

The Strengths of People in Poverty

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Abstract

On average, psychological variables are often statistically different in people living in poverty compared with people living in affluence. The default academic response to this pattern is often the deficit model: Poverty damages or impairs brain function, which leads to poor performance that only exacerbates the poverty. Deficits and damage are real phenomena. However, there are also other processes: People living in poverty may have made reasonable psychological responses to their circumstances or may have developed strengths that enhance their ability to cope with challenges in their lives. We illustrate these points by discussing the linked examples of time preference, early reproduction, and hidden talents. We argue for a balanced approach to the psychology of poverty that integrates deficit and strengths-based models. Future research could focus on the ways in which impairment and adaptation interact.

Keywords

poverty, socioeconomic status, time preference, reproductive decisions, hidden talents

According to the American Psychological Association Task Force on Socioeconomic Status (2007), “Deficit models dominate much of the psychological literature” (p. 25). Deficit models describe how poverty might impair brain structure and function in ways that undermine social and cognitive abilities. Understanding the development of deficits is crucial to preventing and repairing deficits, which, in turn, can help to reduce social inequality and improve health, wealth, and well-being (Duncan, Magnuson, & Votruba-Drzal, 2017). However, the deficit model is incomplete. Some behaviors by people in poverty that are characterized in the literature as negative might actually be reasonable in context. For instance, if current need is high and the future is uncertain, it can be beneficial to spend money now rather than save for the future (Pepper & Nettle, 2017; Sheehy-Skeffington, 2018). In addition, people in poverty may develop *hidden talents*, that is, intact or enhanced abilities for solving recurrent challenges in their environments (Ellis, Bianchi, Griskevicius, & Frankenhuis, 2017; Frankenhuis & de Weerth, 2013). A current direction in psychological science is to acknowledge such strengths and investigate them. The deficit model is thus being complemented with models of reasonable responses and hidden talents.

This broader perspective has merit for several reasons. First, it has generated new ideas and predictions

that have advanced knowledge (see the next three sections). Second, it can inform policy and intervention. For instance, learning and employment environments could be designed to leverage strengths that develop in response to adversity (Ellis et al., 2017). Third, focusing only on deficits can be stigmatizing, and lowering student self-esteem and motivation, as well as teacher expectations, can create self-fulfilling prophecies (Rubie-Davies, 2014). Finally, a theoretical framework that acknowledges strengths can counteract publication bias. Without this framework, scholars are more likely to interpret nondeficit results (i.e., intact or enhanced performance) as a fluke, and journals might hesitate to publish such results, when actually the data offer genuine insight. With this framework, scholars who unexpectedly find nondeficit results can explicitly state this violation of their predictions and then consider whether performance reflects adaptation to context.

The majority of scientists have developed in affluent conditions (J. J. Lee et al., 2016). For them, it might be

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more difficult to recognize the strengths of people living in poverty than to spot their weaknesses. Or scientists might misconstrue a behavior as a deficit when it is a reasonable response or skill in the context of poverty (as we will discuss below). However, in studying human behavior in different contexts, social scientists need to be able to transcend their own cultural frames. We agree with social anthropologists, critical sociologists, and cultural psychologists who argue that disciplines such as developmental and educational psychology are replete with normative assumptions. These disciplines frequently define what is “normal” or “good” as that which is typical of privileged classes (Geronimus, 2004; Valencia, 2010). Through that lens, other groups often end up looking deficient.

In this article, we present theories and findings from three linked areas in which research on strengths is taking place: time preference, reproductive decisions, and hidden talents. Our review focuses on reasonable responses and talents. We discuss deficits but not as extensively. After reviewing research, we provide brief reflections in our conclusion. Throughout, we use the word *reasonable* to mean that behaviors can be understood as a response to the costs and benefits associated with living in poverty, as opposed to, for instance, a pathology or failure of willpower. This word does not imply that people arrive at their decisions via extensive or conscious reasoning (more on this later).

