Life course socioeconomic conditions and adult psychosocial functioning

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Background Various psychosocial factors have been linked to adult physical health and are also associated with socioeconomic position in adulthood. We evaluated the effect of socioeconomic conditions over the life course on measures of psychosocial functioning in adulthood.

Methods Life course socioeconomic position was assessed by retrospective recall of parents' education and occupation when the respondent was age 10, and the respondents' education, occupation, and income in 2585 men from eastern Finland aged 42, 48, 54, and 60 years. Measures of psychosocial functioning were derived from scales measuring cynical hostility, hopelessness, and depressive symptoms.

Results Men with both parents who had less than a primary school education or who both had unskilled manual jobs had higher age-adjusted levels of cynical hostility, hopelessness, and depressive symptoms in adulthood. Mutually adjusted analyses showed that parents' education and the respondents' education, occupation, and income all had statistically independent effects on adult levels of cynical hostility and hopelessness. For instance, men for whom neither parent had completed primary education had a 0.15 standard deviation (P = 0.006) higher cynical hostility score, and a 0.20 standard deviation (P = 0.0018) higher hopelessness score, after adjustment for education, occupation and income. In contrast, depressive symptoms in adulthood were only associated with the respondent's occupation and income.

Conclusions Childhood socioeconomic position was associated with adult psychosocial functioning, but these effects were specific to some aspects of adult psychosocial functioning—cynical hostility and hopelessness, but not depressive symptoms. Adult occupation and income were associated with all measures of psychosocial functioning. In addition to the impact of adult socioeconomic position, some aspects of poor psychosocial functioning in adulthood may also have socioeconomic roots early in life.

Keywords Socioeconomic factors, life course, childhood, psychosocial functioning

Accepted 16 November 2001

While the idea that early-life exposures may influence adult health is not new, there has been a revived interest in studying the life course determinants of health in adulthood. Whether increased morbidity and mortality in adulthood are the result of biological programming due to critical events in utero, the accumulation and interaction of harmful exposures along the pathway between infancy and adulthood, or a combination of both is still unclear for most diseases. Some of the best evidence for the utility of the life course approach comes from recent studies showing that both early- and later-life socioeconomic conditions can affect a variety of health outcomes in adulthood, including self-rated health, coronary heart disease, stroke and stomach cancer, non-fatal myocardial infarction, and all-cause mortality.

Given the evidence that both childhood and adult socioeconomic position are associated with morbidity and mortality...
from specific causes, it follows that they are also likely to be
associated with the biological and behavioural risk factors for
those outcomes. Compared to the enormous literature docu-
menting adult socioeconomic effects on risk factors,13 relatively
few studies have examined life course socioeconomic influences
on risk factors. However, several recent studies provide evidence
for independent effects of childhood and adult socioeconomic
position on behavioural risk factors such as physical activity,
smoking, alcohol consumption, and diet,14,15 and for biological
risk factors such as cholesterol, blood pressure, plasma
fibromylin, and respiratory function.16,18

In addition to biological and behavioural risk factors, evidence
exists that a number of psychosocial characteristics are asso-
ciated with adult morbidity and mortality. While the list of
proposed psychosocial risk factors for disease is extensive,19
some of the strongest evidence for a link between psychosocial
functioning and physical health comes from studies of cynical
hostility, hopelessness, and depression. Cynical hostility has
been prospectively linked to increased risk of cardiovascular and
non-cardiovascular mortality20 and to biological and behav-
ioral risk factors for coronary heart disease.21-22 Prospective
evidence has shown hopelessness to be a predictive of fatal
and non-fatal ischemic heart disease,23 atherosclerosis,24 hyper-
tension,25 cancer, and myocardial infarction.26 Men and women
with high levels of depression or anxiety have been shown to be
at increased risk of cardiovascular mortality and mortality.25,27,28
stroke,29 myocardial infarction,30 hypertension, and gastro-
intestinal disease.31 Whilst ample and long-standing evidence
exists that adult socioeconomic position is related to adult
psychiatric illness,32-34 there has been less research on the
extent to which more general indicators of adult psychosocial
functioning are patterned by socioeconomic conditions in
early- or later-life. Our objective was to investigate the effects
of childhood and adult socioeconomic position on cynical hostility,
hopelessness, and depressive symptoms in adulthood.

