"Unpacking" the Effects of Childhood Poverty: A Psychosocial Approach to Intergenerational Risk

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Invited address: CIQSS/QICSS

Social Statistics, Poverty, and Social Exclusion: Perspectives from Quebec, Canada, and Abroad

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Concordia Inter-generational Risk Project

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Situation in Canada

• In Canada, approximately 1 in every 6 children lives in poverty: basically unchanged from ‘70’s.

• Child poverty has been a target of every federal government since the mid-1980s.

• Quebec govt. actively targets family poverty: today’s meeting....
Poverty is bad for Children

– SES “health gradient” persists in Canada despite universal health care.

– Poverty is associated with problems in virtually all areas of development and health across the life course.
Poverty may operate on health and development via many processes:

- Stressful environment (neighborhood and family); impacts physiology and behavioral coping for both parents and children.
- Limited resources for poor families:
  -- Low income
  -- Low parental education and high school dropout
  -- Early/off time parenthood
  -- Single parenthood and parental absence
  -- Lack of social support and community resources

Add to stress load, and make coping more difficult.
Intergenerational transfer of risk via parenting

- Impaired parental mental and physical health
- Reduced physical and emotional availability of parents
- Physical and emotional neglect and abuse
- Learning: Modeling of problematic behavior and coping styles
- Reduced cognitive stimulation
Role of behavior in continuity and outcomes of poverty

• Direct links between poverty and problematic behavior.

• Behavioral problems may mediate effects of poverty on development

• Reciprocal relation between poverty and behavioral problems over time (Caspi, Bem, & Elder, 1989).
• Today I will discuss some of the pathways from family poverty to later development, using examples from an ongoing 30-year inter-generational longitudinal sample of disadvantaged Montreal families.
Concordia Longitudinal Risk Project


• Participants were screened on measures of aggression and social withdrawal.

• Within gender nominations by peers were used to assign scores on the Aggression and Withdrawal dimensions.
Concordia Longitudinal Risk Project

- These children and their families have been followed over time, from 1976 to the present, including representative sub-samples for a wide variety of questionnaires, archival and interview-based measures of health, social and occupational functioning, and criminality.
• Many participants have since had children, providing the opportunity to examine the intergenerational transfer of risk, via parenting and environmental stress.
A model of intergenerational transfer
Part 1: Predicting parenting in poverty

• Study involves 548 participants in the Concordia Project, now mothers (n=328) or fathers (n=220).

• Examined the “cumulative continuity” of disadvantage from childhood to parenthood, including behavioral characteristics in childhood. How problem kids become disadvantaged parents.
Predicting poverty and other threats to parenting among mothers

Chi Square = 12.36, p = 0.42, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = 0.01
*: p<0.05, †: 0.05<p<0.1, and r: correlation coefficient
Bold line: significant direct or indirect path from childhood aggression or withdrawal
Conclusions from “Threats to successful parenthood” study

• Intergenerational: Poverty operates partially through intervening developmental events/conditions to create new family poverty, across multiple generations (three generations in Concordia Study)

• Mediating role of education in the model

• Within a low income sample, behavior, e.g. childhood aggression, plays both direct and indirect roles in predicting “threats” to child rearing many years later, in adulthood.
Study 2: The intergenerational transfer of Risk

• Intensive study of 175 families from among the parents in the previous study.

• All had children aged 2 to 5 at the time the study began

• Have now followed the offspring into early adolescence: 4 time points, 3 yrs. apart.

• Today focus on the early (age 2-5) and middle childhood outcomes.
Prediction of Home Environment

N = 175, $\chi^2 = 10.43$, P=0.49, CFI=1.0, RMSEA=0.00; Path coefficient and (Correlation coefficient); All coefficients are significant at $p \leq 0.05$. 

**Childhood Aggression**
- .28* (-.26*)

**Childhood Withdrawal**
- .23* (-.20*)

**Maternal Education**
- .51* (.56*)
- .26* (.44*)

**Father Absent**
- .34* (-.44*)

**EconStatus**
- .51* (.56*)
- .24* (.46*)
- .16* (.25*)
- .18* (-.25*)

**Maternal Distress**
- .24* (.46*)
- .29* (-.39*)

**Home Environment**
- R²=.33
- R²=.08
- R²=.40
- R²=.06
N = 175, χ² = 13.33, p = 0.65, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = 0.00; Path coefficient and (Correlation coefficient); *
*: Coefficients are significant at p ≤ 0.05; t: at 0.05 < p ≤ 0.1.
School marks over time

End of year Average:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Surpasses expectations</th>
<th>Meets expectations</th>
<th>Partially meets expectations</th>
<th>Fails to meet expectations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grades 1-2</td>
<td>Grades 5-6</td>
<td>Grades 7-8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- All
- Boys
- Girls
Predicting Performance after School entry (grades 1-2)

• Protective factors:
  – Mother’s years of education (β= .23*)
  – Home environment (cognitive stimulation) (β= .29**)
  – I.Q. (β= .27**)
  – Mother’s involvement in schooling (early grades) (β= .39***)

• Risk factors:
  – Mother’s distress (early childhood) (β= -.28**)
  – Behavior problems (externalizing) (β= -.29***)
Predicting maternal involvement in child’s schooling

- Mother’s years of education ($\beta = .42^{***}$)
- Mother’s Sensitivity ($\beta = .18^*$)
- Mother’s Distress ($\beta = -.19^*$)
- Family poverty ($\beta = -.21^*$)
Summary of effects

- Education is a primary mediator between family poverty and developmental outcomes:
  - This applies both within and between generations.
Additional Pathways include:

- Parental behavior (i.e. problem patterns over time)
  - Environmental and economic stress
  - “Distress” of parents during childrearing
  - Stimulation to children in environment
  - Parenting behavior (e.g. sensitivity, cognitive stimulation, harsh punishment….etc.)
  - Low involvement in schooling

- Offset by available buffers (e.g. social and economic support, education, coping ability, involvement).
So what do we know now?

- Poverty is bad for children, inter-generational

BUT

- There are pathways from one generation to the next via behavioral problems and lowered education.

- Parenting and home environment are part of the ongoing process.

- Perhaps we can focus public policy on these issues to reduce both the impact and prevalence of child poverty.
Thank you…. questions and comments?