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BRIEFING PAPER

Foundations for the best start in life – How a psychological approach to policy can help tackle poverty

Poverty is an intractable and systemic problem that affects children, families and communities across the UK. The situation is getting worse; child poverty in the UK has increased by 2.8% in the last four years¹ and is predicted to increase to 5.2 million children by 2022². The vast majority of parents are doing the best they can in extremely trying circumstances. However, the onset of Covid-19 has put hard pressed families under additional acute financial and emotional pressure.

This briefing introduces two established psychological frameworks which, if embedded in wider social contexts, can increase policy makers' understanding of how poverty affects people's experiences and wellbeing. We review how this evidence base and theory can be used to better understand the psychological dimensions of poverty, and how these can be incorporated into policy making to improve outcomes.

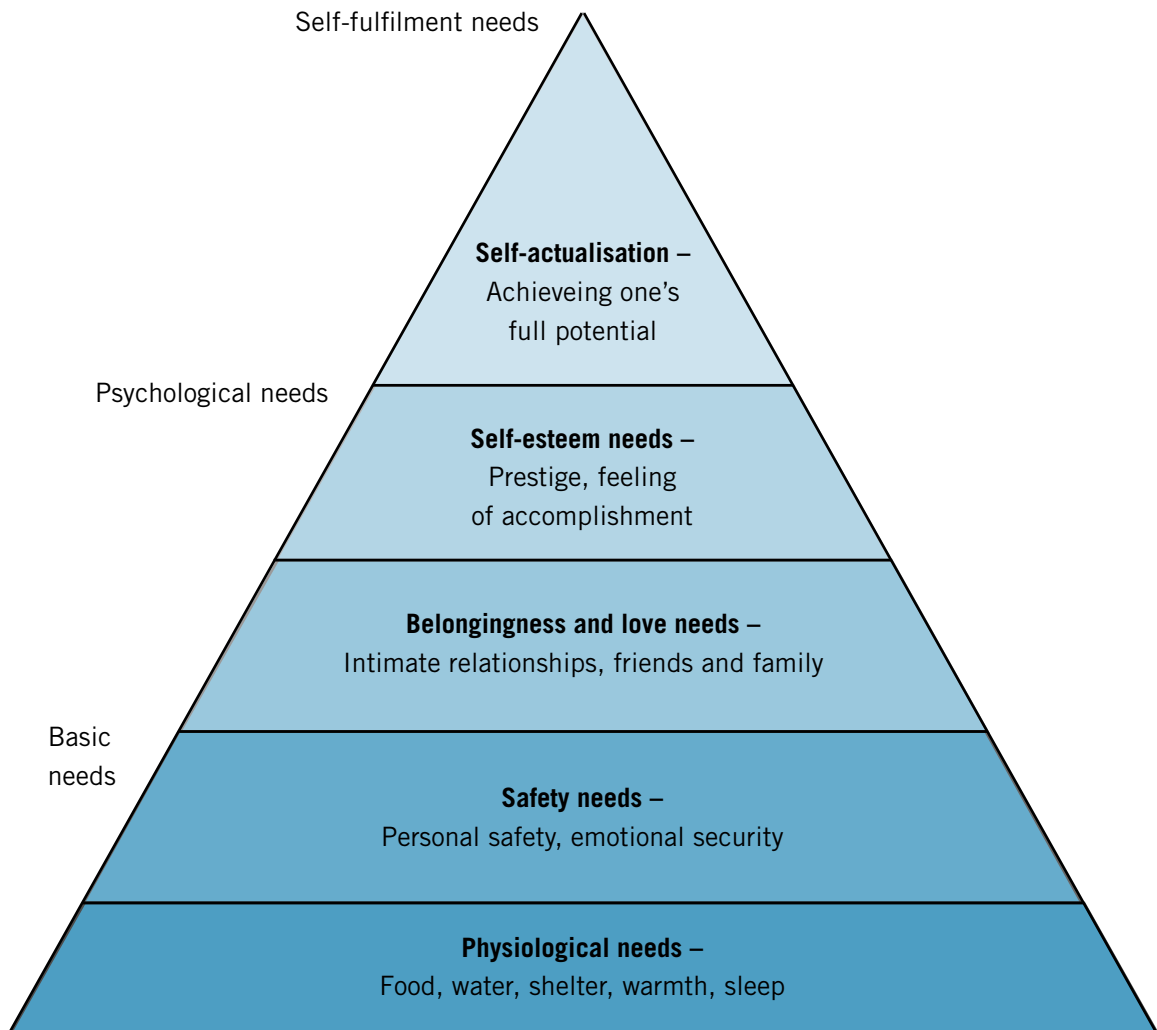
To see real change and move from poverty to flourishing we need to see more psychologically informed policies. The circumstances we're born into and the conditions in which we live have a major bearing on our mental health and wellbeing.

