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From poverty to flourishing: Agency and empowerment

Introduction

The objective of this briefing is to help policy makers understand how poverty can diminish people's ability to exercise *agency* and *empowerment* in their lives (see the text box for definitions of these terms), and to facilitate the development of policies which will empower those living in poverty to be able to 'level up'. Diminished levels of agency and empowerment can lead to a psychologically based poverty trap which inhibits the ability of people living in poverty to actively work to change their situation. It is emphasised that *the person living in poverty is not to blame for any reduction in their ability to exercise agency and empowerment*. A recurring theme in this briefing is that enhancing the agency and empowerment of people in situations of poverty is not only good for the psychological and material wellbeing of those individuals, but also constitutes a constructive and beneficial response for society as a whole.

'The fullest representations of humanity show people to be curious, vital, and self-motivated. At their best, they are agentic and inspired, striving to learn; extend themselves; master new skills; and apply their talents responsibly.'

Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci¹, P68

What is 'agency'?

'the ability to influence intentionally one's functioning and life circumstances.'

Albert Bandura², P165

What is 'empowerment'?

'the mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their lives.' Julian Rappaport³, P3

BRIEFING PAPER

RELEVANT PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES AND DEFINITIONS: SELF DETERMINATION THEORY, EFFICACY BELIEFS AND POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

This section provides definitions and descriptions of psychological theories and constructs used in this briefing, whilst using a minimum of technical language. Self Determination Theory (SDT)^{1,4} serves as a useful lens through which to view agency and empowerment with regard to how poverty reduces people's agency and stifles their empowerment. Relevant aspects of SDT are outlined in the next section. Although not formally a part of SDT, the psychological construct of *self-efficacy*^{2,5} provides additional and complementary insights to those of SDT with regard to the effects of poverty. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their capacity to perform a specific act.

Related to self-efficacy is the construct of *response efficacy*.⁶ This construct, which was originally developed to explain the likelihood of adherence to health advice, concerns beliefs that the response or action one takes will actually be effective in achieving the desired goal. The two constructs are complementary to one another, with self-efficacy addressing an individual's beliefs in their own capability to carry out specific behaviours, and response efficacy addressing beliefs about the effectiveness of that behaviour. Low levels of response efficacy may be seen as indicative of the lack of power to change and influence the circumstances of one's life which has been previously reported in examinations of poverty.⁷ Powerlessness will inevitably be related to low levels of autonomy. Importantly, *in situations of low response efficacy, it is not enough simply to enhance self-efficacy beliefs, as there is no point in behaving appropriately if one's behaviour has no impact. It is important, therefore, to also change the actual conditions that dis-empower people in the first place.*

Where an objective or goal has been achieved, and an individual can identify their response as having been effective in achieving it, in psychological terms the outcome is considered a positive reinforcement for that response. Consequently, such a response is more likely to be repeated than a response which has not been effective.^{8,9} This relationship between response effectiveness and the likelihood of a behaviour being subsequently performed again (sometimes referred to as the law of effect) may hold regardless of whether the behaviour is socially validated (e.g. seeking employment) or socially prohibited, such as crime and/or drug misuse. *This is an important principle to bear in mind with regard to anticipating and evaluating the impact of social policies aimed at addressing problems related to poverty, as unintended negative consequences of policies are not unknown.*

It is important to note that the source of reinforcement lies outside the individual, and is located within the socially regulated context of the behaviour. Consequently, it is emphasised that the *exercising of agency and empowerment by people in situations of poverty will be enhanced if the policies which impact upon them serve to positively reinforce their attempts to develop and exercise these qualities.* Positive reinforcement is best understood colloquially as reward, and is therefore completely different from the punishment of unwanted behaviours, which can have detrimental effects.⁸

MOTIVATION FOR AGENCY AND EMPOWERMENT: THEIR RELEVANCE TO COMBATING POVERTY

SDT^{1,4} proposes that people's behaviour is motivated by three fundamental needs. These are listed below.

- **Competence:** The need to be effective in dealing with an environment
- **Autonomy:** The need to control the course of their lives
- **Psychological relatedness:** The need for people to interact with others, care for others, and be cared for by others.

