

Role of socialization in explaining social inequalities in health

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Abstract

This paper argues that social selection, materialist/structural and cultural/behavioural explanations for social inequalities in health are related to each other through the mechanism of socialization, seen here as a process through which societies shape patterns of behaviour and being that then affect health. Socialization involves the inter- and intragenerational transfer of attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. Parallels between socialization theory and Bourdieu's concept of habitus are also drawn, and the implications for social epidemiology are discussed. Four key areas that would benefit from research within the socialization framework are identified: health behaviours, psychological vulnerability, social skills and future time perspective.

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Introduction

Reports on socioeconomic inequalities in 19th-century Europe (Chadwick, 1842; Villermé, 1840) have been followed by research showing the existence of a socio-economic gradient in health in developed countries (Fox, 1989; Krieger, Williams, & Moss, 1997; Marmot, Rose, Shipley, & Hamilton, 1978). The Black Report identified four theoretical explanations for social inequalities: artefactual, natural or social selection, materialist/structural and cultural/behavioural explanations (Townsend & Davidson, 1982). As social class differences are widely accepted as being real, i.e. not artefactual, further research efforts have been directed at the three other explanations. Although these have been set up in competing, mutually exclusive categories, the

interrelation between them may be critically important for understanding social inequalities. This paper proposes that socialization is a process that links social selection (where early life environmental factors are seen to influence both adult health and social career), materialist/structural and cultural/behavioural explanations of health inequalities.

Socialization is defined as a process by which individuals become part of a group, involving processes that progressively confine their behavioural potentialities within an acceptable range and prepare them for the types of roles they will be expected to play later in life (Ryder, 1965). Socialization is a complex, interactive process that starts from birth and continues into adulthood, involving mechanisms like observation, imitation and internalization. Imitation of observed behaviour is reinforced by the social group, ensuring internalization of the behaviour in question. The idea that social class influences behaviour, emotion and cognition (Gallo & Mathews, 2003; Shaffer, 1994) is an emerging theme in the psychological literature. The

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cult of 'individual differences' had kept the socializing influence of social class out of the psychological research agenda until recently.

This paper argues that social class, throughout the life course, has a powerful influence on behavioural, social and psychological variables. Health-related and psychosocial behaviours are never truly 'voluntary'; they are a product of, and embedded in structures of society. Therefore, the unit of analysis is not the individual but the socio-cultural context that shapes the individual. We argue that cultural, behavioural, structural and material explanations of social inequalities need to be integrated in order to understand the social determinants of health. Social advantage has been linked to maintenance and even increase in health advantage over the last century, despite changes in knowledge about risk factors. This suggests that there are collective strategies in acquiring education, new knowledge, health-promoting lifestyles, and regulating physical environments at home and work (Vagero & Illsley, 1995). We propose that the process by which these strategies are elaborated is socialization.

Socialization is broadly composed of distinct inter- and intragenerational processes. Both involve the harmonization of an individual's attitudes and behaviours with that of their socio-cultural milieu. The first is the more widely understood view of socialization, particularly in psychology: the learning view that sees parents, peers and teachers as principal agents of socialization in childhood. Socialization through childhood would lead to similarity in attitudes, beliefs and behaviours across generations. The second mechanism involves the socializing influence of an individual's own socioeconomic environment through the life course on attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. The socioeconomic position occupied by adults conditions the way in which they live and work, which in turn is critically linked to health (Marmot, 2004). Research suggests that both these pathways are in play in the intergenerational similarity of religious and political ideology (Glass, Bengtson, & Dunham, 1986), personality and behavioural attributes (Brook, Whiteman, & Zheng, 2002), and occupational status (Korupp, Sanders, & Ganzeboom, 2002).

The two meanings inherent in the concept of socialization can be most meaningfully applied to social epidemiology by linking it to Bourdieu's work (Bourdieu & de Saint Martin, 1982; Bourdieu 1984, 1993). Bourdieu's basic thesis is that there is a correspondence between social structures (throughout the life course) and mental structures. He advances the concept of 'habitus' to describe the homologous relations between social structure and practices in different domains—economic, political, social, cultural etc. of an individual's life. Habitus is thus a generative schema whereby social structures, through the processes of socialization, come to be embodied as schemes of perception that enable

individuals to live their lives, leading societies to reproduce existing social structures (Bourdieu, 1984). It provides the individual with class-dependent and pre-disposed ways of thinking, feeling and acting.

The structure–disposition–practice (SDP) scheme can be used to understand Bourdieu's ideas better. Social structures give rise to characteristic dispositions that allow for competent performance of social practices (Nash, 2003). An individual's perception and strategies are connected to their place in the wider society. The individual, armed with a set of socialized dispositions, generates practice in keeping with structural principles. Social positions are seen to create socialized dispositions. In effect, dispositions are properties of individuals and refer to all learnt behaviour. Nevertheless, dispositions are highly influenced by social structure and result in practices which in turn reproduce the structures from which they are derived. The SDP scheme shows how social structures, and the associated dispositions and practices, are reproduced from one generation to the next.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus also suggests that behaviour or 'practice' is not entirely consciously organized. Socioeconomic circumstances determine habitus and this in turn determines behaviour. Individuals, socialized within a particular lifestyle, develop a preference or a taste for that lifestyle, leading to reproduction of that lifestyle. Bourdieu's work on the search for social distinction in the construction of lifestyles is also informative in this regard (Bourdieu, 1984). Different social groups attempt to define and appropriate as their own different behaviours that constitute a lifestyle, leading to what is popularly referred to as a middle-class or a working-class culture. Bourdieu also shows the manner in which dominant classes, due to their greater access to resources, bestow value on their own lifestyles as being prestigious. This suggests that different lifestyles are linked to different social identities, making it difficult for an individual to uncouple the two.