A HIERARCHY OF NEED, A HIERARCHY OF POLICY INTERVENTIONS?

People are complex but we all have needs, many of which are impacted by the experience of poverty. To create the right psychological conditions for people to flourish, it is key to get the right foundations in place.

In 1943, psychologist Abraham Maslow developed a theoretical framework based on physical and psychological needs to explain what motivates people. He presented these needs in the form of a hierarchy, which is usually depicted in the form of a five-tier pyramid as shown in Figure 1 on the following page.

DIAGRAM BASED ON MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEED.
MASLOW, A.H. (1943). A THEORY OF HUMAN MOTIVATION,
PSYCHOLOGICAL REVIEW, 50(4), 370–396)³



Psychologists building on Maslow's work over the last 70 years have demonstrated that progression up the hierarchy is not necessarily uniform because of the systemic relationships between risk factors and protective factors that influence, for example, good psychological development and good mental health. Yet the underlying premise of this classic theory, that people's basic needs must be satisfied before they can address their higher needs, is still taught to psychology students today. While the theory has been challenged and refined over the decades, it still has significant implications for policy making.

This basic hierarchy of need is important for policy makers to consider when planning policy responses to address poverty. It has fundamental implications for programme planning, budget allocation and collaboration in policy making. For example, according to this framework, families struggling to put food on the table and pay their rent will often struggle to also focus on higher level needs, such as education, social mobility, progression and accomplishment.

Maslow's hierarchy illustrates the fundamental importance of a person's psychological needs such as safety, love, belonging, and esteem. To leave a person's psychological and wellbeing needs unmet is to limit their capacity to reach their full potential. This has implications for policymaking, in particular for how the pursuit of policies that advance one indicator (such as GDP) can negatively affect other indicators (such as wellbeing).

PHYSIOLOGICAL NEEDS IN A PANDEMIC: FOOD AND SHELTER

Shelter is a basic need. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the stark inequalities in our society, where people in areas of deprivation have felt the privations of food, shelter and safety. New research from the housing charity Shelter shows that, ‘Nearly one in five (17%) private renting parents – equivalent to 458,000 adults – are now more concerned their family will become homeless as a result of the Covid crisis.’ Evidence demonstrates a clear link between poor and overcrowded housing with psychological distress in children. ‘Living in poor housing may cause difficulties in academic attainment, coping, sleeping, and feelings of anger, anxiety, or depression.’

Malnutrition, exposure to environmental/biological toxins or stress before birth or in early childhood are not ‘forgotten’, but rather are built into the architecture of the developing brain. The ‘biological memories’ associated with these *epigenetic* changes can affect multiple organ systems and increase the risk not only for poor physical and mental health outcomes but also can impact future learning capacity and behaviour.

The possibility of poverty having an epigenetic impact across generations is described in the Glasgow effect (Walsh et al., 2016) which highlights the complexities of the relationships between health outcomes and social conditions. According to Faulconbridge et al., ‘Scotland, and particularly Glasgow, experiences high levels of ‘excess’ mortality compared with other major UK cities with similar levels of deprivation and de-industrialisation. The causes of death are wide ranging, impact across all social classes (though most on the poorest) and are highest in those of younger working age.’ Britain has been described as ‘the sick man of Europe’.