Methods
Study population
We used data from the Kuopio Ischemic Heart Disease Risk
Factor Study (KIHD), a population-based study of risk factors
for heart disease, mortality, and other health outcomes among
middle-age men from eastern Finland.35 The study population
consisted of a population-based random sample of men living
in the town of Kuopio or its six adjacent rural communities,
recruited in two cohorts between March 1984 and December
1989. Of the 3343 eligible men, 198 (5.9%) were not included
because of death, serious disease, or migration away from the
area, and of the remaining 3145 men 2682 (85.3%) agreed to
participate. Among those who participated, 97 (3.6%) men who
reported that they did not know one or both of their parents
were excluded from the current analysis. The final sample con-
stituted of 2585 men, 42 (n = 325, 12.6%), 48 (n = 346, 13.4%),
54 (n = 1536, 59.4%), and 60 (n = 378, 14.6%) years old.

Data imputation
Missing data are a pervasive problem in epidemiology. The
standard approach is to restrict analyses to only those subjects
with no missing values for the relevant variables (the so-called
‘complete-case’ or ‘list-wise deletion’ analysis). In multivariate
analyses, the number of subjects that have complete data on all
the variables can be quite small relative to the actual sample
size. More important, however, are the underlying assumptions
for the validity of complete-case analysis. The complete-case
analysis is generally valid only under the rather strict assumption
that the restricted set of subjects is a completely random subset
of the original sample. That is, the validity depends on whether
or not the data are missing completely at random,36 an assump-
tion that is rarely true in population-based studies. For this
study, we used an alternative method that makes efficient use
of all the available data and imposes less restrictive assumptions
(i.e. missing at random); a multiple imputation approach37
using a sequential regression imputation procedure.38 The
procedure created imputations through a sequence of multiple
regressions and used all non-missing or imputed variables as
covariates. The sequence of imputation was repeated in a cyclical
manner, overwriting previously drawn values and building the
interdependence among the imputed values that is observed in
the non-missing cases. One advantage of this approach is that
the imputation process uses all of the variables in the dataset
and not simply those included in the substantive analysis, there-
by improving efficiency and providing unbiased estimates.39

Measurement of socioeconomic position
Measures of childhood socioeconomic position were constructed
based on the respondents’ recall of the education and occupa-
tion of both parents at the time they were age 10. For parental
education, respondents were asked to identify the highest level
(or partial level) of education completed by each parent (i.e.
primary/basic education, junior high, senior high, university).
Similarly for occupation, respondents were asked to report each
of their parents’ ‘longest lasting principal occupation’. Parental
occupations were then classified as white collar and professional,
skilled manual, or unskilled manual. We combined parents’
occupational data (conceptualized as a measure of the early-life
material environment) and parents’ educational data (conceptual-
ized as a measure of the early-life intellectual environment),
as it is plausible that these different aspects of early-life socio-
economic environment may have different effects on different
types of adult health outcomes.40 Parental education was classi-
fied as low (did not complete primary school) or high (completed
primary school or higher); parental occupation was classified as
low (unskilled manual) or high (skilled manual or white-collar).
The education and occupation of both parents was used to
create two cross-classified measures of childhood socioeconomic
position: both parents high (referee group), father high/mother
low, father low/mother high, and both low, so that we could
investigate synergy between maternal and paternal socioeconomic
indicators. We hypothesized that the effects of maternal
and paternal education on the intellectual environment of the
child may not be independent. Measures of the respondents’
own life course socioeconomic position were created from their
education, occupation, and income. Education was measured in
years of education and categorized as either low (<7 years/did
not complete primary school) or high (≥7 years/completed pri-
mary school or higher). Occupation was categorized as farmer,
blue-collar, or white-collar. Information on income was ascer-
tained continuously in reference to the year prior to the baseline
examination, and was divided into quartiles. Respondents
were classified as either low income (bottom 25th percentile) or
high income (top 75th percentile), previously shown to predict mortality in this cohort.41

