

Urban Neighborhoods as a Context for Moral Development
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What characteristics of adolescents and the worlds in which they live allow for the pursuit of moral projects? How can we—as parents, members of institutions, and citizens—foster the development of these characteristics in our youth and their social contexts? I explore these questions and offer a few tentative answers for adolescents living in poor urban neighborhoods.

A Model of Moral Identity

To facilitate our thinking about these phenomena, my colleagues and I have constructed a model of moral identity.

The model suggests that there are six constituents to moral identity arranged in two layers. The first layer, at the left edge of the figure, is constituted of enduring personality and social characteristics that form the foundation for much of child and adolescent development. The kinds of personality and social characteristics in this layer change slowly and may be outside of children's and adolescents' volitional control. For example, there is little research to indicate that childhood personality traits can be affected in targeted interventions. Similarly, broad patterns of family functioning are difficult to alter, as are neighborhood characteristics and social class.

The middle layer corresponds to the set of qualities that Dan McAdams has called "characteristic adaptations," and includes moral cognition, images of self, moral emotions (shame, guilt, and especially pride), and social relationships/opportunities. Our working hypotheses are 1) that this middle layer mediates the relations of enduring characteristics—the qualities on the left—to moral identity, 2) that this middle layer is more malleable than the enduring qualities, and 3) that this middle layer is linked to particular sets of activities. Piliavin has pointed out in her study of blood donors, moral accomplishment is in part a role, occurring in a specific social context. There are very few individuals who look like moral saints when examined from every perspective. Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Mother Theresa, Paul Farmer all exhibited moral flaws. But we overlook these flaws in light of their spectacular achievements. I might add that pride in the absence of achievement is hubris, and in some research that Kyle Matsuba and I have done we find that hubris interferes with moral achievement.

In our view, the ideal constellation of qualities for commitment to moral projects includes a resilient personality; sophisticated moral reflection and prosocial attitudes; a sense of self characterized by a sense of continuity, moral concerns, and self-efficacy; the ability to feel pride linked to one's moral activities; and, finally, a set of social relationships that both draw one into moral projects and protect one against moral collapse.

We posit that the relations among the components are relatively weak. This means that no single personality profile or background is prerequisite to moral accomplishment. The world has seen remarkable moral achievements from deeply neurotic people.

Finally, the failure of any element can have corrosive effects on the others. In my discussion of neighborhoods, I shall talk particularly about the negative effects that changes in personality brought about by poverty might have on the other components of moral identity.

The Qualities of Poor Urban Neighborhoods

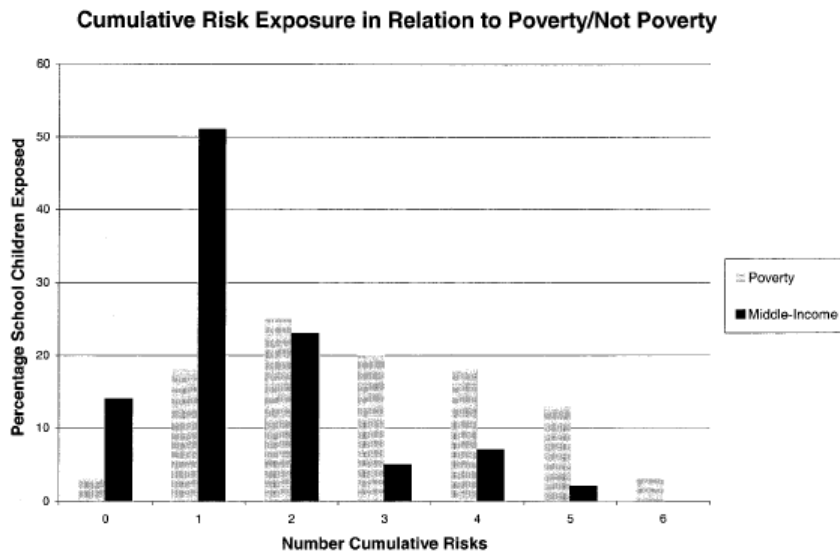
What are poor urban neighborhoods like? In our research we focus on three qualities: stress, youthfulness, and diversity, each of which, we believe, has distinct effective effects on the components of the model that we've proposed. In this précis, and in my presentation, I shall not discuss diversity.

