

Questioning the Power of Resilience:  
Are Children Up To the Task of  
Disrupting the Transmission of Poverty?

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**Young Lives**   
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## **Abstract**

Resilience is an increasingly popular term employed in child development and international development discourse. Applied to childhood poverty, poverty over the life course and the intergenerational transmission of poverty, the resilience of boys and girls may be considered as serving as a conceptual and analytical tool for examining the ways in which young humans are able to overcome the negative outcomes of poverty and prevent its transfer within families, households and communities. This paper reviews the development and application of the concept and assesses its usefulness for poverty researchers and practitioners. Since resilience has not yet achieved a generally accepted definition or a credible theory of how it functions, it does not benefit the field with improved analytical precision. Efforts to improve understanding of the causes and effects of children's poverty and the intergenerational transmission of poverty would be better served by relinquishing the metaphor of resilience while retaining the focus on particular factors that moderate and mediate poverty experiences and outcomes.

**Keywords:** child poverty, resilience, inter-generational transmission of poverty

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## Introduction

Scholars have long been interested in learning how human beings react to adversity, and human responses to phenomena such as family separation, poverty and armed conflict, categorised as adversities in and of themselves, or as inducing risk exposure to adversity, are now the subject of several major bodies of literature globally. Risk and resilience have been judged powerful conceptual and analytical tools in this work and are invoked by researchers in a range of disciplines. Historically, the notion of *resilience* first entered the health sciences from applied physics and engineering, where it signifies the ability of materials to 'bounce back' from stress and resume their original shape or condition. In medicine the term characterized the recovery of patients from physical traumas such as surgery or accidents. Somewhat later, it was adopted into psychological and social research to indicate an individual's capacity to recover from, adapt to, and/or remain strong in the face of adversity. This literature tends to ascribe the concept of resilience to three kinds of phenomena: (a) good outcomes despite high-risk status, (b) sustained competence under threat, and (c) recovery from trauma (Masten 1994; Masten, Best and Garmezy 1990). As such, risk of adversity is the mirror against which resilience is appraised.

Given that adversity and risk are enduring features of human existence, the resilience concept has special appeal for scholars; the promise of research on resilience being the discovery of those factors that enable individuals to triumph over catastrophe. Unsurprisingly, the popularity of this concept in research has led to a remarkable proliferation in popular Western media, 'trade' literature (Boyden and Myers *forthcoming*) and contemporary development discourse and practice (Christian Children's Fund 2002-06; International Rescue Committee 2002-07; World Health Link 2006). Much of the trade literature and development discourse, and much of the research that informs it, focuses on children. In research with the young, the concept of resilience is used largely as a means of exploring what is predetermined and what is pliant in the child. Hence, children's resilience is located at the nexus of the nature-nurture dialectic, or as Rutter (2002) pointedly corrects, at the interplay of these two influences.

Applied to childhood poverty, poverty over the life course and the intergenerational transmission of poverty, the resilience of boys and girls may be considered as serving as a conceptual and analytical tool for examining the ways in which young humans are able to overcome the negative outcomes of poverty and prevent its transfer within families, households and communities. However, research shows that, as a general rule, children are more susceptible to the effects of poverty than are adults, especially during infancy and in terms of physical impacts. It is not merely by chance that many of the more robust global indicators of poverty – low birth weight, infant and under-5 mortality for example – relate to the survival and wellbeing of children. And child and maternal nutrition and health status are cited as critical in determining the irreversibility of poverty transfers (Smith 2006: 5). Children's relative vulnerability is due both to processes of maturation in young humans and configurations of power and dependence within society, especially bearing in mind their need for security, nurturance and teaching through to (and beyond) puberty.

The ways poverty affects children can be understood within a lifespan developmental framework, recognising that children at various ages may be particularly vulnerable (or resilient) to poverty and associated risks and that impacts may extend throughout adulthood. Further, the risks connected with poverty are known to interact and have cumulative effect, in the sense that boys and girls who confront multiple stressors over time are more likely to be overwhelmed than those who experience a single shock of short duration. In terms of poverty impacts on children, these may be understood as encompassing survival and capacities (personal endowments, such as nutrition, cognition and pro-social skills), functioning (utilisation of those endowments, such as actions, roles), protection (experiences of

exploitation, exclusion and the like), and states of being (subjective views, values and feelings).

Evidence of raised rates of infant and child mortality and morbidity in poor communities throughout the world as well as observations of enduring poverty over the life course and subsequent generations would seem to fly in the face of any assertion of childhood resilience against poverty. Yet, narratives of children's resilience have from the beginning of the concept's popular adoption by social scientists been interwoven with narratives of childhood poverty. To ascertain whether resilience is an article of ideological faith or in fact a cross-culturally evident feature of young human lives, this paper reviews the advances and persistent challenges in realising a credible and useful definition of resilience in the social sciences as a basis for considering specific associations between children and resilience in the context of chronic poverty. Its purpose is to explore what, if anything, studies of resilience in children can tell us about the life-course and inter-generational transmission of poverty and its effects.

