

Inequality & Health



What is Inequality?

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



Scientists assess inequality by looking at differences in:

Income



Occupational Status

Education



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]

MIDUS

Midlife in the United States

A National Study of Health & Well-Being

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.

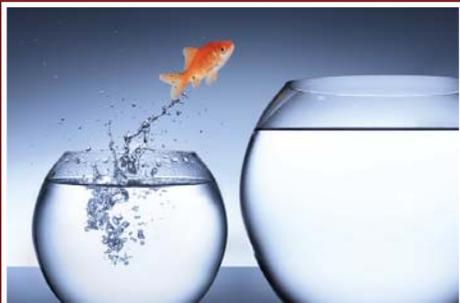
[O'Brien, 2012]



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]



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]

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]



Man is capable of changing the world for the better if possible, and of changing himself for the better if necessary.

∞ Viktor E. Frankl,
Man's Search for Meaning

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.



Inequality & Discrimination

Discrimination Fosters Inequality

- Some are able to get ahead because of their abilities.
- Others are unfairly denied access to resources & opportunities due to **discrimination** based on personal characteristics such as:
 - age
 - gender
 - religion
 - race
 - appearance
 - sexual orientation



MIDUS Looked at:

Day-to-Day Discrimination:

- others acting as if they're better than you
- receiving poorer customer service
- being treated with less courtesy
- being insulted or called names
- being threatened or harassed



Major Discrimination:

- being denied a bank loan
- being hassled by the police
- getting inferior medical treatment
- being fired or not getting a promotion
- a teacher discouraging you from going to college
- not being able to rent an apartment in a desirable area

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]

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]



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."

Please Stay in Touch:

Send updates in your address, phone(s), and/or email(s) to:



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Publications about inequality & health, including those summarized here (indicated in brackets), can be found on our website:

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