There need not be a direct and mechanical relation between social class and health. However, further research is required to determine the period of the life course most amenable to change in the social and behavioural trajectory; the role played by education in this context has received some attention (Grossman & Joyce, 1989; Jonsson & Mills, 1993; Mechanic, 1989).

Socialization: key areas for future research

Four key areas, linking social structure to health, are likely to benefit from research within the socialization framework.

- (1) *Health behaviours*: Health-damaging behaviours—smoking (Graham & Hunt, 1998; Stronks, Van de

Mheen, Looman, & Mackenbach, 1997), poor diet (Martikainen, Brunner, & Marmot, 2003; Pryer et al., 2001) and lack of physical exercise (Ford et al., 1991; Parks, Housemann, & Brownson, 2003)—are socially patterned and found to contribute to the social gradient in death and disease. Attempts to unravel the origins of health-related behaviours suggest that there is a learnt component to both health-enhancing and health-impairing behaviours. Parents as socialization agents have been found to influence many health behaviours—smoking (Clark, Scarisbrick-Hauser, Gautam, & Wirk, 1999), healthy eating (Hays, Power, & Olvera, 2001; Lees & Tinsley, 1998), alcohol consumption and physical exercise (Lau, Quadrel, & Hartman, 1990). Health behaviours, when viewed as the property of individuals, lead health education messages to be targeted at a specific behaviour, usually successfully only among the already healthy. The socialization perspective stresses the importance of the interrelation between social structure and behaviour and the assessment of global rather than individual health behaviours.

- (2) *Psychological vulnerability*: Psychological characteristics such as depression, cynical hostility, control, anxiety and insecurity are more prevalent in the disadvantaged social classes, and have been proposed as possible explanations for the social gradient (Adler et al., 1994; Gallo, & Mathews, 2003; Bosma, Van de Mheen, & Mackenbach, 1999; Kaplan, 1995; Kessler, 1982; Marmot & Wilkinson, 2001; Ulbrich, Warheit, & Zimmerman, 1989). Differential exposure to stressful life events may explain some of this association, but differential psychosocial vulnerability as an explanation has also been put forward (McLeod & Kessler, 1990; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). In other words, individuals at the bottom of the social strata have fewer psychosocial resources to cope with life events. Resilient personality characteristics may be less accessible, by not being available in the repertoire of learnt behaviours, to the socioeconomically deprived, thus increasing their vulnerability to life events. The socialization hypothesis has proved useful in examining the development of attitudes (Glass et al., 1986; McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988), and is likely to provide insight into psychosocial vulnerability.
- (3) *Social participation*: Social networks, social support and the wider concept of social capital has been extensively linked to health in recent years (Berkman, Glass, Brisette, & Seeman, 2000; House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988; Putnam, 2000). The central premise here is that good social bonds provide specific benefits that flow from the trust, reciprocity, information and cooperation associated with social networks. There is extensive research on

the benefits of structural vs. functional aspects of social support (Melchior, Berkman, Niedhammer, Chea, & Goldberg, 2003), and on the mechanisms by which social support works—main effects vs. the stress buffering hypothesis (Cohen & Willis, 1985). We believe that the skill to build social ties is learnt, some social connections are likely to be inherited, and social participation is facilitated by social advantage (Marmot, 2004), making social ties one mechanism by which social structure relates to health.

- (4) *Future time perspective*: Future time perspective (FTP) is a disposition to ascribe high value to goals in the future and to anticipate, in the present, the long-term consequences of a potential action (Shell & Husman, 2001). Individuals with high FTP would be able to project themselves farther into the future than people with low FTP, and work out the consequences of imagined future scenarios (Shell & Husman, 2001; Zimbardo, Keough, & Boyd, 1997). FTP is akin to a cognitive style of information processing based on a learned, preferred focus on the future (Zimbardo et al., 1997). FTP has been found to play a role in educational achievement (Peetsma, 2000; Shell & Husman, 2001), risky behaviour (Rothspan & Read, 1996; Zimbardo et al., 1997), and has been extensively linked to substance abuse (Keough, Zimbardo, & Boyd, 1999; Wills, Sandy, & Yaeger, 2001). It is likely that advantaged adult environments, the work place in particular, influence the development of cognitive styles that are high on FTP.

We contend that norms on healthy behaviour, psychosocial resilience, social skills and FTP are key skills that are conditioned by the socioeconomic context, beginning early in childhood and then continuing throughout the life course. The importance of the social environment lies in the kinds of behaviours, attitudes and beliefs that are sampled in a particular environment. The processes of observation, imitation and internalization ensure a certain uniformity within a particular socioeconomic context in individual level variables linked to health. Furthermore, the macrostructural processes of socialization lead to intergenerational similarity in social status, implying continuities in life events, daily hassles and work conditions experienced by members of a family across generations. Children learn to respond to life events and difficulties from their parents, and when faced with similar adversity in adulthood they react in comparable ways. This hypothesis does not negate the importance of actual material circumstances of an individual. It attempts to tie in the social, psychological, behavioural and material explanations in order to explain the monotonic relationship between socioeconomic position and health.

Conclusions

The Black Report favoured the material explanation. However, the interpretation of this category in that report covers a wide range of phenomena: nutrition, housing, self-fulfilment, job satisfaction, physical or mental strain, deprivation in education or the upbringing of children (Townsend & Davidson, 1982). This paper argues that the social selection, material and behavioural explanations are interrelated, and socialization is the mechanism through which societies shape patterns of behaviour and being that then affect health outcomes. In effect, the importance of socialization lies in explaining group rather than individual behaviour, explaining the more common rather than the unexpected trajectories.

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