Measurement of psychosocial functioning in adulthood
The eight-item Cynical Distrust scale,42 derived from the Cook-Medley Hostility Scale,43 was used to measure cynical hostility. Items included questions about the trustworthiness, sympathy, and honesty of others, and the motives of others in social relationships. Responses were on a four-point Likert scale (0 = completely agree, 1 = somewhat agree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = completely disagree) and were reverse-scored and summed to create an index of cynical hostility (range = 23). Two questionnaire items measured hopelessness, defined as negative expectations about oneself and the future. The items asked about the likelihood of reaching goals and the possibility of positive change in the future. Responses were on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from zero (absolutely agree) to four (absolutely disagree), and were reverse-scored and summed to create a continuous measure of hopelessness (range = 8). Eighteen items from the Human Population Laboratory depression index44 measured depressive symptoms, and included questions about mood disturbances, negative self-concept, loss of energy, sleeping and eating problems, trouble concentrating, and psychomotor retardation or agitation. Assigning one point for each true or false answer indicative of a 'depressed' response generated scores that ranged from zero to 13. It is important to note that the items measuring depressive symptoms did not include a separate measure of hopelessness, as there is evidence for its distinctness both as a psychosocial construct45,46 and in its relation to adult physical health.23,24 For all three measures of adult psychosocial functioning, higher scores indicate poorer psychosocial functioning. Cronbach's α for the measures of cynical hostility, hopelessness, and depressive symptoms were 0.80, 0.70, and 0.55 respectively.

Statistical analysis
Associations between measures of life course socioeconomic position and adult psychosocial functioning were assessed using OLS multiple linear regression. All analyses were age-adjusted, and separate models were run for each psychosocial outcome. The early-life socioeconomic variables (parental occupation and education) were each entered separately to evaluate their effects on adult psychosocial functioning, and then both were entered simultaneously. Subsequently, the respondents' own socioeconomic variables were entered into each model.

Initial stratification of the data by age group suggested some possibility that the effects of childhood socioeconomic status were stronger for older ages. However, this was inconsistent across outcomes. As there was no compelling evidence for an age by life course socioeconomic position interaction, subsequent analyses were age-adjusted.

To account for the possible influence of parental history of mental illness and current physical illness, the age-adjusted analyses containing both childhood and adult socioeconomic measures were also conducted with adjustment for history of mental illness among either parent, and separately with adjustment for extant symptomatic disease (history of ischaemic heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, myalgia, arthralgia, restricted mobility). Respondents' assessment of parental history of mental illness was obtained by self-report of an 'emotional or mental illness' for each parent. History of parental mental illness was not associated with respondents' adult psychosocial functioning. The indicators of prevalent symptomatic disease were all strongly associated with adult psychosocial functioning, but did not substantively alter the effects of life course socioeconomic indicators on these outcomes. Thus, we do not present those results here.

Results
Table 1 shows the distribution of socioeconomic and psychosocial characteristics for the imputed data used in the analysis, and the frequency missing and distribution for each measure in the un-imputed data. Looking down the Table and comparing the socioeconomic frequency distributions between the imputed (column 2) and un-imputed (column 5) data, we see that the process of imputation did not substantially alter the distribution of the data. In particular, the mean and standard deviation of the measures of cynical hostility, hopelessness, and depressive symptoms in the imputed data were nearly identical to the un-imputed data. The correlation between hopelessness and cynical hostility was 0.32, between hopelessness and depressive symptoms was 0.37, and between cynical hostility and depressive symptoms was 0.21 (all P < 0.001, results not shown).

Table 2 presents the age-adjusted associations between measures of childhood socioeconomic position and adult measures of cynical hostility, hopelessness, and depressive symptoms. The values in the Table may be interpreted as the difference in psychosocial scale score between the exposure and the referent group. For example, men who had both parents in unskilled manual labour jobs had higher levels of adult cynical hostility (beta = 0.74, P < 0.001), hopelessness (beta = 0.66, P < 0.001), and depressive symptoms (beta = 0.22, P = 0.02), compared with men whose parents had white-collar jobs. Similar patterns of increased risk were seen if both parents had less than a primary school education. When parental education and occupation were mutually adjusted, each had an independent effect on cynical hostility and hopelessness, but a higher number of adult depressive symptoms was associated only with both parents having less than a primary school education.