It is important for policy makers to understand these three elements of SDT as they provide a motivational basis for people to act in ways which enable them to flourish in both psychological and material terms. In turn, this benefits society as a whole. However, when these motivations cannot be pursued through socially validated channels due to the limited resources and opportunities available in poverty, they may be pursued through channels which are personally and socially destructive. These channels may sometimes include crime and addiction.^{10, 11} The relationship of powerlessness in situations of poverty to low levels of autonomy has already been noted in this briefing.⁷ A major implication here for policy makers is, consequently, to *ensure that access to socially validated routes for the pursuit of competence, autonomy, and psychological relatedness (e.g. education, training, employment) is maximised for people*, and that policies do not create additional blockages for the pursuit of these routes.

The three fundamental motivations proposed by SDT are functionally interrelated. For example, being competent in responding to life's challenges is likely to enhance a person's autonomy. Similarly, it may be argued that psychological relatedness with others is likely to be higher in quality in the context of perceiving oneself, and being perceived by others, as competent and autonomous rather than incompetent and dependent. *The exercise of personal agency and empowerment in the avoidance of poverty, or as a response to the impacts of poverty, may consequently be seen as being positively related to the successful pursuit of all three of these fundamental motivations.*

The relationship between competence and self-efficacy is circular, in that although some level of belief in one's self-efficacy may be necessary for an initial response, the strength of self-efficacy beliefs will in turn be strengthened by the effective (i.e. competent) performance of that response. Such performances have been described as 'mastery experiences'.¹² For such experiences to be gained, it follows that the response in question has been permitted to be effective (i.e. positively reinforcing) by the external factors generating the need for it. Consequently, competence motivation, self-efficacy beliefs and response efficacy beliefs are all bound together in the performance of behaviours which will enable a person to flourish with regard to the development of autonomy and good psychological relatedness. *Such developments in personal wellbeing may also be seen to enhance the general wellbeing of society, but social policies need to allow these things to happen.*

AUTONOMY, COMPETENCE, AND RELATEDNESS ARE EMBEDDED IN COMMUNITIES

It has been shown that *communities with high proportions of unemployment and welfare support also show lower levels of self-efficacy.* This relationship was not only linked with individual levels of SES, but reflected the socio-economic indicators of the broader community.¹³ This finding also emphasises the relevance of factors beyond the individual when planning and implementing interventions designed to alleviate poverty. For example, a low level of employment opportunities in a community will limit the likelihood of response efficacy for job seeking, and a consequent reduced likelihood of this behaviour due to the absence of positive reinforcement for it. It is important to emphasise that *it is the prevailing social conditions that create a context in which there is an absence of positive reinforcement for job seeking behaviour. It is not a characteristic of the individuals themselves.* However, it is likely that there will be a consequence for the individual in terms of a lack of opportunity to develop self-efficacy beliefs and to satisfy their motivation for competence, autonomy and good psychological relatedness through legitimate employment.

Two potential explanations were proposed for the relationship between low self-efficacy and community SES in the study cited above.¹³

- 1 *Institutional discrimination* was seen to reduce the flow of resources into low SES communities, so that those in high SES communities had relatively greater access to resources

than their counterparts in a low SES community. This relationship prevailed even where members of a high SES community had a low SES as individuals. A higher level of available resources would be expected to enhance response-efficacy beliefs. As those in a high SES community could use the resources available to them to broaden their daily experience, they could in turn, increase the likelihood of a mastery experience. As noted above, ‘mastery experiences’ play an important role in bolstering self-efficacy.

- 2 Someone living in a low SES community may report lower levels of self-efficacy because of the social context of the community. In effect, a *self-fulfilling prophecy* may be at work here as seeing one’s peers, who are perceived to have similar levels of competence to one’s own, fail despite their best efforts undermines the observer’s beliefs regarding their own self-efficacy.

An important contribution to lifting SES is to *develop policies related to lifting the wage floor such that wage levels are sufficient to enable individuals to shift out of poverty*. One approach is the ‘living wage’, which goes beyond a legislated minimum wage covering basic subsistence, to one which *enables* low wage workers to make choices about how *they* would like to live their lives.^{14–16} Psychological research has found that there is a tipping point at which a wage enables an improved quality of life, for example through providing space to rest and recover from work (due to needing to work fewer hours, or only work one job), and enhancing a sense of control over one’s life.¹⁷ This in turn enables families to have more time together, which is crucial for healthy child development, and supports low-wage workers to take up further training and education opportunities. Consequently, the introduction of a living wage may be seen to meet personal needs for autonomy and good psychological relatedness, as described by SDT.^{1, 4} At a psychological level, a living wage enhances the response efficacy and positive reinforcement value of legitimate employment for satisfying of the basic material needs of the individual and their family. These outcomes are also good for the wellbeing of society as a whole.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) notes that the mental health impact of poverty can be passed from one generation to another, for example through the impact on parents, family life, and relationships of increased stress and post-natal depression.¹⁸ Parents and children growing up in families with fewer financial resources tend to have lower aspirations for their education and future, and aspirations are generally linked to outcomes.¹⁹ Furthermore, the visibility of poverty can increase stigma and bullying at school.²⁰