However, this does not mean we cannot take steps to counter this generational cycle of poverty. For example, sound maternal and fetal nutrition, combined with positive social-emotional support of children through their family and community environments, will reduce the likelihood of negative epigenetic modifications that increase the risk of later physical and mental health impairments.

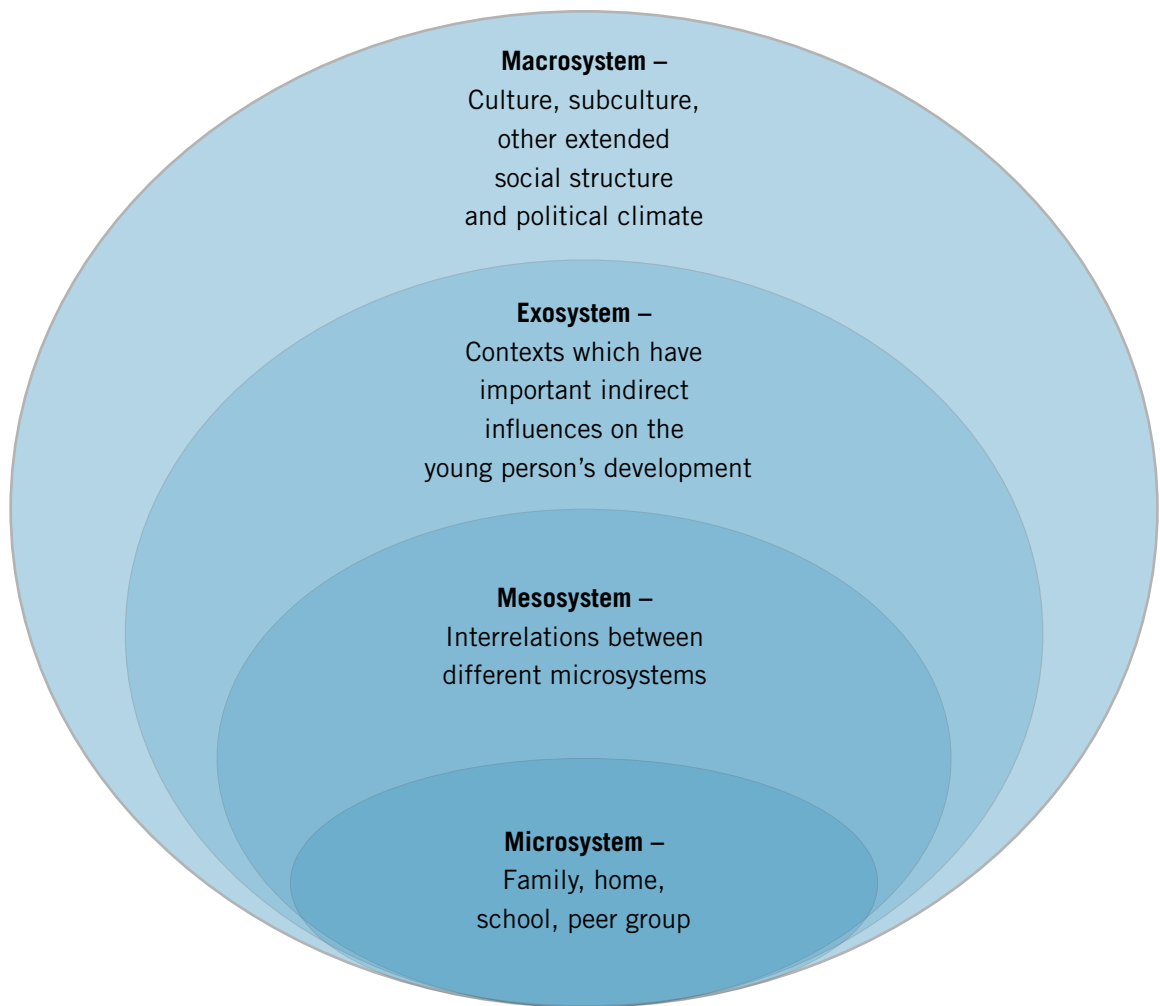
BRONFENBRENNER’S BIOECOLOGICAL THEORY OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

