

Poverty and Behavior: The Case for Multiple Methods and Levels of Analysis

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Research investigating the relations among poverty, home environment, and child outcomes within biologically related families has the potential to confound genetic and environmental influences, but conventional behavioral genetic methods have serious limitations for understanding environmental influences. Careful and thorough measurement of the environment, recognition of the complex interactions of genotypes with environments, and specification of the populations of individuals and environments sampled are critical for such studies. Multiple methods, including carefully controlled multivariate longitudinal studies and random assignment experiments, provide strong evidence that poverty and related experiences influence children's development through environmental processes that go well beyond genetically transmitted attributes. Parents' poverty or affluence is due in part to individual abilities and personality characteristics, but is also a function of economic and social structural conditions as well as opportunity structures available to them as a consequence of their race, ethnic group, and gender. © 1997 Academic Press

In their critique of the *Child Development* special issue on Children and Poverty (Huston, McLoyd, & Garcia Coll, 1994), Rowe and Rodgers (1997) espouse a behavioral genetic approach. They make four major points. First, researchers studying the relations of poverty or family income to child outcomes have ignored the possibility that poverty itself, the environments pro-

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vided by parents, and children's developmental outcomes are influenced by genetic factors; therefore, one cannot attribute relationships among these sets of variables solely to environmental influences. Second, behavioral genetic studies are "required" to provide strong tests of environmental influences. No other methods are deemed acceptable. Third, research should be directed to poverty as the dependent rather than the independent variable with a focus on heritable individual differences in abilities and personality characteristics that determine poverty. Finally, structural modeling procedures designed to identify genetic and environmental contributions to ethnic and racial differences in poverty are proposed as a means of understanding the high proportion of African American and Hispanic individuals living in poverty.

We do not dispute the assertion that individual differences in many human attributes have some genetic basis and that the environments provided by parents to their biological children are influenced by genetic determinants. Nor do we think that many authors of the papers in the Special Issue would claim that relations among family environments and child outcomes are exclusively the result of environmental influences. We also agree that there is considerable variability within economic groups. In fact, one purpose of many of the investigations in the issue was to identify the variables predicting successful or problematic development within groups of poor children. We disagree, however, with the proposals to rely exclusively on behavioral genetic methods, to redirect inquiry to individual characteristics predicting poverty, and to use the proposed behavioral genetic models to understand racial and ethnic differences.

In this commentary, we first discuss issues in the use of behavioral genetic methods for understanding the environmental effects of poverty. Second, we review briefly evidence from a range of methods regarding environmental effects of poverty on development. Third, we address the question of whether heritable individual abilities and traits cause poverty. Finally, we examine evidence for environmental bases of racial and ethnic differences. We conclude that future understanding of development will be best served if the strengths of behavioral genetics conceptualizations can be allied with strong theoretical and methodological approaches to understanding environmental influences.

Do Behavior Genetic Methods Assess Environmental Effects?

Behavioral genetics methods are proposed as necessary for adequate study of environmental effects. Such methods do provide information about heritability, but they have several weaknesses for understanding environmental influences.

Behavioral genetics studies follow one of two basic methods. In one, pairs of children with different degrees of genetic relatedness are compared for similarity on some attribute. In one version of these designs, intraclass correlations for monozygotic and dizygotic twins are compared. The difference

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