### **The development and application of resilience in 'risk' research**

The application of the concept of resilience to poverty research is an ambitious mission which attempts to marry disparate bodies of knowledge from genetics, developmental psychology, social work, human development and poverty studies (which of themselves often endeavour to integrate economic, political and social analyses), all in an attempt to design useful theoretical and methodological instruments for informing interventions in children's lives. The most systematic and influential research on risk, resilience and coping has been conducted in the United States and Europe in the fields of human development and social work. With recent advances in the study of the human genome, genetic researchers are also increasingly contributing to the conceptualisation of human resilience.

Early psychological and social studies of children focused far less on competence and strength than on pathology and were motivated by concerns of parents, welfare professionals and public institutions about behavioural problems in the young such as school failure, crime and suicide (Fraser 2004). One of the aims of this research was to identify forces in children's lives that increase risks for such behaviours and to establish how policy might prevent or reduce these risks. Theoretical and empirical advances were soon made in understanding that a variety of social problems appeared to be influenced by a common set of multiple risk factors (Barton 2005 citing examples: Dryfoos 1990; Hawkins, Catalano and Miller 1992). Acknowledgment of the recurrence of social and behavioural problems in successive generations motivated an emphasis on inter-generational influences on conduct. Emphasising children's psycho-emotional and social dependence on adults, there was a particular focus on the values, condition and circumstances of parents and carers. Harsh or neglectful parenting behaviour, together with parental mental illness, unemployment and recurrent ill-health, early and single parenthood, family separation and divorce, were among the many phenomena highlighted as significant.

Even though research long ago established a clear link between a range of stressors and behavioural problems in the young, the accumulated evidence that some individuals appear to thrive despite sharing the characteristics and conditions of those with problems (e.g., Anthony 1987; Rutter 1985; Werner and Smith 2001) led eventually to a shift in scholarly interest. These 'successful' individuals were deemed to be resilient and discovering the factors that enhance their resilience became a prominent line of enquiry.

In this research context *risk* is defined in terms of statistical probabilities of susceptibility to negative outcomes. Hence the focus on resilience is trained on those factors that moderate outcomes and impacts. These moderating factors are variables that influence the potency

and direction of the association between cause and effect, thereby strengthening or weakening the effects of stressors on children. Those factors that exacerbate susceptibility to negative effects are often termed *risk* or *vulnerability factors* while those factors that mitigate negative effects are generally described as *protective factors* or *protective processes* (Luthar 2006). *Coping* is another term associated with both risk and resilience, and usually denotes struggling or dealing with difficulties. Although coping may imply some degree of success in managing adversity, it does not normally indicate positive adaptation in the same way as protective factors leading to overall resilience.<sup>1</sup>

Appreciating that the effects of adversity on human development are highly influenced by both individual and collective processes, there has been a significant concern with identifying different mechanisms operating at different levels — individual, familial, communal, institutional, and so on — and how they correlate with and reinforce one another. Some risk and protective factors are characterised as internal; they result from the unique combination of characteristics that make up an individual, such as temperament, intelligence, or physical health (Barton 2005; Masten 2001). Thus, ethnographic research conducted in Brazilian shanties by anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992) found that, through higher levels of alertness and social interaction, some infants are able to attract greater attention from carers than others, with significant effects on the levels of care they receive and hence on their survival in the context of poverty. Others are external or ecological; that is, they are the outcome of environmental factors, such as social and material conditions, which affect an individual's healthy development and wellbeing. The significance of the interplay between internal and external factors is bound to how each is transmitted and options for responses.

Developmental psychologist Suniya Luthar concludes her synthesis of resilience research with the evaluation that “Resilience rests, fundamentally, on relationships” (Luthar 2006: 780). By relationships, Luthar is explicitly referring to social relationships between human beings:

During the childhood years, early relationships with primary caregivers affect several emerging psychological attributes and influence the negotiation of major developmental tasks; resolution of these tasks, in turn, affects the likelihood of success at future tasks. Accordingly, serious disruptions in the early relationships with caregivers – in the form of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse – strongly impair the chances of resilient adaptation later in life. Whereas some maltreated children will obviously do better in life than others, the likelihood of sustained competence, without corrective, ameliorative relationship experiences, remains compromised at best. On the positive side, strong relationships with those in one's proximal circle serve vital protective processes, for children as well as for adults. (Luthar 2006: 780)

As resilience and competence have risen to the fore in research, so social workers and other 'helping' professionals (e.g. Saleebey 1997) have sought to establish models of practice that emphasise clients' strengths rather than their problems or deficits. In this sense, it can be understood that the conceptual genealogy of resilience hints at an ideological bias. In other words, one way of framing the sudden popularity of the notion of resilience is to acknowledge its purposeful contrast with the vulnerability discourse, much in the same way that the assets discourse provided a counter to the deficit-focused model of poverty that emphasises needs (Narayan *et al* 2000). Certainly, there is value in recognizing children's, families' and communities' capacities and competencies and challenging the vulnerability discourse which is still prevalent in many quarters. Applied to children, this change in approach reflects a decidedly political orientation in its recognition of the young as competent social agents

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<sup>1</sup> That said, coping and resilience are not always treated with conceptual clarity and are sometimes used interchangeably in a fairly indiscriminate manner.

rather than inherently vulnerable beings that are wholly dependent on others for their survival and development.