Time Preference

About 736 million people worldwide live in poverty (World Bank, 2018). By definition, people in poverty struggle to meet basic needs, have less control over their environment, and are exposed to higher levels of violence. Because of such hardships, they have higher rates of disability and death at all ages. Disadvantageous morbidity–mortality schedules are, in turn, associated with an increased focus on the present. Compared with people living in affluence, people living in poverty are more focused on current threats and opportunities, discount the future more (i.e., prefer sooner-smaller over later-larger rewards), and orient less toward distant goals (Daly & Wilson, 2005; Kruger, Reischl, & Zimmerman, 2008; Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013; Pepper & Nettle, 2017; Sheehy-Skeffington, 2018). This focus on the present might in some cases cause lower levels of investment in health, education, and savings (for reviews, see Frankenhuis, Panchanathan, & Nettle, 2016, and Pepper & Nettle, 2017).

Because a focus on the present is associated with negative outcomes later in life (e.g., addiction, crime, debt, and unstable social relationships), researchers often use pejorative terms to describe it (e.g., “impatience,”

“shortsightedness,” or “failure to delay gratification”), implying dysfunction (Daly & Wilson, 2005). Researchers working from a deficit perspective do acknowledge that being focused on present needs helps people to “make ends meet.” Nonetheless, they stress that this focus is detrimental in the long term, even for people living in chronic poverty, because it undermines investment in health, education, and savings—behavior that can make poverty worse. When poverty leads to behavior that makes poverty worse, this is called a *poverty trap* (Hauhofer & Fehr, 2014).

We agree that a focus on the present carries long-term costs and might lead to poverty traps, but we do not agree that such a focus is, on the whole, detrimental for all people. Some people obviously need to use their resources immediately to meet basic needs (e.g., food, shelter) or live in conditions in which future rewards are unlikely to materialize. Mathematical modeling shows that in such conditions, a focus on the present can lead to higher payoffs in the long run (Stephens, 2002; Tomlin, Rand, Ludvig, & Cohen, 2015). This theoretical finding aligns with human behavior. Mischel (1974) showed that adults prefer immediate rewards when they believe a promised future reward is unlikely to materialize. Experimental studies show that children adjust their delay of gratification in reasonable ways depending on the reward probability and magnitude (Kidd, Palmeri, & Aslin, 2013; W. S. C. Lee & Carlson, 2015). Further, more “impulsive” children (Humphreys et al., 2015) and adults (Otto, Markman, & Love, 2012) indeed achieve higher payoffs when operating in unpredictable task environments.

Why would the same principles that apply on (short) decision-making timescales not also apply on (longer) developmental timescales? In both cases, the “smart” thing to do depends on the expected payoffs of options, which depend on the structure of the environment. To illustrate, we turn to the reproductive decisions of women living in poverty.

Reproductive Decisions

Since the 1970s, it has been a widely held prescriptive norm in America that teenagers should not have children. The persistence of teenage childbearing has been a puzzle and a source of social concern (Geronimus, Bound, & Waidmann, 1999). In welfare reform debates in the 1990s, proposals ranged from discouraging teenage childbearing (e.g., by placing extra requirements, such as finishing high school, on teenage mothers who receive benefits or by eliminating eligibility for welfare for them and their children altogether) to placing children of mothers in financial need in foster care (Geronimus, 1997).

Deficit models have emphasized that women lack the information or foresight to know the costs associated with becoming a young mother. However, these models have done less to illuminate the fact that many women choose to become pregnant at a young age (Nettle, Coall, & Dickins, 2010). Note that we do not imply that women perform explicit calculations when deciding when to have children, though in fact some young women living in poverty have sophisticated insight into their situations (Geronimus, 1996). There is a wide range of psychological mechanisms that could deliver contextually reasonable behavior (e.g., automatic motivational responses, modeling the behavior of other people in the environment, awareness of benefits), not all of which involve conscious reasoning (Nettle, 2011; Pepper & Nettle, 2017). Even if some of these processes are unconscious, their output may be consciously accessible: The best predictor of the age at which a woman will first become pregnant is the age she states, at age 16, is the ideal one to have a family (Nettle et al., 2010). This does not mean that teenage motherhood, overall, is a good thing but rather that in the context of poverty, some women prefer to start having children at a younger age.

