

Poverty and Behavior: Are Environmental Measures Nature and Nurture?

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This article critiques the *Child Development* special issue on poverty. First, we argue that the special issue has understated the variation observed within social class groups. Second, we believe that a confounding of genetic and environmental effects in biological families weakens the case for environmental effects as presented in the special issue. Our conclusion is that behavior genetic research designs are required for studies of poverty. © 1997 Academic Press

In the April 1994 *Child Development (CD)*, a distinguished group of scholars united to examine the influence of family poverty on children's developmental outcomes. The articles concluded that poverty is detrimental to children's intellectual and personality development. Children of poor parents had worse educational outcomes, higher rates of externalizing behavior, and more depressive symptoms than children of higher income parents (e.g., Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994; Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994; Sampson & Laub, 1994; McLoyd, Jayaratne, Ceballo, & Borquez, 1994). Several articles also tried to find *mediators* of poverty's effects. That is, they measured developmental processes linking poverty with children's traits. For example, the relation of poverty to developmental outcomes was reduced when variation in home environments was controlled statistically (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994). Other articles found that independently of some parental traits (e.g., maternal education), poverty still worsens home environments. Weakness in research design, however, compromises the contribution of the CD special issue to scientific knowledge about the effects of poverty.

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This research was supported by grant HD21973 to Drs. Joseph L. Rodgers and David C. Rowe and by a grant from the Alcoholic Medical Beverage Research Foundation to Dr. Rowe.

A mediator model can be used to describe the stated or implicit conceptual model of articles in the *CD* special issue as follows: *Family Poverty* causes *Family Socialization Practices*, which in turn cause *Children's Developmental Outcomes*. Although a special issue cannot be expected to consider all possible influences on poverty, we believe that this mediational model has neglected the possibility of biological influence on the attainment of socioeconomic status. Our critique is focused on the existence of genetic mediators of poverty effects.

First, we believe that the mediational model used in the special issue tended to exaggerate the effect sizes of poverty by downplaying the variation in developmental outcomes observed within social class groups. Second, we argue that the *CD* special issue's mediational model of poverty can lead to overestimates of the environmental effects of poverty. We do not argue that the effects of poverty necessarily vanish when biological influences are accounted for in a model; rather on both substantive and statistical grounds, we postulate that model-estimated effects would be biased without such a specification (Meehl, 1970). We advocate using behavioral genetic research designs when investigating poverty outcomes, and we illustrate the use of such designs with some findings from the *National Longitudinal Survey of Youth*.

The issues raised here are not new; the methodological consequences of ignoring genetic effects have been recognized for many decades. For example, Burks, in her pioneering studies of foster children, noted that some part of the family environment-child IQ association could arise from their shared association with parental and child heredity (Burks, 1928; 1938). Indeed, Burks' use of the method of path analysis, which had been invented not long before by the geneticist Sewall Wright (1923), was decades ahead of its time. Later in this article, Fig. 1 is a conceptual descendant of Burks' (1938) path model. Her conclusion, that 75-80% of IQ variance was due to innate and heritable causes and that family environmental effects were weak, did not lead social scientists, then or now, to routinely adopt behavior genetic strategies in the evaluation of family environmental effects.

In the postwar period, a considerable social controversy swirled around a publication by Jensen (1969a) in the *Harvard Education Review* that suggested possible genetic variation in racial and social class differences. Jensen was physically threatened for presenting these views; many criticisms of him by social scientists were *ad hominem* in content (Pearson, 1991). Despite a gradual accumulation of data on the heritability of most personality and intellectual traits (Plomin, DeFries, & McClearn, 1990), most critics did not respond by advocating that Jensen's hypotheses be taken seriously and that research be launched on group mean differences using research designs able to cope with genetic variation.

Jensen (1969b) coined the phrase "sociologists' fallacy" for the automatic assumption that all effects of social categories (e.g., race, ethnicity, social

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