Emergent attention to resilience as an analytical focal point has recently coincided with advances in identifying the sequence of the human genome. These advances have expanded the boundaries of research on human development, giving rise to studies of the activities of specific genes and their potential effects. Scientists have pursued research that indicates correlations between certain genes and psychological traits, including those involving attitudes or social behaviour, linking genetic effects to probabilities of divorce, religiosity, and parenting styles for instance (Rutter 2002, citing as examples: Jockin, McGue, and Lykken 1996, Eaves, D'Onofrio and Russell 1999, Kendler 1996). While such associations have been critiqued among their disciplinary peers for being overly reductionist, there is acceptance of the idea that all behaviours are affected in some way by genetics (Curtis and Cicchetti 2003, Rutter 2002). In other words, it would seem that resilience is at least partly heritable, with protective processes operating through both genetic and environmental effects, the test being the ability "to find out how these genetic effects are mediated because, obviously, they are most unlikely to operate directly on the social behaviour as observed" (Rutter 2002: 3).<sup>2</sup>

As yet, there have been few studies examining genetic contributors to resilient functioning (Curtis and Cicchetti 2003), although genetic inheritance has been hypothesised as an 'obvious place' to investigate human resilience based on the truism that individuals differ in both genetic make-up and their responses to the same environmental stimuli (Hampton 2006: 1756). As Thomas Insel of the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health justifies the convergence of genetic and resilience research: "To not exploit the power of modern genomics would really be a mistake in a field in which we start by saying that this is about individual variation" (*ibid*). A 2006 conference sponsored by the New York Academic of Sciences and Brown Medical School that focused on Resilience in Children advertised the potential of the 'new biology' of resilience as offering "an unprecedented understanding of processes of development in atypically and typically developing children and will have profound implications for preventive intervention programs" (New York Academy of Sciences 2006).

Some progress has been reported in studying the combined effects of genetic variants and environmental factors. For example, a study of maltreated children with a particular variation of a specific gene found that these children were more likely to develop antisocial problems than those without this variation and similarly that depression after childhood maltreatment was more common among individuals with the same type of variation of a different gene than individuals without this variation (Hampton 2006 referencing Caspi 2002). Research into how genetic and environmental factors interact and how these interactions can affect individuals has also been recognised as providing new plausible interpretations of the processes at work. For instance, a team at the US National Institute of Child Health and Human Development that studied the different behavioural tendencies (high and low levels of aggression) of monkeys found that monkeys with the same genetic variation experienced both different genetic effects (in serotonin metabolism rates) and demonstrated different behavioural tendencies (in aggression levels) according to whether they were mother-, or peer-reared. These findings can be interpreted in two different ways: either an environmental influence ('good' mothering) buffers the potential deleterious effect of a certain genetic variation; or, a particular genetic variation can protect an individual in a potentially deleterious environment (absence of 'good' mothering). As the study's lead scientist Stephen Suomi

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<sup>2</sup> While inducing a correlation between a genetic trait and developmental outcome or behaviour is interesting, Michael Rutter observes that it has "zero use on its own" for understanding causal mechanisms: "To be of any use for policy or practice, it is necessary to know much more with regard to the specifics and how they work." (Rutter 2002: 4)

reflects on the implications of the genetic determinism interpretation: “If you use the argument that good genes are protecting against bad environments, that’s nice if you have good genes, but it’s a little tough to change your genetic background” (Hampton 2006: 1759).

Thus we see different branches of resilience research extending in different directions according to disciplinary interests: those scientists propounding the potential of the ‘new biology’ are attempting to become more precise in understanding how genetic and environmental influences interact, whereas social scientists focus their attention at the complexities of how individuals socially engage with the world as part of their survival. These are both valuable pursuits in that they seek to extend understanding beyond the locus of the human being as a creature of simple biological needs and processes (for food, liquid, sleep, and so on). Yet, it is at the convergence of these different levels of analysis that the most promising new insights may be located. Recent findings from biological research indicates that social and psychological experiences exert actions on the brain which can modify gene expression and brain structure, function and organisation, which in turn can lead to the initiation and continuation of behavioural changes (Curtis and Cicchetti 2003; Hampton 2006). As such, all stages of feedback loops, i.e. the cyclical interaction of social experiences and biological effects, require integrated analysis. The work of those few people who seek to translate findings from each domain of research so that they might converge to inform more holistic and long-term definitions of problems, risk and protective factors, and ultimately the potential for positive adaptation at the locus of the individual who is negotiating her/his environment, may prove supremely valuable for informing what can be contributed to support people in adversity.