Table 3 shows models that include both childhood and later-life measures of socioeconomic position. The results show that parents' education and the respondents' education, occupation, and income all had statistically independent effects on adult levels of cynical hostility and hopelessness. In contrast, adult depressive symptoms are associated only with later-life socioeconomic factors—occupation and income. It is perhaps interesting to note that, after adjustment for adult occupation and income, the effects of low parental education were stronger than the respondents' education for both cynical hostility (0.59 versus 0.41) and hopelessness (0.40 versus 0.21).

Discussion
This study presents evidence that both early and later socioeconomic position are associated with adult psychosocial functioning, at least for measures of cynical hostility and hopelessness. Men whose parents both had less than a primary school education were more likely to report higher levels of cynical
Table 1  Childhood and adult socioeconomic characteristics and adult psychosocial characteristics in the Kuopio Ischaemic Heart Disease Risk Factor Study population, 1984–1989: imputed and un-imputed data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents’ education</th>
<th>Imputed Data</th>
<th>Un-imputed Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No. %</td>
<td>No. %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than primary</td>
<td>771 29.8</td>
<td>804 30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary or better</td>
<td>1814 70.2</td>
<td>1873 70.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents’ occupation</th>
<th>Imputed Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No. %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm</td>
<td>416 16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue collar</td>
<td>1170 44.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White collar</td>
<td>1037 40.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents’ income</th>
<th>Imputed Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bottom 25%</td>
<td>656 24.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 75%</td>
<td>1954 75.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parents’ occupation</th>
<th>Imputed Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No. %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father(low) Mother(low)</td>
<td>910 35.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father(high) Mother(low)</td>
<td>556 21.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father(low) Mother(high)</td>
<td>103 4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father(high) Mother(high)</td>
<td>1016 39.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parents’ education</th>
<th>Imputed Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No. %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father(low) Mother(low)</td>
<td>1132 43.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father(high) Mother(low)</td>
<td>161 6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father(low) Mother(high)</td>
<td>328 12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father(high) Mother(high)</td>
<td>947 37.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents’ psychosocial characteristics</th>
<th>Imputed Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cynical hostility</td>
<td>2585 12.6 (4.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hopelessness</td>
<td>1113 2.7 (3.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depressive symptoms</td>
<td>2585 1.9 (2.1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Imputed Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cynical hostility</td>
<td>2585 12.6 (4.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hopelessness</td>
<td>1113 2.7 (3.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depressive symptoms</td>
<td>2585 1.9 (2.1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| a Imputed data, n = 2585 in the analyzed sample (2682 total sample—97 excluded). |
| b The number of observations in the unimputed data varies according to the number missing on each item. |
| c 'Low' occupation refers to those with unskilled manual occupations, while 'high' refers to those with skilled manual or white collar occupations. |
| d 'Low' education refers to those with less than a primary school education, while 'high' refers to those completing primary school or better. |