Although teenage childbearing is consistently associated with worse social and health outcomes for both mothers and children (Geronimus, 1997), establishing causality is difficult. There are many differences between teenage mothers and the larger population (Geronimus, 2004). When teenage mothers are compared with appropriate reference groups (i.e., matching or controlling for preexisting social disadvantage), the evidence is mixed. In some studies, teenage mothers and their children have worse outcomes; in others, they have equal or better outcomes (Geronimus, 2004). For instance, in one disadvantaged sample of 4- to 14-year-olds, children whose mothers were 18 or 19 at their birth performed better in reading and mathematics than those whose mothers had been in their early 20s (Moore, Morrison, & Greene, 1997). Causation matters for our argument. A pure deficit model suggests that teenage childbearing always makes outcomes worse. A reasonable-response approach suggests that teenage childbearing can be neutral or beneficial for women living in poverty, given the constraints they face. We will now discuss some of these constraints.

For most people living in affluence, death is the predictable end station of a long and healthy journey, traveled alongside healthy friends and kin. This prospect favors the accumulation of cultural capital (e.g., education) before reproducing, though not indefinitely. For women living in poverty, however, the costs of delay start to mount up sooner than for women living in affluence. First, because of chronic stress, their bodies deteriorate (“weather”) faster, increasing their

probability of dying or becoming disabled during or even before middle adulthood, when they would be producing and raising offspring (Belsky, 2019; Geronimus, 1997, 2004; Geronimus et al., 1999; Rickard, Frankenhuis, & Nettle, 2014). Second, like women in affluence, women in poverty benefit from the help of kin and friends. As these caretakers weather faster, too, having children at a younger age increases the chances that these caregivers will be healthier and more able to provide support. Third, many women have caregiving responsibilities for their elders, whose health tends to decline as they age. Having children at a younger age means that children are less likely to compete with elders for the mother’s energies. Fourth, postponing childbearing improves the educational and economic prospects of women living in poverty to a more limited extent than it does for women living in affluence (Geronimus, 2004). Fifth, in some marginalized groups, mothers actually produce healthier babies in their late teens—when most teenage pregnancies occur in the United States (Guttmacher Institute, 2017)—than in their 20s and 30s, potentially because of their own health deteriorating (Cohen, 2016).

For these reasons and others, teenage childbearing can be a reasonable response to living in poverty. Nettle (2011) computed the optimal behavior that would be needed to satisfy the reasonable rule—“begin childbearing at such an age that you can on average expect to be in good health until your oldest grandchild is five” (p. 360)—for women living at different levels of neighborhood poverty in the United Kingdom. Observations of actual behavior show that childbearing begins at least 8 years earlier in the poorest neighborhoods than in the richest, matching the predictions of this simple rule remarkably well. In sum, early fertility can be a reasonable response to particular demographic and environmental circumstances.

Hidden Talents

The idea that the behavior of people in poverty is reasonable in context might be gaining ground. It is the cornerstone of new integrative frameworks on the psychology of poverty, which are organizing and inspiring empirical research (Pepper & Nettle, 2017) and which have started to inform social policy (Sheehy-Skeffington, 2018). Recently, a new and complementary line of work has emerged positing that some people in poverty develop intact or enhanced abilities for solving challenges relevant in their environments (Ellis et al., 2017; Frankenhuis & de Weerth, 2013). As we have done for time preference and reproductive decisions, we present a selection of research on such hidden talents that focuses on responses to unpredictability in the environment.

Hidden-talents research shows that people might develop a suite of related abilities to deal with harsh and unpredictable environments, in which threat looms large and potential rewards are sparse and short-lived. For instance, people might become adept at detecting imminent dangers and opportunities (for reviews, see Ellis et al., 2017, and Frankenhuis & de Weerth, 2013), shifting efficiently among different tasks or mental sets (Mittal, Griskevicius, Simpson, Sung, & Young, 2015), tracking rapidly changing conditions (Young, Griskevicius, Simpson, Waters, & Mittal, 2018), persisting when procuring an immediate reward (Suor, Sturge-Apple, Davies, & Cicchetti, 2017), and reacting faster to, and recovering faster from, negative affect displayed by other people in their environments (Wass et al., in press).