### **Some problems with applying resilience in poverty research**

The vast majority of the popular and scholarly literature on resilience represents the phenomenon as though it embodied scientifically proven principles that can be applied to positive effect in the lives of those living in adversity. Yet, in spite of the appeal of resilience as a tool in the struggle to ‘inoculate’ children against hazards of many kinds and prevent the transmission of susceptibilities across generations, research in this area is beset with conceptual and analytical problems. Here we examine a few of the major difficulties.

One of the more fundamental limitations of the resilience research has to do with its origin in particular domains of psychology, social work and other human sciences. This disciplinary legacy has led to an inordinate focus first on the individual as the unit of observation and second on intra-psychic functioning and individual behaviour as the object of analysis. Such foci are sustained at the expense of broader structural and collective considerations that make a crucial difference to human experiences of adversity. The distortion in perspective becomes apparent when one considers the extent to which chronic poverty and inter-generational poverty transmission are in fact shaped by overwhelming structural forces, as in the case of institutionalised labour and property market discrimination against people of a particular caste or ethnic status for example. While the agentive role of the individual cannot be denied, such structural forces can become deeply embedded within society, entrenching poverty and related distress in many generations of a population.

At a more practical level, the emphasis on individual functioning and the harnessing of individual resources to overcome adversity de-politicises the project of poverty reduction. Attention is diverted away from the state and other actors with the power and moral responsibility to intervene and bring about change, with populations living in poverty being charged with using their own resources to support themselves through crisis. Hence we find major players in the field of poverty reduction adopting a default position which individualises that which should, in fact, involve structural or collective effort for change in most circumstances. Thus, even the World Bank can be found promoting the resilience concept,

as evidenced by a paper it produced on early childhood development: “Parents and other caregivers can promote resilience in their children by positively responding to situations and by teaching children how to respond” (World Bank n.d.). Resilience researcher Michael Ungar articulates the reasons for concern:

The discourse of resilience can be (has been?) co-opted by proponents of a neo-conservative agenda that argues if one person can survive and thrive, then shouldn't the responsibility for success be on all individuals within populations at risk to do likewise? (2005b: xvi, *bracketed content in original*).<sup>3</sup>

The multi and inter-disciplinary nature of resilience research is another major challenge to this field and is one that undermines the achievement of a coherent conceptual and theoretical framework that can be applied to practice. Indeed, in an attempt to encapsulate the research in an illustrative metaphor, Ungar describes the field as an ‘unwieldy tree’ with many branches (Ungar 2005b: xviii). Scholarly debates have yet to produce clarity on the definition, locus, determinants, mediating and moderating factors and outcomes of resilience. A principal concern for those who seek to advance understanding of how resilience might be realised is that the various branches of ‘resilience research’ (using Ungar’s metaphor) might not be shooting off from the same conceptual roots. They therefore are pursuing directions that will not offer the advantage of theoretical comparability. More worrying still, the conceptual roots may never have been robust in the first place, and thus much of the growth in resilience research is theoretically tenuous (Boyden and Myers *forthcoming*).

The lack of conceptual and theoretical coherence is evident even with the core constructs of this field. We have stated that in psychological and social theories, the effects of resilience are revealed only in their interaction with risk, and it is therefore apparent that the concept cannot have meaning without a pre-existing understanding of risk. Clearly, then, the starting point for defining and identifying resilience is knowledge of the ‘problem’. But, in practice defining a problem for an individual or a society incurs normative judgments; what is ‘bad’ is predicated on values, interests and assumptions.

Indeed, the ‘problem’ of poverty itself continues to be redefined according to paradigmatic shifts and methodological innovations, especially as the long-cherished premise that poverty can be ascertained according to uni-dimensional measures is increasingly contested and countered. Multidimensional definitions of poverty are now being advocated and accepted, thereby gradually moving away from definitions resting solely on income or consumption shortfall (e.g. the World Bank’s demarcation of US\$1/day for the poverty line, which still dominates much poverty-related policy). Development researchers and practitioners have encouraged the employment of more contextually specific definitions of poverty in which the social and political rather, or as well as, the economic dimensions of the phenomenon are stressed. These analyses commonly give prominence to emic perspectives, which are often divergent and which emphasise that even if consensus on the definition of poverty is reached it is not always characterised or experienced as a problem (Hulme 2005; Graham and Pettinato 2005). Certainly, children’s poverty has a long and contentious history of problem definition (Feeny and Boyden 2003; Gordon *et al* 2005).

