

20 Final conclusions of the Newcastle study

Whatever deprivation a child may experience, our findings suggest that a fundamental family mechanism by which the child is affected is through inadequate physical and emotional care. Two of our criteria measured this directly. What of the other criteria that supposedly reflect social handicap — namely, social dependence and overcrowding? While poverty does not imply lack of affection and a caring attitude, the pattern of living enforced by poverty may not leave parents with adequate time and energy to devote to a particular child. And it is not only direct care which is important, but the skills of sensible organization, good housekeeping and planning of family activities which constitute a home, a family environment and a positive model for child development. We contend that, in large or 'overcrowded' families, the processes are not different in nature but merely more complex.

This leaves us with the two other deprivations of parental illness and marital disruption. We suggest that parental illness, especially in the mother, may give rise to poor care of the child but, where the family has other resources, the impact may be attenuated. Marital disruption, especially in the conflict-ridden phase of marital breakdown, will have similar effects on mothering and child care. In most cases these will be exaggerated by any attendant economic privation. It would be oversimplifying matters to suggest that these are the only routes by which deprivation brings about its effects, but we believe that parental care is a basic mechanism. Obviously, the effect will be modified by the specific circumstance of deprivation and by other strengths or weaknesses within a particular family.

A second fundamental mechanism involves educational handicap. The precise processes involved are not clear. In some families it may have a basis in intellectual dullness;

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in others it may result from a tradition of disinterest in vocational or academic achievement, lack of opportunity, poor foresight and planning, or general lack of motivation and drive. Educational handicap seems to exert its effects in a multitude of ways and has many end results, and it is, as could be expected, an important predictor of low occupational rating and even unemployment. Nor is it surprising to discover that it is an important precursor of poor mothering ability. Many of the selfsame qualities required for the acquisition of educational and vocational achievements are also necessary in planning and organizing child care. Mere lack of achievement in a family may constitute a model for the child; the parents may be dull and may not have the enthusiasm or skills to stimulate their children, or there may be combinations of these factors. This is a recipe for less than adequate intellectual performance and scholastic achievement by children. Moreover, educational handicap has long-term effects. It is, for instance, an important predictor of low occupational status in the next generation and a significant link in the causal pathway to antisocial behaviour at home, at school and in the neighbourhood.

Our data also reveal that, while a single deprivation may have little effect, multiple deprivations, coexisting in the same family, can have impressive and widespread effects. But in such circumstances we are not necessarily able to tease out the important pathways to undesirable outcomes. While we have tried to establish broad patterns, it is likely that the underlying pathways to achievement or dysfunction in their offspring will vary from family to family.

It would be naive to conclude that childhood deprivations are the only important precursors of undesirable outcome. Other explanatory factors may contribute and may furthermore exercise different effects according to the circumstances of the family, one example being occupational status. It is possible to conceive of a large family whose breadwinner is in the lowest occupational status, with the members subject to financial and material privations in addition to overcrowding, and the parents lacking the personal resources to care for the family. At the other end of the continuum, in a financially secure family there may be not only absence of deprivation and the presence of good material resources and opportunities for care, but also parents motivated to

stimulate their children and encourage cultural and scholastic achievements. Thus it is not surprising that occupational status proved such a good predictor of intelligence, achievements and behaviour.

Another important factor was mother's relative youth at first marriage or cohabitation. Our data suggest that dull girls from deprived homes are more likely to marry or cohabit early. How does this come about? Poor parenting skills may give rise to behavioural and socialization problems in their offspring, followed in turn by poor attitudes to school and schoolwork (both of which predict low age at marriage or cohabitation). These negative attitudes make for lack of motivation and unpreparedness for a career which, when combined with exposure to neighbourhood models of early cohabitation, increase the likelihood of early relationships.

There are two other important causes of child dysfunction. The first consists of undesirable recent life events. It is possible, though not inevitable, that any parental or family distress generated by such events may in turn, directly or indirectly, unsettle or distress the child. The second consists of socially and psychologically undesirable child management techniques by parents. We had planned our path analysis on the assumption that prior deprivation as represented by poverty or poor mothering experience in childhood would be associated with subsequent undesirable techniques in managing one's own children. However, this proved not to be the case and, on reflection, we concluded that these were two separate facets of negative child care. Poor care and poor mothering may often be due to lack of skills, imagination and social and economic resources and lead to acts of omission rather than of commission. In contrast, undesirable child management techniques are circumstances where negative or unpleasant measures are used to coerce the child, and are acts of commission. Undesirable management techniques proved significant predictors of antisocial behaviour in the home, neighbourhood and school. However, it is occasionally possible that this is an effect rather than a cause, with parents reacting punitively in their attempts to cope with their children's antisocial behaviour. Another possibility is that there are intrinsic qualities in a mother's personality which make a contribution to the negative way in which she manages her children. This hypothesis receives

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support from the fact that undesirable management techniques are powerfully predicted by the measure of poor attitude to schoolwork by the mother when a girl. Thus it seems there are intrinsic qualities in a mother's personality which contribute to the negative way in which she manages her children.