Stress

There's very little to recommend chronic stress. It has adverse effects for health. And, we believe, it has adverse effects on personality.

Perhaps not surprisingly, there are more stressors in poor neighborhoods than there are in affluent ones, as this graph from work by Gary Evans suggests. There's more noise, more violence, more family separations, more pollution, and disorder.

Percentage of Poor and Nonpoor Children Exposed to Cumulative Physical and Psychosocial Environmental Risks



Note. The mean number of multiple stressors is significantly higher ($p < .001$) for the poverty sample compared with the middle-income sample. Data adapted from a corrected version of Table 2 in *Child Development*, 74(5), p. 1338, which originally appeared in "The Environment of Poverty: Multiple Stressor Exposure, Psychophysiological Stress, and Socioemotional Adjustment," by G. W. Evans and K. English, 2002, *Child Development*, 73, p. 1242. Copyright 2002/2003 by the Society for Research in Child Development. Adapted with permission.

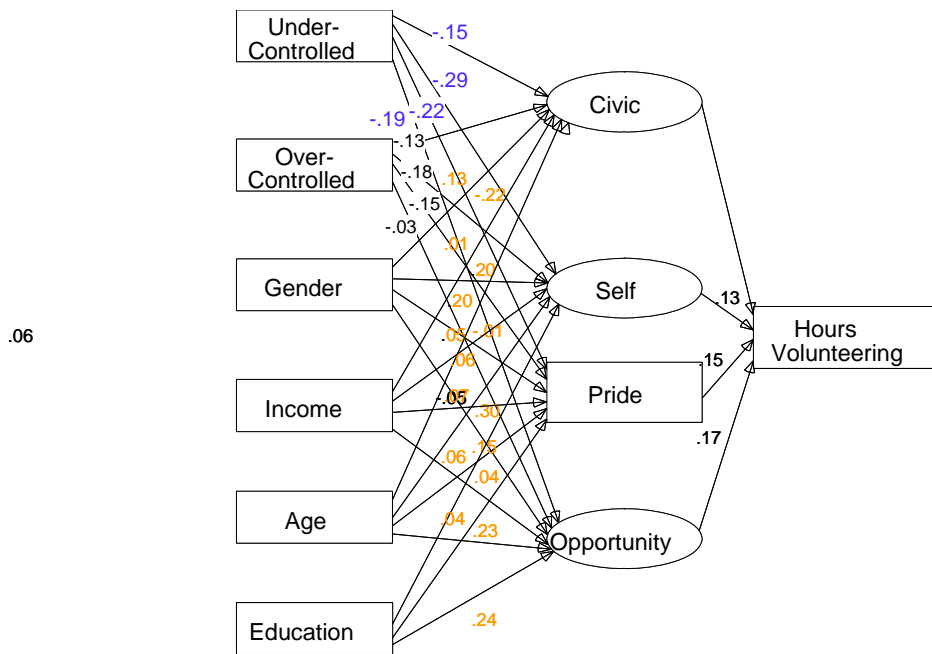
In our recent work, we are trying to understand the effects of stress on personality change. We've relied on a threefold typology to characterize childhood personality: resilient, over-controlled, and under-controlled.

The personality types measured in childhood are associated in predictable ways with adolescent academic progress (resilients do best), aggression (under-controlled are highest), sexual behavior (under-controlled are first to debut, less likely to use contraception), and volunteering (resilients are highest). Children in the resilient status fare better.

We have calculated the poverty rates for the census tracts of the children in a large national data set, the NLSY, and then have estimated the association of poverty rate to personality change—from resilient to under-controlled—between ages 3/4 and 5/6. These estimations include a number of controls for family income, maternal education, and other demographic characteristics. Our estimates suggest a meaningful relation between neighborhood poverty rates and adverse personality change: Our estimate is that children living in a place like Camden are more than twice as likely as children living in affluent neighborhoods to change out of the resilient type into the under-controlled type.