Such permutations in the course of problem conceptualisation obviously complicate the establishment of a baseline of risk, from which to evaluate what resilience to that problem may look like. If resilience manifests positive adaptation despite exposure to a problem then what constitutes positive adaptation also requires definition. This clearly implicates the same challenges as problem definition given that positive adaptation is difficult to claim as universally and objectively knowable. The proliferation of research and theory concerning

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<sup>3</sup> The concerns outlined above resonate in important ways with the longstanding debate in which the concept of ‘the culture of poverty’ as a predisposition to fatalism or laziness was proposed in explanations of the causes of and solutions to poverty.

wellbeing definitions is testament to the difficulties in validating factors associated with both objective and subjective perceptions of quality of life across contexts (Camfield and McGregor 2005). Most current resilience researchers justify presenting only very general indicators of positive adaptation as sensitivity to contextual specificity. For instance, Luthar posits that the concept of resilience is most salient with respect to the concept of social competence, or the effective performance in developmental tasks appropriate for people “of a given age, society or context, and historical time” (Luthar 2006: 751).

Even if the general domains of wellbeing turn out to be broadly universal, specific factors and specific competencies will inevitably prevail in different contexts according to socio-cultural patterning. Scholars in psychology and anthropology (for example, Cole 1996; Goodnow 1990; Rogoff 1990) who follow the socio-cultural approach to human development first expounded by Lev Vygotsky (Vygotsky 1978) would have no difficulty with such a proposition for they maintain that all psychological phenomena, including perceptions of risk and resilience, are highly dependent on context. It is their contention (Rogoff 1990) that, consciously or not, caregivers and other mentors structure children’s learning to support the acquisition of the knowledge, skills, and experience needed to function successfully in their particular environment. Since each environment contains unique socio-cultural and material features and challenges, this is an enduring source of cognitive, psychological and social diversity in the young, with clear implications for variation in ‘positive’ or ‘resilient’ behaviour.

Since values, interests and perspectives influence judgments of what is ‘good’, this raises the possibility that outside researchers may not share that same understanding about positive adaptation as the individuals whose behaviour they are analysing. To add further to this complexity, responses may function as positive adaptations in immediate circumstances but generate other negative outcomes in different circumstances (in the future, in other environments). Research among children of depressed mothers in the United States, for instance, showed that boys and girls who adopt a caretaker role at first appeared to be responding well. However, susceptibility to problems such as depression and anxiety were later observed (Luthar 2006 citing Hammen 2003; Hetherington and Elmore 2003). Indeed, the response in such cases has been characterised as ‘false maturity’, hinting at the masking of problems beneath the surface of outward behaviours. In relation to poverty or other experiences of marginalisation, the theory of false consciousness, if valid, suggests that people’s perceptions of how they are doing “can easily be swayed by mental conditioning or adaptive expectations” (Sen 1999: 62). Hence, it is important to appreciate that even while resilience traits imply the ability to overcome adversity, such traits need not necessarily manifest in behaviours that are generally understood as positive adaptation. For example, resilience against the adversities of war may entail responses such as emotional numbing or hyper-vigilance which can have the effect of reducing the capability of affected individuals to empathise and interact positively with others (Dawes 2000).

Only after ideas of the problem and the resilient response are established is it possible to begin identification of associated risk and protective factors, a task which Luthar describes as the “the central objective of resilience researchers” (Luthar 2006: 743). Thus, risk and protective factors are defined in relation to problem or positive adaptation definitions. Findings from a study of child labour in Vietnam illustrate this point. Child labour is prevalent among those Vietnamese households likely to have higher borrowing costs, that are farther from schools, and whose adult members experienced negative returns to their own education (Beegle, Dehejia and Gatti 2005). Five years subsequent to child labour experiences, researchers find significant negative impacts on educational enrolment and attainment, but also substantially higher earnings for those (young) adults who worked as children. The study also showed no significant effects of child labour on individuals’ health. Forecasted estimates of earnings from the age thirty onward, however, indicate that forgone earnings attributable to lost schooling exceed any earnings gain associated with child labour, and that the net present discounted value of child labour is positive for discount rates of 11.5 percent

or higher. The researchers interpret their results to show that in the medium run (i.e. over a five to ten-year horizon) there are important economic benefits to child labour that offset its opportunity cost (lower school attainment) for households. However, over a longer horizon the returns to education increase, with more educated individuals experiencing increased wage growth, and the returns to work experience decrease. As this study's findings demonstrate, if the problem is defined as household earnings in the next five to ten years then child labour could be regarded as a protective factor against poverty (particularly since no health problems were noted). On the other hand, if the problem is defined as the earning potential of individuals twenty to thirty years hence, child labour may be a vulnerability factor for future poverty.

To add greater complexity, subjective interpretations of adversity by those affected make a significant difference to resilience and wellbeing since the meaning of experience is a crucial moderator of its effect. Thus, for example, the way in which poverty undermines an individual's social interactions and relationships with others can be far more important to children than having to go without food or other commodities. In rural Bolivia, despite knowing full well that chronic shortages of water have a significant effect on livelihoods and on the survival and health of humans and livestock, children highlighted above all the humiliation of being unable to wash and therefore being labelled smelly, dirty, and poor (Boyden *et al* 2003). These children acknowledged that one of the worst consequences of being thought of as 'poor' is the associated shame, social exclusion, and humiliation by peers.