Table 2  Beta coefficients (standard errors) derived from multivariable linear regression models of parents’ occupation and education and the respondents’ adult psychosocial functioning (cynical hostility, hopelessness, and depressive symptoms)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parents’ occupation</th>
<th>Cynical Hostility</th>
<th>Hopelessness</th>
<th>Depressive symptoms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td>Model 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father(high) Mother(low)</td>
<td>0.162</td>
<td>(0.21)</td>
<td>0.221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father(low) Mother(high)</td>
<td>-0.072</td>
<td>(0.42)</td>
<td>0.408</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father(low) Mother(low)</td>
<td>0.740</td>
<td>(0.18)</td>
<td>0.657</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parents’ education</th>
<th>Cynical Hostility</th>
<th>Hopelessness</th>
<th>Depressive symptoms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td>Model 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father(high) Mother(low)</td>
<td>0.485</td>
<td>(0.34)</td>
<td>0.460</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father(low) Mother(high)</td>
<td>0.218</td>
<td>(0.26)</td>
<td>0.338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father(low) Mother(low)</td>
<td>1.075</td>
<td>(0.18)</td>
<td>0.812</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| a Model 1 = Parents’ occupation + age; Model 2 = Parents’ education + age; Model 3 = Parents’ occupation + Parents’ education + age. Referent group for Parents’ occupation and education is ‘Father(high) Mother(high)’. |
| b P ≤ 0.05 for comparison with the referent group. |
| c P < 0.01 for comparison with the referent group. |
Table 3 Beta coefficients (standard errors) derived from multivariable linear regression models of parents’ occupation and education and the respondents’ education, occupation, income, and adult psychosocial functioning (cynical hostility, hopelessness, and depressive symptoms)\(^a\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cynical hostility</th>
<th>Hopelessness</th>
<th>Depressive symptoms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td>Model 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parents’ occupation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father (high) Mother (low)</td>
<td>-0.007</td>
<td>-0.172</td>
<td>-0.207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.21)</td>
<td>(0.21)</td>
<td>(0.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father (low) Mother (high)</td>
<td>-0.345</td>
<td>-0.586</td>
<td>-0.594</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.41)</td>
<td>(0.41)</td>
<td>(0.41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father (low) Mother (low)</td>
<td>0.404</td>
<td>0.188</td>
<td>0.143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.19)</td>
<td>(0.19)</td>
<td>(0.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parents’ education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father (high) Mother (low)</td>
<td>0.433</td>
<td>0.295</td>
<td>0.298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.34)</td>
<td>(0.34)</td>
<td>(0.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father (low) Mother (high)</td>
<td>0.077</td>
<td>-0.061</td>
<td>-0.102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.26)</td>
<td>(0.26)</td>
<td>(0.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father (low) Mother (low)</td>
<td>0.833</td>
<td>0.628</td>
<td>0.582</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.19)</td>
<td>(0.20)</td>
<td>(0.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Respondents’ education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low (&lt; primary)</td>
<td>0.678</td>
<td>0.523</td>
<td>0.407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.20)</td>
<td>(0.20)</td>
<td>(0.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Respondents’ occupation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>0.036</td>
<td>-0.072</td>
<td>0.124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.24)</td>
<td>(0.26)</td>
<td>(0.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue collar</td>
<td>1.125</td>
<td>1.007</td>
<td>0.788</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.20)</td>
<td>(0.20)</td>
<td>(0.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low (bottom 25%)</td>
<td>0.872</td>
<td>0.716</td>
<td>0.594</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.20)</td>
<td>(0.10)</td>
<td>(0.11)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Model 1 = Parents’ education + Parents’ occupation + Respondent’s education and age; Model 2 = Model 1 + Respondent’s occupation; Model 3 = Model 2 + Respondent’s income. Referent group for Parents’ occupation and education is ‘Father (high) Mother (high)’; for Respondent’s education is ‘primary or better’; for Respondent’s occupation is ‘white collar’; for Respondent’s income is ‘top 75%’.

\(^b\) \(p \leq 0.05\) for comparison with the referent group.

\(^c\) \(p \leq 0.01\) for comparison with the referent group.

hostility and hopelessness, regardless of their own education and adult occupation and income. On the other hand, patterns of adult depressive symptoms were much more sensitive to current socioeconomic circumstances than to early-life socioeconomic indicators. We found little evidence that mothers’ and fathers’ socioeconomic characteristics interacted to affect adult psychosocial functioning. In addition to the evidence that the childhood socioeconomic environment affects biological and behavioural risk factors for adult disease,\(^{14,17,18,47}\) the results presented here suggest that childhood socioeconomic conditions may also have important influences on some aspects of adult psychosocial functioning.

The specific mechanisms linking childhood socioeconomic conditions and adult cynical hostility and hopelessness are far from clear. Given that the time from exposure to outcome was about 50 years on average, a number of other childhood or adult social, behavioural or biological factors may have contributed to patterns of adult psychosocial functioning. However, it is also possible that cynical hostility and hopelessness are sensitive to the environments in which people grow up and live. Thus, these adult psychosocial characteristics that develop over time into relatively stable ways that individuals interact with others and view their place in the world are plausibly associated with experiences and environments encountered during earlier periods of life. Childhood deprivation has been shown to be associated with a multitude of potentially harmful exposures, such as a poor educational environment, poor housing quality, parental conflict and loss, environmental exposures, and violence.\(^{48}\) In addition to the effects of such exposures on the physical health and education of children,\(^{49,50}\) there is also evidence of early negative psychosocial effects,\(^{51}\) which may lead to increased risk of psychiatric illness in later life.\(^{52}\) A longitudinal study from Finland found that hostile child-rearing attitudes in mothers predicted hostile attitudes in 15 year old boys,\(^{53}\) and a US study found that father’s occupation was related to measures of mental health (including ‘hostile suspiciousness’) among men in their twenties.\(^{54}\) Given the breadth of negative externalities associated with low socioeconomic position, it is not difficult to imagine that during the course of childhood and adolescence individuals chronically exposed to hardship may develop a persistently cynical and distrustful view of the world, a view that over time may also lead to hopelessness about the future.\(^{55}\)

