

# The Stress of Poverty: A Case Study Using Amazing Grace

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Poverty is an overarching social issue that affects people in many ways. Stress has often been associated with poverty. This relationship is explored through Kozol (1995) and his experiences with children in an impoverished neighborhood. The children he describes have bio-psycho-social risk and resilience factors in regards to stress and poverty. Stress and poverty can be put into an ecological perspective utilizing functionalist theory. Functionalist theory is limited in implementing a planned change process with a client. Utilizing empowerment theory works to both help the client understand their issue and they aren't the only one with the issue (much like functionalism). It goes further to help create a planned change process for the client and to continue that process at the macro level.

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Barusch (2006) talks about children who grow up in some of the United States' most impoverished areas suffer from a variety of mental and health-related ills. Poverty has been associated with low birth weight, increased infant mortality, nutritional deficits. AIDS and other infectious diseases are also often associated at higher rates with people in poverty. Kozol (1995) describes the lives of children who are growing up in just such impoverished areas. As he relates to their lives he uncovers many of the stressors that are in place due to poverty.

The abject poverty that the children he explains show stressors at every turn. Ballas (2006) defines stress as "a feeling of emotional or physical tension." (Definition section, para 1) These tensions can be both emotional and or physical. This means, simply put that they can have an effect on your mental and or bodily health. Moore (n.d.) breaks the concept of stress down into three different categories. The first two categories deal with the stresses of daily life. First acute stress is non-consistent stress that can come from a variety of sources. Second chronic stress occurs when one suffers from the same acute stress consistently over time. Third traumatic stress deals with an overwhelming tragedy. People who suffer from traumatic stresses can often be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

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## Bio-psycho-social Risk and Resilience Factors

The common quote saying "when it rains, it pours" seems to be very true of stress and can be especially true of the stressors related to poverty. Kozol (1995)'s kids many different stressors that affect them. These stressors are a contestant in their lives and often can be considered chronic. Sometimes, they have a pouring down of various seemingly unrelated acute stressors. Most of the kids experienced at least one stressor that many would consider traumatic.

The stressors that these children experience can be described as risk factors. All of the children described experiencing some of the same biological risk factors. 1.) The children's living conditions and neighborhoods were risk factors. These issues included the general dirtiness of the neighborhood (all of the things found on the sidewalks). 2.) The pollution from the incinerator and the city dump could also be called risk factors. 3.) The disproportionate number of neighborhood members with AIDS and other diseases could be another risk factor. It is important to describe people and topics in a holistic fashion. When talking about risk factors there is a need for the comparison of resilience factors. 1.) A community that helps each other when they are in need is an important resilience factor. Mrs. Washington's sickness shows a bit of this. Her son acts as her caregiver. Also, other members of the community stop by and sometimes attempt to help out their family.

Biological risk factors are associated with more physical health, psychological risk factors are more associated with emotional health. 1.) Instability and constant need. Both of these lead to chronic stress for children. 2.) A lack of positive adult role models. This gives the children a few examples to follow after and nobody to help them process the stresses that they are going through. Sometimes when dealing with risk & resilience factors, the same one will show up on both sides.

The adults that are in the children's lives are a resilience factor. One place that this can be seen is with the members of Saint Ann's Church.

Social risk factors focus on interaction with groups of people. Gangs and violence are both social risk factors. Lack of access to social services is another social risk factor (health care, social service workers, and police officers). A good example of a social resilience factor would be Church.

### Stress of Poverty and Functionalism

According to Rogers (2006), functionalism explains how the aspects of society work together to maintain stability. "Specifically, the functionalist theory is concerned with the ways in which values, norms, institutions, and organizations contribute to the overall good of society." (p. 90) Functionalism is very focused on describing societal needs for perceived social problems but lacks considerably in being able to advocate for clients who are in those perceived social problems.

The social problem of stress accredited to poverty would be explained from various points of view if a functionalist was working with a client. They might start by talking about the city dump and incinerator being placed in the neighborhood with the client as follows; their neighborhood is the best place for those facilities because it helps keep the stability of the overall environment. Their neighborhood allows for the most cost-effective position, not needing to worry about costly upper-class neighborhoods (land, payment to workers, and the fight to keep them out). They would explain that because the company benefited, the overall city is in better shape. Maybe they would talk about the possible jobs that are closed for the neighborhood.

Rogers (2006) describes five criteria for judging theories, they must; be functional, strong, parsimonious, falsifiable, and make practical sense. Firstly, the functionalist theory does have clarity or ridged specifics integrated into its use. It is non-functional for bringing about social change or reform. Secondly, functionalism is not strong, because it does not allow you to make predictions about behavior. It only allows the user to look back at previous experiences and find out why they happened. Thirdly, functional does allow for it to be integrated with previous theories such as systems theory and the ecological perspective. Fourthly, functionalism is not falsifiable. The concepts involved to not allow for empirical observations. Fifthly, most of the time it does not make practical sense for the social worker to attempt to help the client. Functionalism can be would be useful to help the client un-

derstand the systems at work in their situation.

### Stress of Poverty and Empowerment Theory

Aria (1997) describes five stages of empowerment theory. The first two stages focus on the client and problem interaction. She defines them as experiencing powerlessness and coming to awareness. The third stage is where the social worker-client interaction is the focus, she titles it connecting and learning. The fourth and fifth stages are where the client takes their new skills and reaches out with them. She labels them as mobilization/action and contribution.

Empowerment theory could be used to both reduce and eventually reduce stress in relation to poverty. First, the client would need to be in the situation, before they can get out of it. Then, there must be a realization that they are both suffering from the stress related to poverty and that they are not the only ones who are suffering. This also includes a desire for change. To be able to change, there is a need to learn new skills. Some possible skills could be stress management techniques, better budgeting skills, team building, and advocacy skills (to help rid their community of unwanted facilities and gain better access to social services), vocational/educational training, and a host of other possibilities. Then they need to implement the skills that you taught them and be spend there time contributing to others who are in the same position that they were in. This works in both the individual's life and moves out to become a macro fix for the social problem at hand.

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