In studies of poverty, the power of subjective valuation in confounding interpretations of ill-being and wellbeing, risk and resilience, is often illustrated through comparison of the social and psychological effects of relative versus absolute poverty (Camfield and McGregor 2005). Surprisingly perhaps, subjective perceptions of life satisfaction or happiness are seldom found to correlate in an obvious way with 'objective' assessments of people's material circumstances. Thus, relative poverty commonly has far more deleterious effect on psychological, emotional and social wellbeing than does absolute poverty. Such findings are likely to reflect the fact that material lack is perceived as far more debilitating when associated with stigma, social exclusion and denigration. Therefore, it follows that judging whether a phenomenon such as child labour is a risk or protective factor remains contentious and the debate is likely only resolvable according to careful attention to specific contexts' local values in relation to this activity and perhaps even individuals' particular situations. This kind of complexity point to the danger of approaches to wellbeing and resilience that "fragment people's accounts of their experience or reduce them to a single indicator" (Camfield and McGregor 2005: 197).

### **Assessing the role of children's resilience in preventing poverty transmission**

Researchers have often sought to investigate life-course and inter-generational aspects of transmission as a means of explaining how poverty becomes a chronic condition within families and communities (Bird 2007; Harper, Marcus and Moore 2003; Hulme and Shepherd 2003; Smith and Moore 2006). In assessing the potential of resilient individuals to disrupt poverty transmission, the question remains as to how deterministic these transmissions are. Were childhood resilience found to have a role in arresting poverty transmission, then presumably this would be predicated on the ability of resilient individuals to somehow disrupt the mechanisms and processes by which poverty is conveyed through the lifespan and to subsequent generations. This in turn would seem to be premised on the idea that poverty becomes entrenched in families and communities through cyclical processes that are intrinsic to the development of both individuals and the domestic unit, individuals who demonstrate resilience having the power not simply to overcome adversity personally but to actually arrest cycles of deprivation within groups. While she does not use the concept of

resilience, Briony Smith articulates this view clearly: “Although highly context-specific, an individual’s asset bundle, their capabilities, and their power to exercise agency have been found to combine to mould the life-course of individuals and their households” (Smith 2006).

In making a case about a potential relationship between resilience and the obstruction of poverty transmission, the first step would need to be acknowledgement that children inherit rather than create their poverty (Greenspun 2004; UNICEF 2005). The understanding that children do not of their own making cause their poverty implies the intergenerational transmission of poverty from parents to children (Green and Hulme 2005; Moore 2001). Insofar as inheritance of poverty is the concern, this highlights the mediated nature of childhood experience, in which poverty (and other adversities) may impact both directly on the child, but also indirectly through stress or disruption to care arrangements, family networks, community and other environmental support systems. This emphasis on the inseparability of the wellbeing of boys and girls from the settings, systems of relationships, and cultural processes within which they are raised, resonates strongly with the key tenets of resilience research.

Such a conceptualisation brings to the fore the capital of households, parents, carers and other adults with a significant role in children’s lives. In accordance with this paradigm, Moore (2001) and Hulme and Shepherd (2003) present a list of poverty-related capital that can be transmitted from ‘parent’ to ‘child’ through various means. They include items of financial, material and environmental capital (e.g. land, physical assets, debt), human capital (such as survival strategies, disease) and social, cultural and political capital (for example, norms of entitlement, value systems, access to key decision-makers). Different modes of transmission are recognised for such different forms of capital including inheritance (both the physical inheritance of goods and genetic inheritance), investment (of time and capital in care, education and health) and socialization (Hulme and Shepherd, 2003; Moore 2001). One of the more robust correlations to emerge in research of this nature is between mother’s education attainment and children’s eventual education attainment, with implications for opportunity and wellbeing (Harper 2004).

While it would seem to make a lot of sense to think about poverty as being inherited by children through deprivations of various forms of capital that are conveyed via different means, pinning down the mechanisms of inter-generational transfer of non-material forms of capital, and the effects for children’s resilience, is not straightforward. In the case of resilience in individuals, we are not necessarily talking about observable goods in the way of financial, material and environmental capital, but various forms of human, social, cultural and political capital; these manifest in far more intangible variables such as traits, competencies, values, self perceptions, and the like. It is hard to imagine precisely how these kinds of variables can be measured concretely as acting against poverty transmission across generations. Further, whereas it is possible to conceive of highly developed skills in problem solving and lateral thinking as encouraging entrepreneurial actions that lead in turn to capital accumulation, some other competencies, such as optimism, for example, even whilst manifesting significant positive adaptation to adversity, may appear to have only tenuous connection with poverty eradication. Even where seemingly robust correlations may be found in some processes, as in the above example in which mother’s education attainment links with that of children’s, causal relations in the psycho-emotional and social domains of the child’s life particularly cannot be assumed.