While an understanding of Maslow can help policy-makers as they navigate difficult policy questions relating to poverty, Urie Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory of human development⁴ is another useful psychological framework through which we can understand the influences of the interacting systems and contexts that impact people experiencing poverty. Bronfenbrenner’s model was developed with children in mind, but this approach can be applied at a systemic level, as show in Figure 2.

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory⁵ helps us to understand how children and young people interact with their environment: the ways it impacts upon them and how they influence it. He proposed that children constantly grow, change, engage with multiple systems, and are active participants in their development as a result of reciprocal interactions between individual characteristics and their environments (Brewin & Statham, 2011, p.369).

Children and young people’s development can be better understood by viewing it via the lenses of interacting environments. For example, the influences from the child’s home family environment, their school environment, the local community and society as a whole all play an important part in a child’s development. These influences and experiences determine how children and young people might flourish or struggle within their environments.

**FIGURE 2: BRONFENBRENNER'S BIOECOLOGICAL MODEL (2005).
LABELLING FROM TUDGE ET AL. (2009)**



Bronfenbrenner's model can help us to identify what could be successful policy interventions at different levels of need. These include:

A focus on the individual and their available options, within their social and cultural environment.

At the *microsystem* level: school and family influences

At the *mesosystem* level: home-school; home-neighbourhood

At the *exosystem* level: community and local authority services.

At the *macrosystem* level: the influence of social structures, political policy and culture.

Research has demonstrated the correlation between living in relative poverty and poorer mental health (in both adults and children). Gershoff et al. (2003) identified a core trio of factors in which poverty impacts on children:

Parental investment – How poverty affects the quality of the home environment that parents can provide, the activities they can afford for their children, and so on.

Parental behaviour and stress – How the stress of living in poverty can lead to parents having insufficient psychological resources to care for their children; for example, through high levels of depression or parental conflict.

The impoverished local communities in which families are living, such as a lack of facilities and opportunities⁶.

When looking at poverty and the potential policy levers which could be implemented, we therefore need to consider risk factors through Bronfenbrenner's theoretical lens – at a number of levels:

At the individual level: physical illness, disability, and neurodevelopmental difficulties, etc.

At the *microsystem* level: neglect, bereavement and loneliness, parental conflict, and an adverse family climate, etc.

At the *mesosystem* level: housing, discrimination, racism, and exposure to trauma, etc.

At the *exosystem* level: violent neighbourhood, cutbacks in local authority services, etc.

At the *macrosystem* level: extreme inequality in society, national recession triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic, rise of racism in political discourse, etc.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY MAKING: THE IMPORTANCE OF STRONG FOUNDATIONS

An understanding and application of these two frameworks is why the BPS recommends policy interventions that focus on children and young people. To establish strong foundations, children need to be supported in developing optimally and policy makers need a good understanding of the things that are harmful to children and young people's psychological development and the things that promote it.

Services should be designed to take into account the psychological, emotional and wellbeing needs of the early years. Policy makers need to create, develop and protect all prevention and early intervention services, to ensure all children and families get the integrated support they need. One example would be promoting attachment.

PROMOTING ATTACHMENT

A good understanding of attachment can help policy makers get the foundations right. Attachment is a special emotional relationship that involves an exchange of comfort, care, and pleasure; a lasting psychological connectedness between human beings.