The results for cynical hostility and hopelessness also demonstrated important effects of both parental occupation and parental education. While adjustment for multiple measures of adult socioeconomic position attenuated the relationship between parental occupation and cynical hostility, both measures of childhood socioeconomic position remained strongly related to hopelessness. Given the data in hand, it is difficult
to know how to interpret these results. Although done rather
crudely here in terms of education and occupation correspond-
ing to intellectual and material environment, it nevertheless
seems useful to conceptualize potentially different domains of
early-life socioeconomic environment and their potential im-
 pact on a variety of different later-life health related outcomes.

In contrast to the results for cynical hostility and hopeless-
ness, childhood socioeconomic position was not associated with
adult depressive symptoms after accounting for adult socio-
economic characteristics. The assessment of depressive symptoms
used here essentially measures relatively acute somatic
symptoms that are commonly associated with depression.
Such symptoms are perhaps more likely to be transitory and
responsive to recent events and experiences than are the mea-
sures of hopelessness and cynical hostility. Both hopelessness,
which captures an attitude regarding low expectations and
futility about the future, and cynical hostility, which captures a
suspicious and mistrustful world view, may tend to reflect more
enduring cognitive mind-sets. The likely complex relationships
between these three outcomes certainly merit further inves-
tigation and it is possible that cynical hostility or hopelessness
or both are precursors to adult depression.

The specificity of the associations between childhood socio-
economic factors and adult psychosocial functioning observed
here is interesting and may be informative about pathways
between childhood and adult health. There is evidence that
childhood socioeconomic deprivation is not uniformly asso-
ciated with all adult health outcomes. Indeed, it is logical to
assume that not all adult health outcomes would be influenced
by the same degree by early-life factors—itis would depend upon
which particular risk factors were associated with deprivation in
childhood, and the distribution of these risk factors would likely
differ across place and time. For instance, it seems plausible
that things like motor vehicle accidents are likely to be more
strongly associated with socioeconomic indicators reflecting
the current environment, whereas other outcomes like dietary
patterns are more plausibly the result of life-long learned
processes that could be linked to childhood as well as current
socioeconomic conditions.

In addition, the evidence for a relationship between childhood
socioeconomic conditions and adult depression is inconsistent.
Some studies have found that childhood socioeconomic position
is associated with adult depression, but these are hard to inter-
pret because they have not accounted for adult socioeconomic
position, while others have found either no relationship with
childhood socioeconomic position or strong effects of
other measures of childhood adversity such as parental loss or
abuse. Given that socioeconomic differentials in depression
may increase with age, one reason for the discrepant results in the
above studies may be the failure to measure socioeconomic conditions in both early- and later-life. In particular,
and consistent with the results presented here, depression
is likely to be particularly sensitive to occupational and
employment conditions (e.g., the extent of direction, organizational
control, and planning) in adulthood.

However, we would caution against interpreting our results
as evidence that childhood socioeconomic conditions are unimportant in relation to adult depressive symptoms simply
because of the social links between poorer childhood and later
socioeconomic disadvantage. In other words, adjustment for adult
socioeconomic indicators could be viewed as over-adjustment
for socioeconomic factors in the pathway between childhood
and adult conditions. The important influence of childhood
socioeconomic conditions on socioeconomic destinations in
adulthood militates against explanations for adult health out-
comes that emphasize socioeconomic conditions at a single stage
of life. The attenuation of the impact of early-life factors on
depressive symptoms after adjustment for adult socioeconomic
position in our study simply implies that later-life factors are
more closely aligned with adult depressive symptoms. Finally,
since our study measures depressive symptoms and not clini-
cally diagnosed depressive disorder, we cannot rule out the
possibility that childhood socioeconomic conditions may be
causally related to clinical depression. Clearly this is an area
of research that requires additional investigation.

