Growing up in Poverty:

The Role of Human Capability and Resilience

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In this article some of the findings emerging from a research network investigating the socio-economic, biological and psychological circumstances that contribute to human capability and resilience over the life course [www.ucl.ac.uk/capabilityandresilience] are reported. The network, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), brought together scientists from diverse disciplines including experts from psychology, psychiatry, sociology, economics, epidemiology, geography, and social policy. The diverse backgrounds of the team reflect the complexity of the topic, which has to be tackled from different angles in order to generate a better understanding of the factors and processes that make it possible for individuals to lead healthy and rewarding lives.

**Human capability and resilience**

The terms capability and resilience are generally associated with positive connotations. Capability describes a person's ability to do or to achieve certain desired functionings (Sen, 1993), and resilience refers to the process of avoiding adverse outcomes or doing better than expected when confronted with major assaults on the developmental process (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). There is now consistent evidence in the research literature to suggest that serious harm to physical and mental health and well-being can be caused by the experience of poverty and adverse life events (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; McLoyd, 1998). Adversities such as socio-economic disadvantage, material hardship and family breakdown greatly increase the risk of developing adjustment problems later on, such as increased risk of educational failure, behavioural problems, psychological distress, or poor health. On the other hand, there is also evidence that not everyone is affected in the same way, and that some seem to be able to 'beat the odds', who do well despite the experience of adversity (Luthar, 2003; Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 1992). The observation of positive outcomes in the face of adversity has lead to a paradigm shift away from a pathogenic or deficit model, based on expectations of strong unidirectional effects, towards the consideration of developmental processes leading to health and well-being instead of adjustment problems or disease (Antonovsky, 1979; Cicchetti & Garmezy, 1993; Huppert, Baylis, & Keverne, 2005).

**Critique of the well-being movement**

The conceptualisation of capability and resilience and their various implementations in research are not without criticism, and serious concerns have been raised regarding

their measurement, and how these terms are used in the explanation of behaviours and outcomes (Antonovsky, 1994; Kaplan, 1999; Tarter & Vanyukov, 1999; Ungar, 2004). There is no consensus on the referent of terms. For example, the criteria used to identify successful functioning vary considerably between studies, and definitions of positive adjustment differ between historical, cultural and developmental contexts (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten & Powell, 2003; I. Schoon, 2006). Likewise the operationalisation of socio-economic disadvantage is often lacking specificity and can include measures of income poverty, lack of basic amenities, overcrowding, or relative social position – used either as individual indicators or as composite measures (Schoon, 2006). This lack of specificity in turn leads to variations in conceptualising the timing, the severity and the duration of adversity and disadvantage. Another danger, associated with a focus on adaptive functioning, is that of identifying capability and resilience as a personality trait, following the assumption that everyone can make it, if they only try hard enough (Kaplan, 1999; Tarter & Vanyukov, 1999). Such a dispositional approach can lead to a potentially damaging misunderstanding, blaming the victim of adverse circumstances, instead of examining the factors and processes that enable individuals to beat the odds, or thinking about measures to change the odds by removing obstacles and creating opportunities.

**Ecological models of development**

What is required for a better understanding of human resilience is a theoretical perspective conceptualising interactions between individual and context. Adopting an ecological framework of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) instead of focusing on personality characteristics enables the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active and growing individual and a changing

environment. Human development is continually produced, sustained and changed by interactions between individual and context, and human functioning has to be understood as a dynamic process which is shaped by the opportunities available to individuals and the choices they can exercise. What can be done to enable individuals to thrive and flourish? How to reduce risk or the negative effects of adversity? How to promote competence and self-efficacy?

**Evidence and implications**

The network activities addressed different challenges faced by individuals at different life stages and sources of resilience in the face of these challenges. Findings are based on information covering the lives of some 40,000 individuals born in 1958, 1970 and 2000, as well as 3 adult cohorts, spanning the period between birth and age 70. The data sources include the 1958 National Child Development Study, the 1970 British Cohort Study, the 2000 Millennium Cohort, the British Household Panel Study, the Boyd-Orr Cohort, the English Longitudinal Study on Ageing, the Whitehall II study and Censuses. Across these studies we could identify key factors that make it possible for people to strive in the face of adversity, such as  the quality of human relationships, opportunities for participation in education and employment, as well as the quality of public service responses to people with problems (Bartley, 2006).

**Challenges**

The main source of adversity studied was that associated with *conditions of poverty and disadvantage*. Growing up in poverty gives people less opportunity to build up strengths and capabilities to maintain good  physical or mental health and well-being (Schoon, 2006). Uneven life chances start at birth, and individual responses to current adverse situations are shaped by earlier experiences. Economic pressure, low income, poor

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housing are all associated with increased levels of family distress, less effective parenting, and higher risk of separation and divorce (Conger et al., 2002; Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994; Schoon, Hope, & Ross, 2006). Living in poverty not simply means not having enough money, it also means being excluded from normal social interactions in society. Poorer families are more likely to live in places where facilities and services have been stripped away and are often unable to access even essential services such as health care and education  (Kemp & al., 2005; Townsend & Gordon, 2002).