Early attachment relationships provide protective factors throughout life. By having their basic and psychological needs met in a consistent and predictable way, a baby learns that they're okay, adults are okay, and the world is safe. There is significant psychological evidence of the value of

healthy parent–child attachments in the early years and the detrimental impact poor attachment can have on a child’s emotional and social development^{7a,7b}.

These foundational relationships thrive when parents and primary caregivers feel supported and experience normal as opposed to prolonged stress – and when the adults themselves have good attachment relationships. Those living in poverty are disproportionately adversely affected on both counts, and stress is the mediating factor. Prolonged stress disproportionately impacts those living in poverty, for example, about concerns about debt and housing⁸. Those living in poverty are also more likely to experience post-natal depression possibly contributing to the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage⁹.

One of the best ways to help parents who are having difficulties with attachment with their babies is addressing their need for security, support, safety, etc. For many families this means reducing material sources of stress such as debt, housing concerns, work stress, and/or community violence¹⁰. Further psychological provision to connect emotionally is helpful for some families. Attachment relationships can be reinforced over time. Therapeutic support or other parenting help and relationship-based approaches can build confidence and skills.

A SYSTEMIC APPROACH THAT BALANCES ENVIRONMENTAL, SOCIAL AND INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

As Bronfenbrenner’s model explains, children do not grow up in a vacuum. Both prevention and early intervention measures need to consider more than just the individual child. Decades of evidence attests to the impact of familial, community, and wider socioeconomic circumstances on children’s ability to flourish and exercise their autonomy in making decisions that affect their long-term development. For example, Sheehy-Skeffington and Rea report that:

Being in poverty means living without enough resources – both money and education – to meet one’s needs and to participate fully in society. It is also usually accompanied by unreliability in the availability of food, shelter and employment, and instability in one’s environment, both of which are experienced as stressful. Such a constrained decision-making context triggers changes in the functioning of key psychological, social and cultural processes¹¹.

As children grow up, they may shift their way of thinking to adapt to the circumstances they and their family face. There is a risk that if their lived experiences show them that they have no control over their life outcomes or that the future is unpredictable, then it is rational to lower their expectations and *seize immediate rewards rather than forego them* for the sake of an uncertain future. On the other hand, they may default to behaviours which prioritise survival, such as living day to day, taking cash in hand jobs, not planning for the future or resorting to criminal activity¹².

It is important to note, one key benefit of *universal* provision of services is that it avoids the stigma and psychological harms associated with means-tested ones, while also providing opportunities for parents across the socioeconomic divide to mingle/meet each other. This is why community-level, community integrated level policy measures, such as affordable childcare, Sure Start, and Children’s Centres are so important.

CHILDHOOD ADVERSITY AND DEVELOPMENTAL CASCADES

There is a growing understanding of the impact of childhood adversity on health and psychological wellbeing. Evidence on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) demonstrates that children who grow up experiencing multiple adversities are at increased risk of developing psychological difficulties, both as children and as adults facing lifelong difficulties with wide ranging impacts

on their physical and mental health¹³. Many children living in poverty will also experience one or more experiences of childhood adversity.

The psychological impact can extend into the school years, when the shame and stigma of poverty is reinforced by discrimination, ‘othering’, bullying and isolation. These experiences of exclusion come to shape children’s views of whether they are valued by society and its institutions, leading to negative, though understandable, behavioural responses:

Children from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds report a lower sense of belonging at school and greater exposure to negative incidents such as bullying or sexual harassment. These findings might explain the robust association between living in poverty and demonstrating more aggressive, and less co-operative, behaviour at primary and secondary school¹⁰.

DEVELOPMENTAL CASCADES – A CASE STUDY

Developmental cascades are a way of describing how problems interact and escalate through a child’s life¹⁴. If we take the example of a child who has experienced poverty, they may reach school age and not be school ready.

They are likely to struggle with academic tasks and struggle to make a good relationship with the teacher.

When the child starts school they may not be able to meet the behavioural expectations of the school environment and struggle to make good relationships with other children.

This in turn leads to worsening relationships with other children and with adults in school.