Five additional issues require comment. First, retrospective
reports of parental occupation and education are clearly not as
desirable as data from objective sources. Nevertheless, we
cannot think of a reason why respondent recall of mothers' and
fathers' education and occupation should be subject to recall
bias. More importantly, if bias was present, we do not see how
it could produce the pattern of results observed, where parental
socioeconomic factors were associated with hopelessness and
cynical hostility but not depressive symptoms. Second, it should
be noted that the independent effects of childhood and adult
socioeconomic position reported in the results were modest in
magnitude—in the order of one-quarter to one-half a standard
deviation of each psychosocial outcome. However, the relatively
small, unique contribution of multiple measures of socioeco-
nomic position across different stages of the life course suggests
that the cumulative effects of life course socioeconomic position
on adult hostility and hopelessness will be more substantial.
Third, we were unable to obtain early-life measures of psy-
chological functioning for this population. Given both the time
between exposure and outcome, and the potential effects of
childhood and adolescent psychosocial functioning on adult
psychosocial indicators, measures of this sort from early-
life would allow for a better picture of the relationship between
socioeconomic position and psychosocial functioning across
the life course. Fourth, it is important to remember that this study
was conducted on a sample of Finnish men born between 1926
and 1947, most of whom grew up amid the unique economic
and social consequences of the Second World War. While this
may be seen as a limitation to the generalizability of the results,
it may also be viewed as a conceptual strength, allowing for
a more refined understanding of the results. For example,
another Finnish study of childhood experiences and adult
depression among people born from 1905 to 1954 found no
effect of father's social class, and found childhood experiences
were more strongly related to depression among women than
among men. Studies assessing the effects of socioeconomic
factors on health, particularly across the life course, should pay
close attention to the particular historical, geographical, and
cultural circumstances pertaining to the cohort being studied.
If we abstract individual elements of peoples' lives from the
contexts in which those lives were led, it may impair our ability
to better understand the mechanisms through which the
economic and social environment affects health throughout
life. Finally, it is possible that our results are confounded
by unreported parental psychiatric illness; however, the lack of
any association between our measure of self-reported history of emotional/mental illness in either parent and measures of adult psychosocial functioning makes this less plausible. More importantly, our results have implications for the effects of residual confounding on potential links between psychosocial exposures and health. We have shown that psychosocial factors like hopelessness and hostility are influenced by socioeconomic conditions in childhood, and by education, occupation and income. Thus, when studies seek to determine the association between a particular psychosocial factor and an outcome, adjusted for socioeconomic position, they may underestimate confounding by life course socioeconomic factors if they only adjust for one or even two measures of current socioeconomic position. It is possible that simple socioeconomic adjustment for things like education or occupation will result in inflated estimates of the association between certain psychosocial exposures and health outcomes.

The importance of our study lies in the measurement of socioeconomic position over the life course, which highlights the need to begin to think about adult health in a perspective that encompasses the positive and negative exposures that accrue throughout life. A more complete understanding of the pathways between the childhood socioeconomic environment and subsequent psychosocial functioning obviously requires further study. However, consistent with previous research on the effects of childhood socioeconomic position on physical health in later life, the results presented here suggest that, in addition to the impact of adult socioeconomic position, some aspects of poor psychosocial functioning in adulthood may also have socioeconomic roots early in life.

Acknowledgements
This work was partially supported by grant HL44199 from the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute and grant HD38986 from the National Institutes of Health/National Institute of Child Health and Development.

KEY MESSAGES

- Adult levels of cynical hostility and hopelessness are associated with socioeconomic conditions in both early and later life.
- Socioeconomic factors in adulthood are more strongly associated with adult depressive symptoms than socioeconomic conditions in childhood.
- Understanding socioeconomic variations in adult health outcomes—including psychosocial functioning—may require assessment of socioeconomic position over the life course.