AGENCY AND EMPOWERMENT ARE UNDERMINED BY POVERTY: WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Cognitive performance is one area where competence has been shown to be compromised in situations of poverty. For example, research has demonstrated how *situations of poverty can induce a mind-set of scarcity*, which in turn narrows a person’s ‘cognitive bandwidth’ (i.e. the mental space available for planning and forward thinking).²¹ Consequently, when people feel they are low on a given resource, particularly money but also time, coping with this shortage takes up cognitive capacity that would otherwise go to efforts such as forward planning and problem solving. In turn, long-term developments which would help to improve their situation are ignored in favour of the management of short-term needs. Effective interventions to combat poverty will need to overcome this barrier in order to facilitate sustainable advances in wellbeing, which will include bolstering beliefs concerning self-efficacy, response-efficacy, competence to manage long-term issues, and autonomy. Psychological research has also shown that poverty may be related to impairments in cognitive functioning by other mechanisms than reduced ‘cognitive bandwidth’.

Poor nutrition in childhood, which will often be a consequence of poverty, has been shown to impair children’s ability to cognitively engage with their school work on a daily basis, thus impairing their capacity for educational attainment.^{22, 23} In this way, their competence as school

students has been diminished as a consequence of the material poverty of their home life. Poor educational attainment, in turn, may be expected to limit opportunities for stable employment, and social and economic security. Individuals' beliefs in their competence and self-efficacy to benefit from adult education and training opportunities may need to be carefully nurtured in order to overcome the legacy of early experiences of failure. However, *prevention of the impact of poverty on the cognitive abilities of young people will be a far more cost-effective intervention for public investment, than attempting to remedy the impact once it has occurred.*

As noted previously, *when poverty limits the availability of socially validated channels for competence, autonomy, and psychological relatedness, these motivations may sometimes be pursued through channels which are personally and socially destructive, which may sometimes include crime and addiction.*^{10, 11} Problems of substance misuse and addiction are multifaceted, having many potential causal roots. Although many people in situations of poverty do not develop problems of addiction, a complex relationship between poverty and addiction has nevertheless been demonstrated empirically.^{24, 25} Psychological research has demonstrated impaired cognitive functioning to be related to the misuse of many substances including alcohol,^{26, 27} cannabis,^{28, 29} ecstasy (MDMA),³⁰ and cocaine.³¹ As with the impact of poor nutrition on cognitive performance previously described, prevention of the impact of poverty on the cognitive abilities of people, where this is mediated through engagement in substance use, will be a far more cost-effective intervention for public investment than attempting to remedy the impact once it has occurred.

Policy makers need to be aware that the experience of *poverty can, through a variety of mechanisms, limit the cognitive resources available to people which are necessary to take advantage of opportunities concerning education, training and employment which may improve their lives.* The concept of social capital is multifaceted,³² but one important question which it highlights concerns the ease or difficulty with which somebody is able to use the material and social resources of society in order to control their interests. The effects of poverty as described in this briefing so far, may be seen to represent a diminution of the social capital of those affected by poverty. Similar to any form of 'capital investment', such a diminution may, be seen to represent a weakening of their stake in society, which in turn would constitute a weakening of social cohesion. An additional related impact is the way in which parents are able to get involved in their child's education and school life. For example, Sime and Sheridan³³ reported that poorer parents perceived themselves as having high expectations for their children, but felt inadequate about being able to support them. These researchers identified the importance of relationships in schools in overcoming these perceptions of inadequacy. *Consistent with the evidence cited here, it is important that cognitive limitations and poor educational achievement are not seen as some form of inherent characteristic of people in poverty, but as a consequence of life experiences characterised by limited material resources and limited access to socially validated routes of advancement.*