In emphasising the mother-child dyad, or systems of relationships based in the nuclear family or household, as the locus of transmission of non-material forms of capital, poverty research shares with much of the resilience research some significant assumptions that may not in practice be valid. Thus, for such transfers to work they must somehow be embedded in a mix of genetic heritability and environmental influences related to physical proximity and underpinned by ties of affect, mentoring and role modelling. This kind of thinking seems to

take for granted the family structures and relationships through which transmission occurs, as well as the care arrangements made for young children. As it happens, family structures and relationships – especially nuclear family structures and relationships – may well be quite marginal to inter-generational transmissions of non-material forms of capital and resilience traits in the many parts of the world where alternative family forms and care arrangements prevail. Practices like child labour migration, exchange and fosterage and sibling caretaking or shared caretaking by extended kin and neighbours, together with phenomena like child headed households, would seem likely to result in multiple and diffuse emotional and social attachments across a range of relationships and reduced interaction and allegiance between parents and children (Mann 2001). Hence, the power of inter-generational transmission between parent(s) or household and child is likely to be much diluted in such situations. It is also important to recognise that capital transfers are not necessarily unidirectional, but that children also affect the existence of, and access to, various forms of capital. Indeed, current research is challenging assumptions about the foundational role of family in children's development (Hariss 1998), highlighting the influence of peers, school, neighbourhood networks and the like as well as the development of domain-specific behaviours. This research raises important questions concerning the efficacy of the concept of inter-generational transfers of non-material forms of capital.

Turning to lifespan or life course transmission of poverty, we find a different set of research challenges. The thinking in this area rests on extensive evidence provided by health sciences and developmental psychology that childhood experience and children's development and wellbeing are foundational in shaping individual life trajectories. In other words, how children respond to their poverty will likely have major ramifications for adaptation and functioning in adulthood; such transmission being expressed in diverse domains, including physical health, social skills, emotions, values and conduct. The argument is that adaptive traits, or protective factors that strengthen children in adversity, can become embedded in the longer term and thereby serve to enhance or undermine resilience in the adults they become. In scrutinising the health and developmental psychology literature, then, we find a proclivity for emphasising the temporal sensitivity of children's resilience, this somehow distinguishing the resilience of the young from that of adults.

This particularity boils down to the idea that *children have developmental pathways*, or, in other words, behaviours that manifest in a systematic or orderly, fashion, with behaviours at later stages in the sequence characterising those in the earlier stages but progressing to more definitive forms. Some of the most consistent research on children's developmental pathways has been conducted in the field of psychopathology and focuses on deviance and delinquency (Compas, Gerhardt and Hinden 1995; Kelley *et al* 1997). Early childhood is theorised as especially critical in building lifelong attributes, including resilience competencies and/or vulnerability traits. This is both because developmental patterns established at this stage will likely be reproduced later on in the lifespan and also because this early phase of life is characterised by accelerated processes of developmental change that are in turn associated with heightened receptiveness to environmental stimuli.

Certainly the concept of developmental pathways is attractive for those interested in studying the possibility of building and sustaining in children resilience against poverty, the most obvious convergence of ideas and understanding in this respect being around time sensitivity. This notion builds on the evidence that there are important 'sensitive periods' for some developmental processes and potentials (Dawes and Donald 2005; Yaqub 2002) during which the stimulation that a child receives has a lasting effect on specific domains of development. Resilience theorists also predicate their approach on recognition of time sensitivity:

... there is broad consensus that in working with at-risk groups, it is far more prudent to promote the development of resilient functioning early in the course of

development rather than to implement treatments to repair disorders once they have been crystallized (Luthar 2006: 739).

In poverty research, deprivation during sensitive periods has been correlated with later poverty in life and linked to intergenerational transmissions of poverty (Harper 2004). Studies concerning various aspects of foetal, neonatal, infant and child development have indicated the likelihood that different human motor and mental developments have time-sensitive receptivity to environmental factors. For instance, correlations have been observed between maternal malnutrition during pregnancy (for example iron deficiency anaemia) and low birth weight in infants, lowered resistance to infection, inhibited growth and cognitive development and chronic diseases in later life (WHO 2006). And prenatal and infant protein-energy under-nutrition has been causally linked to later impairment of intellectual functioning (Alderman, Hoddinott and Kinsey 2001). Findings on nutrition, physical health and education in particular make a compelling case for time sensitive or age appropriate strategies and interventions to assist children in mastering key developmental tasks and thereby prevent potentially irreversible harm to their future wellbeing, for once these developmental 'sensitive periods' have passed, opportunities to avoid permanent damage can diminish and even disappear (Moore 2004, citing Yaqub 2001).