*Lack of employment opportunities* was studied in two of the projects. Paid employment and entry into the labour market are considered as the principal pathways out of poverty and welfare dependency (Kemp & al., 2005). There is also evidence that having paid work beyond the normal retirement age (as long as it is done voluntarily and not because of financial hardship)  may improve the well-being of older people (Baltes & Mayer, 1999). The same applies to being involved in voluntary work and looking after grandchildren. Work and family are places where people can engage in social interactions and build strong supportive relationships. Social isolation, on the other hand, associated with single parenthood, divorce, and unemployment has been linked to lower levels of health and well-being.

*Onset of chronic illness at older ages* was studied in another of the projects, finding that a supportive social network allowed people to maintain their quality of life. Living alone and childlessness were not in themselves disadvantages in older ages, given the presence of supportive friendships (Netuveli, Hildon, Montgomery, Wiggins, & Blane, 2006).

**Sources of resilience**

*Individual characteristics*

Individuals demonstrating and maintaining early academic competence, who were engaged in the school context, who believed in their own capabilities, who participated in extracurricular activities and social networks, who were motivated and showed positive aspirations for the future were more likely to overcome adversities associated with the experience of socio-economic disadvantage than young people lacking these individual resources. Resilient individuals were also less likely to show persistent behaviour problems than their more vulnerable peers. Yet, although the literature on resilience has traditionally paid much attention to individual characteristics as the most important sources of the ability to thrive despite external adversity, we found that a.) individuals growing up in poverty are generally less likely to develop these resources than their more privileged peers, and b.) even if they clearly demonstrate these capabilities, they are still not achieving to the same level than their more privileged peers regarding educational, occupational, or health related outcomes later on in life (Schoon, 2006). We thus have to ask what are the processes and mechanisms that allow young people to build up and maintain these crucial resources, and how to improve the life chances for all.

*Family environment*

Characteristics of the family environment, for example, played an important role in contributing to the development and maintenance of individual capabilities. Individuals manifesting resilience in the face of adversity were more likely to experience a stable and supportive family environment, parents who showed interest in their child's

education and wanted their child to continue with education after the minimum school leaving age. A supportive family environment is furthermore characterised by parents who read to their child, who took an active interest and involvement in their education and career planning, and who took the children out for joint activities. Another important factor was a supportive father who helped the mother with the household chores (Schoon & Parsons, 2002). A warm relationship to both mother and father was found to be associated with a more secure attachment style in adulthood. Secure attachment, in its turn, was associated with greater career success in those without the advantage of higher levels of education (Bartley, Head, & Stansfeld, 2007)

*Wider social context:*

Beyond the more proximal experiences in the family context, there is a third factor of vital importance: the role of the wider social context. Experiences in school, in the work place, within one's neighbourhood, as well as contact with institutions and services are all contributing to the development and maintenance of individual resources.

     *School environment.*

The chances of developing into a healthy, happy, and successful adult despite growing up in poverty can be improved by facilitating and encouraging educational achievement and participation (Sacker & Schoon, in press). Providing educational opportunities, from pre-school daycare to life-long learning, is one of the most effective ways of helping individuals to beat the negative effects of poverty  High quality and affordable childcare is key to both children's early development and to releasing parents' time to participate in learning and employment opportunities. Parents support their  child to stay in school and gain qualifications if they are interested in their child's educational progress, show that they believe that their child is capable of succeeding, and wish him

or her to do so (Schoon, 2006). Teachers can smooth the progress of young people, giving them confidence in their own abilities and encouraging positive aspirations for their educational and occupational futures. A supportive and stimulating school environment can be a vital influence in reducing the negative effects of family socio-economic disadvantage (Schoon, Parsons, & Sacker, 2004). To facilitate return to education for those who drop out of school there is furthermore a need for opportunities enabling life-long learning, including apprenticeship schemes, day-release from work, evening and adult education classes that offer the chance to gain vocational and academic qualifications, and skills for employment.

*Work environment*

It is undoubtedly important to provide increased opportunities to gain skills and improve chances of employment. There is a need to create opportunities for fairly paid employment and working conditions that stimulate feelings of autonomy, participation, and control. This would include family-friendly practices at work and easy access to affordable childcare (Schoon, Hansson, & Salmela-Aro, 2005). Yet, in helping individuals to live well, to work well, and to love well, support for social and emotional development is also important. Efforts to secure employment should not be enforced at the expense of activities that help people build self-esteem and the social interactions that will help them fulfil their capabilities (Jones, Burström, Martilla, Canvin, & Whitehead, 2006). Both economic and social interventions are needed to support individuals and families experiencing material deprivation and difficult circumstances.