What difference does this make for moral life and the construction of a moral identity? One way to appreciate it is to examine some of our findings from analyses of the MIDUS data set. The MIDUS survey collected extensive self-report information about personality, demographics, moral attitudes, self, moral emotions, and social capital. In fact, we believe that the MIDUS has items, and usually groups of items, for all the elements that we postulate in our model of our identity.

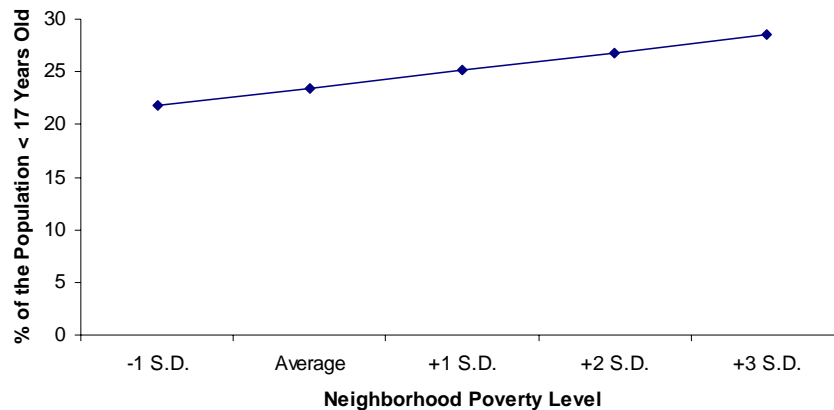
Below is a structural equation model that we have estimated predicting hours volunteered per month. It's evident that this SEM corresponds directly to our theoretical model. Of particular importance is the fact that the personality types, which correspond conceptually to those I was discussing in the context of the NLSY, have clear relations with all the qualities in the middle, characteristic adaptations level of the model. Adults who are either over-controlled or under-controlled report less of a sense of civic responsibility, feel less keenly that they will be helping others into the future, are less inclined to feel pride in their contributions to the community, and report lower levels of social capital. In terms of our model of moral identity, over-controlled and under-controlled adults are clearly disadvantaged.



To summarize: Poor urban neighborhoods are stressful. Stress is associated with undesirable change, from resilient to under-/over-controlled. Under- and over-controlled adolescents are less likely to volunteer and more likely to be involved in risky behaviors. In adulthood, under-controlled and over-controlled adults are likely to be less civically minded, have a self less oriented towards helping others, experience less pride, and have lower levels of social capital. I am suggesting, then, that the chronic stress endemic to high poverty neighborhoods saps children and adolescents of the psychological and social resources they need to develop moral identities.

Youthfulness

Poor urban neighborhoods are also youthful. Consider Camden, New Jersey, where we do much of our work. In Camden, there is one person under the age of 16 for every 2 over that age; in one census tract in Camden, in 2000, there was one person under the age of 16 for every person over that age. A typical city in New Jersey has a much different ratio. Bayonne, for example has 1 person under the age of 16 to 4 persons over the age of 16.



As the graph above illustrates, the association of poverty and youthfulness is quite clear.

Our hypothesis is that a child or adolescent in a community in which a large fraction of the population is constituted of children and adolescents (child-saturated environment) will interact more often with peers, and consequently will be more influenced by them, than will an adolescent in a community with relatively few children and many adults (adult-saturated environment). This hypothesis rests on the notion that social influence is a product of the persons that an individual interacts with on a daily basis. What do children and adolescents learn from each other?