Even if the idea of developmental pathways has some practical significance for understanding how to bolster children against adversity, the concept does require further interrogation. The obvious question arising from a hypothesised connection between children's resilience and pathways is: how accessible are these pathways? First, are there universal pathways, for example in terms of self-esteem, self-efficacy, or emotional stability? Or are pathways more effectively conceptualised according to specific contexts (as with Sen's freedoms to realise competencies, for example, or with Rogoff's and anthropological views of socialisation as training in cultural competencies)? Second, does resiliency create pathways or are the foundations of pathways required before children can mobilize their resilient potential to embark on their transformative journeys? On a more critical note, the concept conjures up a rather static model of human development in which the life-course for adults seems to be largely pre-determined according to patterns laid down in childhood. Proponents of transactional theory on the other hand have elaborated a far more dynamic perspective in which child-context interactions are seen to contribute differently to development at different points in the life cycle, such transactions leading to a continuous modification of developmental trajectories (Dawes and Donald 2005; Sameroff 1975). As Dawes and Donald highlight, this view "challenges the idea that what is established early in development always has lasting or permanent effects" (2005: 14), and recognises "the complex interplay between genetic endowment and contextual influences across the lifespan" (*ibid*: 15).

Time sensitivity is obviously a concern for addressing many potential effects and causations of poverty (especially malnutrition), and this can necessarily mean targeting children who experience poverty, or may be susceptible to poverty given environmental factors. Nevertheless, recognition of the heterogeneity of both contexts and children is crucial, as is retaining an understanding of poverty that does not reduce its characterization to biological effects (Green and Hulme 2005; Hastrup 1993). But, as we have indicated, moving beyond the biological really is one of the greatest challenges. Without doubt, psychological, emotional and social wellbeing are more complex states to ascertain than biological health and are far less likely to be subject to mechanistic cause and effect relations. Yaqub (2002) notes how it has proven far more difficult to empirically demonstrate correlations between so-called 'sensitive periods' and behaviour traits such as self-esteem, temperament and personality. Accordingly, the factors that cause, moderate and mediate these processes are also much more difficult to identify and measure than the factors that affect physical health. Similarly, poverty researchers acknowledge that there is more certainty about the effects of some inheritances than others. While biological causal mechanisms are better understood,

or at least more easily empirically verifiable, than social causal mechanisms, it is important to notice that these biological relationships are based on environmental influences as well as genetic influences. Thus our cognitive map of intergenerational transmission is at the present time extremely restricted to the site of the individual's body and does not stretch very far either internally into her/his genetic make-up or externally out to her/his roles and relationships in the social world.

The impossibility of observing resilience directly or of identifying precise causal relations and the complexity of identifying contributory effects of interacting and cumulative factors means that it makes most sense to speak in probabilities. Incertitude of causal relationships in human development and conduct remains, since the correlation between various inputs (for example, mother's education) and outputs (for instance, child's health or education attainment) are derived from large sets of socio-economic variables that cover many different parental and community characteristics (Yaqub 2001). Thus, direct pathways are not identifiable (nor assumed to exist) and understanding of how different inputs and conditions interact remains complicated. And herein lies one of the most profound problems for resilience research, as Barton observes in his recent chapter:

The sheer multiplicity of potential risk and protective factors and the possible relationships among them (reciprocal, conditional, etc) places strains on the most complex multivariate, quantitative models. When one introduces time as a variable – that is, that certain processes may apply only at certain times, have lagged effects, or both – another layer of complexity emerges (Barton 2005: 142).

## **Conclusion**

At the outset of this paper we assigned ourselves the task of questioning whether studies of resilience are useful for research and practice concerning children's poverty and the lifecourse and intergenerational transmission of poverty. Based on our review of the increasing exercise of the resilience concept in various fields of research, we conclude that it has not yet been demonstrated as a valid analytical tool for poverty research. In short, we find that so far resilience has achieved neither a sufficiently functional definition nor a credible theory by which to identify its existence. Confident of unearthing direct cause and effect relations, much of the resilience research has been framed in positivist and mechanistic modes. But this kind of reasoning has been confounded by reality, leading some scholars to argue that we are in practice dealing with a multivariate phenomenon that is subject to highly complex moderating forces which in each individual combine uniquely to influence the outcomes and impact of adversity in countless distinct ways. To insist upon recognising this multivariate phenomenon as 'resilience' runs the risk of generating a concept that by attempting to mean everything ends up meaning nothing of analytical value.

Efforts to improve understanding of the causes and effects of children's poverty and the intergenerational transmission of poverty would be better served by relinquishing the metaphor of resilience while retaining the focus on particular factors that moderate and mediate poverty experiences and outcomes. It seems supremely naïve to expect that any absolute 'resilience process' could be identified given the infinite contingencies of the interplay between multiple factors. A more fruitful approach is to explicitly value and investigate these contingencies and how they play out in human development (broadly conceptualised). To do so means to invest in research that attends to the interactions of genetic and environmental influences as well as to how structural influences translate in peoples' everyday lives. The key challenge will be to retain the understanding that despite the empirical findings of chronic and intergenerational poverty, poverty is always experienced as dynamic. This dynamism is the challenge that spurs us on.

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