In harsh and unpredictable environments, there might be a premium on forming memories and associations quickly and efficiently. Consistent with this idea, studies have shown that stress affects the structure and function of distinct memory systems differently. Neuroscience studies show that stress causes a shift from hippocampal–prefrontal-dependent explicit (top-down) memory systems to striatum-dependent procedural (bottom-up) memory systems (Leonard, Mackey, Finn, & Gabrieli, 2015; Schwabe & Wolf, 2013). Cognitive and behavioral studies show that, in some conditions, people living in poverty display similar (Leonard et al., 2015) or even better (Dang et al., 2016) performance on procedural memory tasks than people living in affluence. Future research could explore the extent to which such findings depend on developed traits versus current states, or their interactions. Future work should also explore the benefits of procedural memory in stable conditions (e.g., forming habits when action-outcome contingencies remain the same) and the benefits of explicit memory in unpredictable conditions (e.g., greater sensitivity to changing action-outcome contingencies; Schwabe & Wolf, 2013). Nonetheless, these studies and others (for a review, see Ellis et al., 2017) illustrate the current efforts to examine not only deficits but also strengths that develop in response to stressful conditions.

Conclusion

The theoretical landscape is becoming enriched with strengths-based models. However, there is no revolution. Strengths-based models do not undermine the deficit model but complement it. Together, these models provide a well-rounded approach. Strengths-based models have also started to grow connections with each other (Ellis et al., 2017). For instance, bridges have recently been built between the hidden-talents approach and the resilience approach, which examines protective factors that enable people in poverty to overcome their

challenging life circumstances (Masten, 2014), and the successful-intelligence approach, which studies the diverse skills and abilities that enable people to attain their life goals within a specific cultural context (Sternberg, 2014). Such connections are essential to establishing the integration of strengths-based models. Our larger goal, however, is to integrate strengths-based models with deficit models and bring consilience to the psychological science of poverty.

People in poverty are more likely to be exposed to a variety of adversities, some of which they can developmentally adapt to (e.g., danger) and some of which they cannot (e.g., exposure to toxins). Chronic stress associated with these adversities creates physiological strain, which can damage brain structure and function. In addition to such potential damage, individuals developmentally adapt to challenges in their environments. Future research could focus on the ways in which impairment and adaptation interact. For instance, at an individual level, impairment processes may reduce one set of abilities, whereas adaptive processes might improve another set of abilities. Or impairment processes may reduce abilities in general, but adaptive processes might counteract or supersede this reduction for some abilities. At a population level, these intraindividual processes could result in different patterns of variation across individuals (e.g., ordinal and disordinal interactions). Studies integrating impairment and adaptation, which bridge levels of variation, would enrich the psychological science of poverty.

Recommended Reading

- Ellis, B. J., Bianchi, J., Griskevicius, V., & Frankenhuis, W. E. (2017). (See References). Extensively reviews empirical research on hidden talents in humans, as well as other animals such as birds, rodents, and nonhuman primates, and proposes how to redesign learning environments in order to maximize the motivation and performance of high-adversity youth.
- Frankenhuis, W. E., de Vries, S. A., Bianchi, J., & Ellis, B. J. (2019). Hidden talents in harsh conditions? A preregistered study of memory and reasoning about social dominance. *Developmental Science*, Article e12835. Advance online publication. doi:10.1111/desc.12835. Provides evidence for and against the hypothesis that people who have more exposure to violence show better memory and reasoning for social-dominance relationships than people who have less exposure to violence.
- Frankenhuis, W. E., & de Weerth, C. (2013). (See References). Provides the first proposal of the hidden-talents approach, which focuses on the intact or enhanced social and cognitive skills that people develop in high-adversity conditions, reviews relevant publications, and proposes new research directions.
- Frankenhuis, W. E., Panchanathan, K., & Nettle, D. (2016). (See References). Reviews and integrates research on hidden talents with research showing that people in harsh

and unpredictable environments tend to be more vigilant, act more impulsively, and discount the future more and argues that these behaviors are an integrated suite of traits reflecting a present orientation produced by biological adaptations, even if these responses might cause harm to health and well-being.

Geronimus, A. T., Bound, J., & Waidmann, T. A. (1999). (See References). Provides evidence supporting the hypothesis that teenage childbearing can be a reasonable response to living in poverty and offers theoretical insights relevant to developmental theory and public health.

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