They may struggle with this package of difficulties and be experienced by adults as disruptive in class and struggling to behave appropriately with others at break times.

A child like this may be excluded, even in nursery or very early primary school and so does not have access to the educational and social opportunities that could help them overcome their early adversity.

All of this puts further pressure on his or her family.

Without the right support the cascade continues with ever more damaging results as the child gets older.

Developmental cascades are important as they highlight moments where promotion of good psychological development have been missed. They underline the importance of understanding opportunities in a child’s development where policy can best intervene.

Whole school approaches to psychological wellbeing will support school leaders and teachers to identify children that need additional support. The BPS has previously called for the roll out of the Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs) policy teams, in England, to be extended to reach every child and young person in all schools¹⁵.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGE AND PROLONGED STRESS

Socio-economic disadvantage can adversely affect health, particularly mental health and even lead to excess mortality. It exerts its effect through major unrelieved stress over prolonged periods of time (Nussbaum). Prolonged stress is what happens when, ‘children experience severe, prolonged adversity’. The experience of systemic racism, discrimination, food scarcity, poor housing, neighbourhood violence, bereavement, and low socioeconomic status can lead to the inter-generational transmission of adversity. Additionally, there are regional factors which need to be taken into account. An upcoming briefing in the campaign will consider community based approaches to addressing poverty in more detail.

CONCLUSION

When it comes to ameliorating poverty, there is no one size fits all policy. What psychologists working with children, families and communities find and what the research evidence supports, is that approaches which focus on the whole system to ensure that the right circumstances are created for everyone are crucial.

We advocate a multi-level, multi-sector, systemic approach – drawing on psychological frameworks such as those described above and investing at the *early years* level will achieve a significant improvement in outcomes. Accordingly, the government must take a cross departmental strategic approach to reduce the number of people living in poverty and prevent further increases in child poverty.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is crucial to address the reasons why people are in poverty. We need to address the impact of poverty, and concurrently intervene on the causes. This is the only way to see substantive change. Our recommendations suggest a way forward:

1. UK governments must commit to developing a comprehensive, cross-departmental Anti-Poverty Strategy. In doing so, policy makers and strategists should take a systemic, structural and psychologically informed approach to addressing the foundations of poverty that seeks to increase access to societal and community resources to create flourishing families and communities.

2. Poverty needs to be tackled systemically – there is no point in delivering lots of disconnected services that do not map onto each other. Commissioners and strategists at all levels across government should use a systemic approach, like Bronfenbrenner to ensure policies work together and cover all levels of need. Policy makers should consider whether efforts to reduce poverty in their area of responsibility are connected -and if they tap into the foundational causes of poverty.

3. Collaborative, multiagency working should be the default approach in all levels of national, regional and local government. Integrated care pathways (ICPs), and local sustainability and transformation partnerships (STPs) and their equivalents should promote and facilitate multi-agency working to integrate services dealing with children’s health and wellbeing needs. These initiatives point toward the promise of population impact through psychological interventions in early life that are delivered in a collaborative system of care¹⁶.

4. Services should be co-produced with people from the local community who will use them. It is essential to draw on individual and community expertise. It will empower and support local communities to transform economically disadvantaged areas. Thus, the Department for Housing and Communities and Local Government should fund and incentivise community-led approaches to reduce poverty, particularly for children, and ensure local improvement plans address and reduce the effect of poverty on communities.

5. Every child is entitled to the best start in life, as enshrined by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which the UK ratified in 1991¹⁷. Universal programmes offered to children in schools result in improvements to the whole school population, with notable gains for higher risk children. Furthermore, universal programmes work best when complemented by access to targeted support for pupils/students with higher needs.

6. Local authorities should take a psychologically informed approach to ensure services are designed to take into account the psychological, emotional and wellbeing needs of the early years. Accordingly, they should create, develop and protect services, such as: children's centres, flying start, early help and family hubs, to serve all children and families with the integrated support they need – from the early years and beyond.

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