In many respects the opposite of self-efficacy, response-efficacy and competence as psychological constructs is 'learned helplessness.' The psychological construct of learned helplessness has developed from the work of the American psychologist Martin Seligman,^{34, 35} and describes a state where a person has learned from adverse experiences that they are unable to act in an effective way to escape from or avoid an unpleasant situation. Having learned that one is helpless in this way has been shown to have negative implications for both physical and mental health,³⁶ and to be associated with maladaptive coping responses.^{37, 38} Interventions to overcome learned helplessness beliefs in clinical situations have been developed³⁵ in such a way which avoids any blame being applied to the patient. By extension, the blame-free challenging of learned helplessness beliefs for people in poverty is something which psychological research suggests may be a helpful component of interventions, as long as it is accompanied by real changes in material opportunities for people, such as the availability of a living wage.

In practical terms, both self-efficacy and response efficacy beliefs will often need to be addressed in order to engage those whose experience of poverty has led them to become alienated from the mainstream social culture, in responses designed to facilitate levelling up. It is important to note that psychologists have devised numerous measures of self-efficacy for use in addressing real-world problems in effective ways, and the enhancement of self-efficacy beliefs is recognised as an important objective in interventions aiming to address such problems as addiction.^{39, 40} Alongside the possibility of challenging learned helplessness beliefs previously described,³⁵ targeting the enhancement of beliefs concerning self-efficacy and response efficacy would be a feasible and realistic objective for policies and interventions intended to tackle poverty. Such an enhancement of personal agency would in turn empower people with regard to the management of their own lives, and those of their families, and in turn diminish the negative impacts of poverty on society as a whole. *However, as already noted in relation to learned helplessness, any psychologically informed intervention to tackle poverty needs to be accompanied by real changes in material opportunities available to people, as it is maladaptive to believe one has more agency or power than one actually has.*⁴¹ *In sum, real agency and empowerment for life lie at the heart of enabling people and of a flourishing society.*

CONCLUSIONS AND KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

This final section summarises key recommendations arising from the discussions in previous sections of this briefing. The numbering of these recommendations serves only to differentiate them, and does not indicate a priority order.

- 1 Interventions to address poverty must *recognise the structural and situational factors underpinning poverty, and must not blame those living in poverty for their situation.* Interventions must seek to remedy these structural factors, while concurrently enabling long-term behaviour change through positive reinforcement rather than punitive interventions. In this way people can be empowered to be effective agents avoiding and escaping situations of poverty which are destructive to them and to society as a whole.
- 2 The experience of poverty has many negative effects on individuals which serve to diminish their ability to be effective in improving their circumstances. As a general principle, therefore, policy makers need to be mindful to *avoid negative consequences arising from policies and decisions which will either create situations of poverty, or make it more difficult for people to escape poverty.*
- 3 Needs to develop and display competence, to develop autonomy, and to experience psychological relatedness are important motivators for human behaviour. *Policies and interventions to address poverty will maximise their effectiveness if these needs are recognised, and the pursuit of them through, for example, education, training and employment, are positively reinforced through socially validated routes by permitting real change in people's lives.* The enhanced effectiveness of such policies and interventions will in turn benefit society as a whole. Flourishing people are necessary in order to have a flourishing society.
- 4 *The introduction and maintenance of a living wage* is an important step in taking people out of poverty, and should be regarded as a priority by policy makers. By taking people out of poverty and dependency, the receipt of a living wage has important benefits for the general wellbeing of society.
- 5 *The maintenance of satisfactory nutrition for children* should be a permanent priority for policy makers. In addition to its basic humanitarian merit as a priority, it is a step which will enhance the ability of children to benefit from education and, consequently, to make it less likely that they will fall into poverty. As with all effective interventions prevent or remedy situations of poverty, this will benefit society as a whole.

- 6 The development of self-efficacy beliefs can be supported by psychologically informed targeted interventions. The development of such beliefs in one's personal effectiveness can play an important role in helping people overcome many types of challenging situations. However, they cannot be effective in a vacuum, so that it is important that social policies ensure that attempts by people to improve their circumstances and leave situations of poverty are positively reinforced by being effective. In other words, *self-efficacy beliefs must be matched by policies which enable response efficacy*.
- 7 Services should be designed to take account of the *need to promote adults' and children's confidence and the understanding of those providing the service*. For example, time needs to be made available to enable positive relationships that help adults and children feel safe, understood, valued and able to share their experiences.

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