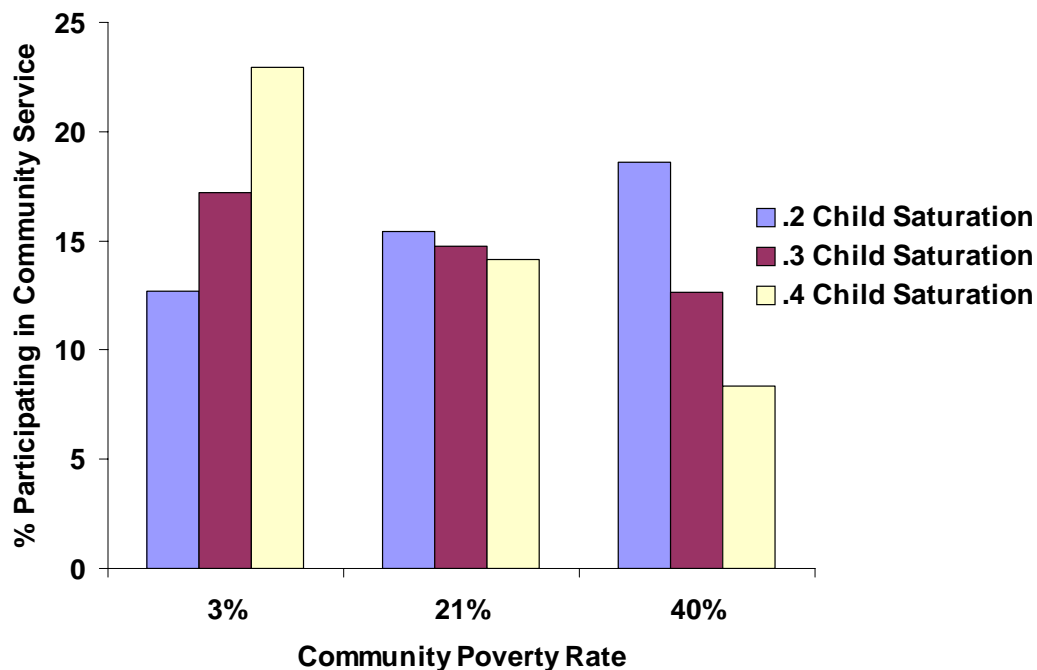
Piagetians believe that children and adolescents learn to collaborate, to cooperate, through interactions with peers. We might imagine that children and adolescents growing up in child-saturated environments might benefit in this regard.

Peers also have a mobilizing effect on each other. This is one reason that political scientists have hypothesized that large populations of young males are dangerous for the political

system in any society. These large populations can be easily mobilized to revolution or social action.

If social influence operates as we suggest, then child-saturated environments are better than adult-saturated ones for the acquisition by adolescents of any activity requiring collaboration and mobilization. Volunteering is one such activity; consequently we hypothesized that adolescents in child-saturated environments would be more likely to volunteer than adolescents in adult-saturated environments.

To test this hypothesis, we made use of data from the National Household Educational Survey of 1999 (NHES-99). The NHES-99 was a telephone-interview study of nationally-representative households from across the United States. Approximately 6000 children and adolescents in grades 6-12 were asked if they had been voluntarily involved (i.e., not to meet a school-mandated requirement) in community service in the current school year. We also calculated the poverty rate and child saturation quotient for their neighborhoods (zip codes). The graph below provides estimates from a logistic regression equation predicting volunteering from the interaction of poverty rate and child saturation (controlling for family demographics and child characteristics). We have replicated this effect in two additional national samples.



In low poverty neighborhoods, approximately 3%, the rate of volunteering was nearly twice as high in neighborhoods with 40% children than it was in neighborhoods with 20% children. In moderate poverty neighborhoods approximately 21%, child saturation had no effect on volunteering. Finally, in extremely poor neighborhoods, 40% poverty, neighborhoods with 40% children have extremely low rates of volunteering. The conjunction of extreme poverty and an extremely youthful populace appears to overwhelm a community's capacity to provide opportunities for children and adolescents to contribute through volunteering to the public good.

To summarize: Child-saturated neighborhoods can increase the frequency of volunteering, a behavior that is typically considered prosocial. This effect likely occurs through the influence of peers on personality and by increasing the opportunities adolescents have for participation in volunteering.

However, there is little to recommend high levels of child-saturation in combination with high levels of poverty. In such locations, volunteering is depressed. It appears as if the large population of youth, combined with a lack of resources, may overwhelm a community's ability to provide opportunity for development.

Conclusion

Conditions aren't optimum for moral growth in America's poorest neighborhoods.

That said, there are bright spots; moral flourishing regularly occurs in poor urban areas. There are remarkable adolescents in such communities. I shall discuss the achievements of such adolescents in my presentation, and focus particularly on the implications for intervention.