

Part III

Children's Experiences of Poverty

In this part, we consider outcomes of poverty in children's lives, paying particular attention to how boys and girls experience poverty and related adversities and how they respond. The previous part discussed poverty at the levels of family and community; here we consider how poverty entails privations and risks that have outcomes, sometimes serious and long term, in the lives of children. In particular, poverty is a major source of risk in children's lives and well-being is compromised by the multiple privations and risks associated with poverty. Ethnographic studies have shown, however, that given the right social and cultural environments, it is possible for children to develop cognitively and socially notwithstanding severe poverty (for example, on highland Peru, see Bolin 2006).

We start with two chapters that bring together current knowledge of general patterns of how poverty can affect children's lives. Subsequent chapters bring out nuances and complexities that appear in case studies arising from ethnographic research.

In Chapter 8, Patrice Engle brings together current knowledge on what influences the developmental potential of children. At the individual level, children are affected by biological factors (genetics, health, and nutrition) and environmental conditions (families, communities, and schools). There are also influences that affect whole families and communities, such as opportunities for school or work, expectations, and social exclusion. Apart from genetics, these factors are all related to dimensions of poverty: damage in early childhood can affect development permanently and the influence can persist to future generations. The various factors interact with each other and with moderating positive factors in children's lives; Engle presents a variety of models of how this happens. She points out that while some effects of poverty

are external to individuals, life trajectories are also determined by responses to the situation, a topic that is pursued in later chapters in this section. Again we see the importance of social factors in understanding poverty, and the variety of ways in which poverty can affect the lives of children.

One of the points presented by Engle is that while mild or moderate stress is not necessarily harmful to children in the long term, 'toxic stress' can be very damaging. This relates to the accumulation of risk discussed in the following chapter by Theodore Wachs (Chapter 9), which further illustrates the importance of understanding specific mechanisms operating between poverty and child development. Wachs points out that growing up in poverty has consistently been linked to impeded cognitive and psychosocial competence, which in turn reduces readiness for school. He presents evidence, mostly but not only from high-income countries, of the deleterious effects of risks, especially when risks accumulate as they so often do in the lives of poor people. He concludes that interventions to alleviate poverty must impact directly on poverty-related risks if they are to be effective in improving child development. Second, a focus on reducing specific risks is unlikely to have a strong effect when children are exposed to multiple risks, and it is not possible to devise programmes to cover all risks that can damage children's development. The evidence he presents points to the critical importance of intervening early in a child's life, before he or she is exposed to multiple cumulative risks.

Risk does not, however, always and necessarily result in damage. Jo Boyden (2009) has pointed out that childhood is a highly diverse phase of life. Although physical, biological, and psychological (factors discussed by Berhman, Woldehanna, Engle, and Wachs) have a significant influence in shaping lives, personality and the environment are at least as important. Some cultures, or social contexts, encourage problem-solving initiatives on the part of children, which develop competencies and enable children to respond positively to some risks. Even in times of great adversity, children (and others) may consciously act upon and influence the environment in which they live. Thus through adversity, it is possible to learn how to deal with it – what in some circles is referred to as developing resilience.

In her cross-cultural studies of child development, Barbara Rogoff points out that there are different ways of protecting children from danger (2003: 5–7). One is to remove them from dangerous situations; another is to introduce them to dangerous situations, and particularly the use of dangerous implements, carefully and under supervision, so

that they learn how to deal with them. Intervention to protect children from all risk is not necessarily the best way to prepare them for a future in which they are going to have to face adversity. Indeed, children sometimes experience child protection as a negative, restrictive feature in their lives (for example, Sinclair et al. 2002: 8). While intervention is sometimes necessary to remove or minimize particularly harmful features in the lives and environment of children and their families, effective intervention should also provide them with support in their own attempts to deal with adversities they have to face. This requires detailed empirical knowledge of their particular contexts rather than an abstract set of universal norms.

The later rounds of Young Lives research will provide information on how children have fared after being subject to a variety of risks and privations. Meanwhile, from the first two rounds of data, Jo Boyden and Gina Crivello show how ethnicity and caste can increase poverty and risk in Andhra Pradesh. Families in Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are more likely to be poor and experience shocks, and their children are likely to have lower readiness for school and drop out earlier. The experience of children is, however, affected by a variety of factors that can change over time, including the attitudes and decisions of older family members and the social and cultural worlds in which they live. Risk is thus both a feature of interaction with the immediate environment, and a consequence of the political and economic structure of society.

The study of risk and responses to it leads into a consideration of what comprises children's well-being. Although some aspects, such as health and nutrition, can be measured objectively, other dimensions, such as inequality and social exclusion, are not easily measured, still less how people feel about meeting their expectations. Well-being cannot simply be measured in material terms. Children's perceptions of what is good and bad in their lives often refer to relationships with those around them and recent experiences, sometimes belying intuitive assumptions based on abstract norms. In the introduction to this volume we mentioned children's right to be heard in matters that affect them, and the importance of allowing children to speak for themselves in research. In Chapter 4, Stefan Dercon pointed out that the perceptions of caregivers and children differed from more material and objective measures of poverty. The chapter by Gillian Mann illustrates vividly that the social experience of adversity can be far worse than material privation. The main concerns of Congolese refugees in Tanzania are social exclusion, discrimination, and harassment. Their well-being depended

on how they responded to these indignities and creatively found ways to enhance and maintain their self-esteem, and how successfully they fought to maintain their dignity. Mann also shows how parents and children within the same households sometimes respond differently to adversity, and that adversity and responses to it carry different meanings for them: poverty was experienced differently even within a single household.

Experiences and perceptions of adversity are central to the chapter by Laura Camfield, which describes different ways in which children and their parents understand a good or bad life in Young Lives sites in Ethiopia, often reflecting particular recent experiences. In particular, well-being is usually assessed in relation to peers and others in the surrounding community. Concerns of both children and parents depend on the environment in which they live and the facilities available to them. Although the concerns of children are usually similar to those of their parents, there are divergences in such things as the importance of school for children and the importance of religion for adults.

In the final chapter in this section, we return to Andhra Pradesh. Gina Crivello, Uma Vennam, and Anuradha Komanduri (Chapter 13) explore children's views on the relationship between social and material aspects of poverty. The survey and group discussions show how children assess their childhood and perceive differences in power and resources between rich and poor. Two case studies illustrate ways in which children are forced by circumstances into particular trajectories, but at the same time exercise some control over the direction of their lives, and therefore over the outcomes of the dimensions of poverty that afflict them. Decisions that close certain opportunities, such as schooling, sometimes open up others, such as travel and work experience.

References

- Bolin, Inge (2006) *Growing up in a Culture of Respect: Child Rearing in Highland Peru*, Austin TX: University of Texas Press.
- Boyden, Jo (2009) 'Risk and Capability in the Context of Adversity: Children's Contributions to Household Livelihoods in Ethiopia', *Children, Youth and Environments* 19: 111–37.
- Rogoff, Barbara (2003) *The Cultural Nature of Human Development*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sinclair, Ruth, K. Cronin, L. Lanyon, V. Stone and A. Hulsi (2002) *Aim High Stay Real: Outcomes for Children and Young People: The Views of Children, Parents and Professionals*, London: Children and Young People's Unit.