The Psychological Effects of Childhood Poverty: Rough Draft

Melissa Thomas

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Instructor Dwight Paulsen

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Poverty is a pervasive problem that affects individuals worldwide, as are mental health issues. The underlying question is, are these two problems connected and why? In the US alone, 12.8 million children under the age of 18 are living in poverty, and of that 12 million, 4.6 million are under 6 years old (United States Census Bureau, 2016). The environmental conditions associated with poverty are seen to be incredibly harsh and unforgiving. With this many children living in poverty it seems logical that the environment and the conditions associated with poverty would take a toll mentally in significant numbers. In my essay, I plan to show that poverty and its social stigmas create negative psychological impacts on children, which in turn affects decision-making and self-image in those individuals, inhibiting their success and their ability to escape from poverty.

Poverty exposes individuals in low-income homes to considerable stress and anxiety, dangerous neighborhoods, scarcity of resources, and less-optimal living environments (Capistrano, Bianco, & Kim, 2016, p.7), all of which have the capacity to cause disorders such as anxiety, low self-image, and depression due to internalizing this stress. The scarcity of food and the lower nutritional value found in inexpensive food can play a role in declining mental health. When hungry, a person has a difficult time thinking, it becomes hard to pay attention, and one’s decision-making skills greatly decline (Schilbach, Schofield, & Sendil, 2016). Not only that, but children living in poverty do not receive the same type of parental care that other children do. Due to having less, some of the basic necessities fall by the way-side, parents are less involved, and often unsympathetic (Capistrano, et.al., 2016). These children have no control over the financial situations that cause the environment that they are living in or the lack of food available to them, yet suffer the effects just as much as the adults around them.  By internalizing the stress of having no control, being hungry, educational expectations from teachers, and the lack of stability in their environments, it can cause the issues to compound and therefore leads to anxiety and depression.

Furthermore, studies have been conducted by experts which conclude not only how detrimental poverty can be to a child’s mental health, but also that the effects seen in that of impoverished children are much rarer than those found in children of means (Capistrano, et. al., 2016), meaning that the poverty situation itself creates these psychological impacts that are not generally found in most children. In a Go/NoGo study, both children living in poverty and children from higher incomes families would recognize angry and sad facial expressions equally as well. However, only the children from poverty backgrounds showed greater false alarm rates to those facial expressions (Capistrano, et. al., 2016). The fact that both groups of children have no problem identifying facial expressions and their meanings shows that there is not a misinterpretation of the guidelines skewing the results. The only factor that is different between these two groups is monetary. The implications of these studies are that even though these children can identify facial expressions correctly, showing “greater false alarm rates” to those same facial expressions is directly connected to developed psychological issues. It has also been found that children living in poverty are two and a half times more likely to exhibit depression or anxiety than children of the same age range who do not live in poverty (Allen, et. al., 2014). Since the only difference is a monetary consideration, poverty can be connected to causing psychological issues due to the stress of living in the environment, as well as, the harsher parenting that they receive.

Psychological issues like anxiety, depression, and low self-image developed early in life have the propensity to seriously impact a child’s future and therefore make it difficult to escape the cycle of poverty. The stress of poverty takes up so much of the brains available resources, that the resources left for developing the skills of good decision-making are very few. Some of these decision-making skills that are not being developed from an early age are money-handling, judgement, self-discipline, and risk assessment (Schilbach, et. al., 2016). By not developing these skills, these individuals do not have the tools to make smart financial decisions as an adult, which makes it easy to fall into considerable debt, or even to climb out of debt that family members have already inflicted upon them. Also, due to living in poverty, “poor secure attachment, neglect, lack of quality stimulation and conflict all negatively affect future social [behavior], educational outcomes, employment status” (Allen, et. al., 2014, p.394). These factors, along with poor decision-making skills, and the low self-image and depression that is developed in children who live in poverty can seriously impact their performance in school. This can lead to poor grades, a decreased chance of pursuing a higher education, poor relationships, and underdeveloped money-management skills. Low self-image or depression from not having developed the right life skills can perpetuate the cycle of poverty by making it more likely that the child will repeat the parents example.

Not only do the environmental circumstances of poverty affect the psychological well-being of the children living in it, but the social stigma of poverty creates a negative bias in the larger population and can cause further psychological harm. In a research study on how clinical students view impoverished patients over those who are not living in poverty, it was found that across the board they had mixed feelings on their obligation to deal with the issue of poverty. As these students got further into their clinical programs, their opinion toward their poor patients also severely decreased (Jilani, Fernandes, & Borges, 2015). The implications of this study show that society’s opinion of the poor can directly relate to how that individual is treated by others. These clinical students could give less optimal medical care to their poor patients due to this low opinion. If this bias extends to a medical student who has taken the Hippocratic Oath, then it is logical to infer that the rest of society could similarly affect the well-being of poorer individuals. By looking at a study centered around the extremely impoverished who live in Africa, similar social biases are seen where children are directly concerned. It was shown that impoverished children would be chased away from school for not being able to pay their educational fees. Also, the children who could pay their educational expenses and were dressed in uniform would be treated better by both teaches and students, as well as, exhibited less personal shame (Attah, et. al., 2016).

I recognize that discussing how the circumstances of poverty create psychological disorders can lead some to argue that this diagnosis only shifts the blame directly onto the poor instead of on society, allowing that society to simply medicate the problem instead of fixing it (Mills, 2015). However, acknowledging the effects that poverty has on an individual’s psychological well-being does not diminish the role that society plays in sustaining poverty and the mental effects developed from it. In fact, the two issues go hand in hand. If we look at which countries in relation to the depression rates later in life, Scandinavian countries have the lowest rates, while Mediterranean countries have the highest rates. The difference in these two regions is that the Scandinavian countries have government programs that provide for mental health and better financial provisions (Allen, et. al., 2014, p.397). This shows that it does not have to be an either/or argument. Understanding that the circumstances of not having enough causes psychological disorders has led these countries to provide aid, not by medication, but by providing monetarily as well as psychologically to their populations. “Broader economic and political interventions have shown successful influences on the mental health of populations” (Allen, et. al., 2014, p.400). By providing assistance in both areas, the psychological disorders found in poverty can be lessened.

It is clear that living in poverty creates stress, anxiety, and depression; all of which compound to inhibit a child’s overall achievement later in life and their ability to prevent the poverty cycle. By providing aid to these children and their families through educational programs and community outreach programs, the psychological issues that are caused by poverty can be severely lessened. This allows these children to have the same chances of good education, healthy relationships, and financial well-being as children from higher income families; creating better self-image, emotional stability, and decision-making skills that they may not otherwise develop. If these skills are not developed and our society’s bias toward the poor continues, the cycle of poverty will only continue and the negative psychological effects that are found in those living in poverty will continue to be passed on. It is a societal obligation to lift each other up and not to turn a blind eye to conditions that are clearly psychologically damaging the children of our society. Only by adjusting our own biases toward the impoverished can we see a change start to begin.

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