Inequality & Health

What is Inequality?
when resources & opportunities
(money, healthcare, college, good housing)
are not available to everyone

Inequality Compromises Health:
• Having less income or lower education can lead to more health problems and shorter life spans.
• For instance, those who said:
  • “I feel cheated about the chances I have to get a good job”
  • “I think most people live in better neighborhoods than me”
  • “I am not able to do as much for my children as others”
showed increased health risks as measured by accumulated wear & tear on the body (allostatic load).

[Seeman, 2014]

Examining Inequality in MIDUS
Inequality in America has become an important issue in public discussions and in many people’s lives. It is also the focus of scientific attention, and a major theme within the MIDUS study:
• Results from MIDUS and other national surveys are showing that inequality can compromise health and quality of life.
• MIDUS goes a step further by also looking at those who demonstrate significant strengths in the face of inequality.

We are sharing some of our results with you as a small thanks for your participation in MIDUS, without which we could not work toward our larger objective: to find better solutions to the problems of inequality in America so that greater segments of the population have opportunities to live meaningful and healthy lives.

Sincerely,

Carol D. Ryff, Director
MIDUS National Study of Health & Well-Being

But Some are Resilient
MIDUS has shown that some with less income or lower education maintain good physical & mental health.
What Promotes Health in the Face of Inequality?

**Good Relationships**

- Those with less education usually have worse health.
- However, those with less education who experienced less strain with their friends, family, and spouses developed fewer chronic illnesses (such as arthritis) and had fewer physical limitations (they could still bend, lift, and exercise) as they got older.

[O’Brien, 2012]

**Having a Loving Mother**

- Growing up with parents who had less schooling is associated with metabolic syndrome (a cluster of symptoms such as large waist size & high blood pressure) which can contribute to chronic diseases like diabetes and stroke.
- However, those who also grew up with a loving mother (who understood them and gave them more time & attention) were less likely to develop metabolic syndrome in middle age.

[Miller, 2011]

**Better Psychological Well-Being**

- Psychological well-being includes:
  - Continuing to learn, grow, and improve yourself.
  - Having goals to accomplish in life.
  - Having a positive view of yourself.
  - Having warm & trusting relationships.
- Those with less education who had persistently high well-being showed better physical health over time compared to those with less education and low well-being.
  - This included having fewer chronic diseases, fewer limitations in daily functioning (like walking up stairs) and fewer daily discomforts (such as headaches, stomach problems, or difficulty sleeping).
- Additionally, those with limited education but higher well-being were protected against elevated levels of inflammation.
  - Inflammation, or swelling, in body tissues is a risk factor for multiple diseases such as Alzheimer’s, cancer, and heart disease.

[Ryff, 2015; Morozink, 2010]
Believing You're in Control

- Those with less education who had a higher sense of control over their lives had better health (measured by number of chronic diseases) and less risk of dying over 10+ years, when compared to those with a low sense of control.
- **Low control means:** believing that other people determine most of what you can do and that little about your life can be changed.
- **High control means:** believing that if you really want to do something, you can find a way to succeed.

[O’Brien, 2012; Turiano, 2014]

Having Hope for the Future

- Adults raised by parents who didn’t finish high school showed more health risks in adulthood.
  - Health risk was measured by accumulated wear & tear on the body (allostatic load).
- However, those who grew up with less educated parents showed better health when they tackled problems by:
  - **positively shifting their view** (finding something meaningful in bad situations, controlling their irritation over setbacks)
  - **persisting by focusing on hopes for the future** (rather than living one day at a time).
- People who succeed in shifting & persisting find the strength to change themselves so that they don’t give up, even when faced with limited options to change the situation.

[Chen, 2012]

Being Satisfied with Many Aspects of Life

- Those with lower education & poor financial situations showed higher hormone levels (elevated cortisol) that reflect chronic stress.
- However, those who also reported high levels of life satisfaction had healthier hormone levels similar to those with more education and better finances.
- Life satisfaction was measured by asking how people felt about the overall quality of their life, health, work, and family relationships.
- Although wealth contributes to life satisfaction, these results suggest that feeling good about other areas of life might reduce the health risks associated with financial hardship.

[Zilioli, 2015]

What if You Don’t Have These Advantages?

*Midus* results show that while some are able to use their strengths to overcome considerable hardship, many others continue to suffer under the burdens of inequality. Identifying strengths is a first step toward developing interventions that could benefit everyone facing inequality.
Well-Being Amidst the Challenges of Minority Life

- Although more Blacks than Whites reported discrimination, 27% more Blacks than Whites had higher levels of psychological, emotional, and social well-being (accepting yourself, having a sense of purpose, being part of a supportive community, feeling happy and satisfied with life).
- Such outcomes suggest that despite the problems of inequality some who are disadvantaged nonetheless experience high well-being. [Keyes, 2009; Ryff, 2003]

In the words of Nietzsche: “He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.”

Acknowledging Discrimination May Help

- Whites who reported more discrimination showed elevated stress hormones (cortisol) associated with poor health.
- African Americans who reported more discrimination, however, showed healthier hormone levels, especially among those with less education.
- This suggests that among groups who regularly experience discrimination, acknowledging it may help people cope by being aware of an unfair system. [Fuller-Rowell, 2012]

Discrimination is Linked to Poor Health & Lower Well-being:

- African Americans who reported racial discrimination (people acting afraid of you, assuming you are dishonest) were less likely to report good physical or mental health. However, those who reported having supportive families (they cared about them & understood them) had better health, even if they experienced discrimination.
- Reporting weight discrimination (being treated as if you’re inferior because you’re overweight) was associated with a 60% increase in chances of dying.

- Those who reported discrimination for any reason (such as being treated with less respect at a restaurant) showed undesirable personality changes:
  - They became less trusting & less agreeable.
  - They had more negative emotions & grew more neurotic.
  - They became less organized, less disciplined, and less conscientious. [Warren-Findlow, 2013 & 2011; Sutin, 2016 & 2015]