*Improving living standards*

Risk and protective factors may occur along the negative to positive poles of a continuum. For example, the lack of a protective factor, such as a supportive family

environment, can act as a risk factor. What is important though, is to build up protective mechanisms that lead to the removal or reduction of risk effects and to reduce negative chain reactions. Some people find parenthood to be a difficult task, but this situation is made more harmful when accompanied by low income. Increasing the living standards of poor families with children will go a long way in reducing the risk of adjustment problems and poor health. Yet, it is not just a question of the income or commodities people have, but what these enable them to do (Sen, 1993). Changes in the physical or social environment should increase the choices available, open up new possibilities, enhance the space and enjoyment of functioning. The improvement of social housing, schools, parks, and public services can be seen to improve capability and opportunity quite apart from individual income. Regenerating areas of industrial decline, building up the local infrastructure and preventing ghettoisation, releases strengths and talents in local residents that are otherwise wasted, as well as taking steps towards a fairer society (Jones, Burstrőm, Martilla, Canvin, & Whitehead, 2006; Mitchell & Backett-Milburn, 2006). A stable community, where facilities such as libraries, parks, and leisure centres provide opportunities for sports, hobbies and social activities, invite participation in community life, thereby encouraging the ability to learn, to acquire skills, and enabling a neighbourhood to become a community.

***Creating sustainable support structures***.

Supportive experiences occur and are effective well past early childhood, and it is never too early, nor too late for appropriate interventions (Schoon & Bynner, 2003). Appropriate support at different life stages can reduce the risk of problems of adjustment in individuals exposed to multiple and changing problems. Children showing positive adjustment initially may falter later because support structures are

lacking, and interventions do not necessarily show immediate benefits (Schoon, 2006).

Evidence suggests that intervention efforts should aim to foster sustainable programmes and services (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Providing more opportunities to build good parent-child relationships as well as parent-school relationships, for example, can encourage better communication and interactions between parents and their children, and between parents and teachers. Widening access to school facilities with all-age community activities, after-school clubs, and further education courses run by other education providers can facilitate community interaction and create joint interests. The provision of places where communities can meet and interact will help to foster strong social bonds and build up social networks (Mitchell & Backett-Milburn, 2006).

*Improving service provision.* One critical aspect of living in hardship is high levels of isolation and anxiety (Bartley, 2006). All too often families or individuals in greatest need receive the least support, although adequate material benefits and support would be critical to their well-being. The way in which services are given is as important as what is provided. Services need to be based on trust and respect in order to be effective (Bartley, 2006). One of the critical aspects of service provision is to offer a space, where people in hard-pressed neighbourhoods feel welcome and listened to, without being patronised or judged. Services must rid themselves of the perception that those in hardship and poverty are of less moral and social worth (Jones, Burström, Martilla, Canvin, & Whitehead, 2006). The needs and perspectives of clients, but also of front-line staff, should be a crucial source of information in designing service provision. Listening to and involving individual clients and user groups as a legitimate source of 'welfare wisdom' and incorporating their views into the design of services is essential. Well-designed services, offering for example activities with people who share similar

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experiences, can provide opportunities for clients to build self-esteem and confidence, to identify skills and aptitudes, and play a key role in acknowledging and releasing often hidden capabilities.

**Conclusion**

Rather than focusing on how poverty and adversity grind people down, our research has attempted to identify measures aiming to reduce risk or risk effects, as well as factors and processes within families and hard-pressed communities that help them to 'beat poverty', to get by despite living in poor circumstances, or to move on (Bartley, 2006). There is not one major factor that enables individuals to cope with adversity, but rather a combination of influences and measures make a difference. Multiple processes involving the interplay between persons and particular situations are involved in enabling individuals and communities to thrive, and it is crucial to acknowledge these contextual dependencies. The identification of particular developmental, material, and social contexts that promote or hinder human development thus should be an important focus for a psychology of human strengths and well-being. Considering the multidimensional and interactive nature of human development, appropriately designed interventions need to operate on several levels, involving community-based measures and integrated service delivery. The findings presented here should, however, be read with caution. Many individuals are crushed by the experience of poverty and disadvantage, and it is always the most vulnerable who suffer the consequences. Even the most resilient child from poverty-stricken areas or circumstances is finding it more difficult to do well in life then a more ordinary child from a wealthy background. To witness these inequalities one has to ask, what would that resilient child or person have been able to do, what would his or her contribution to the community or the economy

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been, if he or she never had to overcome disadvantage? A society that maximises

opportunities for all citizens equally is also one that makes best use of the many assets

for well-being and social and economic development.

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