This brings us to qualities within the child which contribute to the processes underlying the major mechanisms. One cardinal factor is intelligence which is an important predictor of educational performance and occupational status in adulthood. In a similar way, attitude to schoolwork in a girl proved a powerful predictor of not only her adult achievements and her behaviour but also of other family factors. These included family size, undesirable techniques of child management and, at a lesser level, mother's age at first marriage and overcrowding in the home. This suggests that there are qualities in girls which, reflected in a negative attitude to schoolwork, are predictors of a series of adverse family circumstances in adult life. We can only speculate about their basis but suspect that they are qualities of personality which may be specific to girls.

Other qualities in schoolgirls were associated with a negative performance in adult life. Girls whose attendance at school was poor subsequently gave poor care to their children and were more likely to be dependent on social welfare services. Those who showed poor sociability at school had higher rates of marital disruption and those with poor self-confidence showed poor mothering ability. We also considered that there are intrinsic qualities in boys likely to evoke negative responses from their parents. This was supported by the finding that boys who were rated as showing poor concentration and persistence at school were children whose mothers were judged to show poor mothering abilities.

In recent decades there has been a steady accumulation of information showing how undesirable life experiences may influence development and behaviour. Bowlby's (1951) emphasis on the affectional components of mothering gave impetus to such research, but he overestimated both the universality and irreversibility of the psychological consequences (Rutter, 1981b, 1985b). From the viewpoint of our study the most salient conclusions are that individuals

vary in their resilience to environmental experiences and that different undesirable experiences may have different risk potentials for cognitive, socioemotional and behavioural development.

In respect of individual differences of temperament, we conceived of poor concentration and persistence as tending to increase a youngster's vulnerability. No matter whether the genetic component underlying temperament is large or small, the question arises how such differences in vulnerability are converted into psychological disturbance (Plomin, 1983). There are several possibilities: teachers, and perhaps peers, are likely to respond more positively to the boy who can concentrate and show a good attention span, which in turn may lead to his increased confidence and self-esteem. In contrast, teachers and peers may respond less well to the boy of difficult temperament, which may reduce self-esteem and increase vulnerability even in the absence of environmental deprivation. Within the home, the temperamentally easy child is less likely to be the target of parents' irritability.

Similarly, in respect of intelligence and scholastic achievement, we envisage chain reactions whereby positive experiences with teachers and peers give rise to positive self-esteem. Abler children may be protected through better ability to understand the meaning of their experiences and to seek ways of solving social problems.

Our work emphasizes the importance of a network of social and emotional supports, especially in the pre-school years, as protection against environmental deprivation. Good mothering is likely to be reciprocated by positive attachment; good maternal health and absence of financial and employment problems mean better opportunities for management and supervision of the child; smaller family size enables better pre-school care, which is then likely to continue throughout schooling; relative maturity of age in the mother proves protective against delinquency in the child. Our findings suggest that a good relationship with a constantly present mother constituted the major source of protection in the pre-school years and school years for those deprived boys who did not become criminal. One important factor for girls was the continued presence of the father throughout the formative years. We assume that his presence implied a

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In conclusion, our data have given rise to speculation about a variety of important processes and mechanisms in one stage of the life span which underlie adverse experience and poor achievement in the next. Some of these are operative during childhood years and give rise to their effects in adult life; others operate in adult life and create their effects in the children of the next generation. We have seen that many children appear destined — due in part to the nature, attitudes and behaviour of parents and grandparents — to experience a disproportionate burden of adversity, and we have attempted to unravel some of the complexities of cyclical deprivation. More encouragingly, we have identified some of the circumstances which enable individuals, despite initial disadvantage, to experience positive change and development in their lives. Desirable characteristics and protective factors are to be found in the nature of the child and parents and in aspects of family life: an equable temperament, scholastic ability, social competence, parents who plan and provide good physical and emotional care and close and appropriate supervision. Yet such positive and protective influences are not to be seen as discrete, isolated events. They appear to bring about their effects through chain reactions, often in social contexts, over the course of time.