References


Commentary: Childhood socioeconomic status, life course pathways and adult mental health

Stephen E Gilman

The paper by Harper et al. in this issue of the International Journal of Epidemiology provides new evidence that childhood socioeconomic conditions matter for adult mental health. Their study joins many others in showing that—at the very beginning of life—socioeconomic stratification sets the stage for the exposure to risks that eventually lead to diseases of diverse etiologies.1, 2

Harper et al. studied 2585 Finnish men, and found that those of lower childhood socioeconomic status (SES), indexed by parental occupation and education, had significantly higher mean values on scales of cynical hostility, hopelessness, and depressive symptoms. On the basis of multiple regression models estimated separately for both childhood SES indicators, parental occupation and education had comparable effects on the psychosocial outcomes. These effects were slightly attenuated when both childhood SES indicators were modelled simultaneously, and were further attenuated after the subject’s own SES was controlled for; however, childhood SES remained significantly related to cynical hostility and hopelessness, although not depressive symptoms. It is possible that the lower reliability of the depression index in this sample and the assessment of depression on a current rather than lifetime basis contributed to the weak association between childhood SES and adult depressive symptoms.

While these analyses can be criticized for the use of retrospective reports of childhood SES, adults do seem to be able to accurately recall their parents’ SES at the time of their childhood.4 Whether or not high levels of hostility, hopelessness, and depressive symptoms influence the reporting of childhood SES is less clear. In light of evidence that current mood impacts certain aspects of memory,5 this issue remains a concern.

Interpretation of the results of this study depends on our ability to gauge the location and magnitude of the differences in hostility, hopelessness, and depressive symptoms that were observed between men of lower versus higher childhood SES. By location, I refer to the question of whether SES differences in the psychosocial outcomes lie entirely within the normal range of functioning or whether they shift individuals into the severe range of a normal distribution. Regarding magnitude, I refer to the issue of whether the effects are meaningful; that is, are of ‘clinical significance’. To address both of these questions, additional information is needed, such as the correlation of the psychosocial outcomes with psychiatric diagnoses, and the level of functional impairment associated with high scores for hostility, hopelessness, and depressive symptoms. Yet, as Harper et al. maintain, even small effects that exist at any single point in time may accumulate over the life course and lead to significant impairment. However, SES indicators obtained at multiple life stages are needed to directly test accumulation hypotheses (for example, see Holland et al.).

The study by Harper et al. brings to the fore two important challenges for researchers conducting epidemiological investigations within a life course framework.

Challenge 1: The Use of Socioeconomic Status in Life Course Epidemiology

Epidemiological investigations into socioeconomic gradients in disease are often criticized as ‘Black Box’ epidemiology because explanations for such gradients are seldom elucidated.6 In addition, the tendency to use measures of socioeconomic conditions interchangeably makes it difficult to generate hypotheses regarding the specific domains of SES that are relevant for any
particular outcome. This lack of clarity is especially problematic for studies investigating the effects of SES across the life course. The reason for this is that we tend to regard the most common indicators of SES—i.e., education, occupation, and income—as attributes of individuals rather than of contexts. This is an incorrect assumption in ‘life course’ studies, wherein parents’ SES is used to represent their children’s socio-economic context. And despite considerable shared variation between indicators of parental SES, they may not be entirely redundant, with the variance specific to each measure of parental SES reflecting distinct aspects of the childhood environment that impact long-term health.

It is notable that Harper et al. considered two aspects of children’s socio-economic context, parental education and occupation, and hypothesized that each represents a different component of the childhood environment, i.e., children’s intellectual and material resources respectively. As parental education and occupation were found to have independent effects on adult cynical hostility and hopelessness, it is possible to conclude that both of these domains are important for adult well-being. It is important to distinguish between the two hypotheses presented here. The first, or ‘measurement’ hypothesis, is that parental education and occupation reflect different aspects of the childhood environment. The second, or ‘causal’ hypothesis, is that both of the domains measured by parental education and occupation influence adult well-being. Further research is needed to explicitly test both of these hypotheses.

Challenge 2: Identifying Common Pathways

To a large extent, the focus of life course epidemiology has been the correlation of childhood factors with single adult health conditions, leading investigators to call for future studies of the pathways between childhood risks and specific adult disorders. Harper et al. have gone beyond this by analysing multiple, albeit related, dimensions of adult psychosocial health. Their finding that childhood conditions predict multiple aspects of adult functioning may lead one to hypothesize that common pathways exist linking early life SES to adult health. The identification of common pathways has substantial public health relevance for the translation of life course epidemiology into practice; this is because interventions that target common pathways have the potential to reduce morbidity related to multiple conditions.

Perhaps the most frequently hypothesized pathway—or mediating variable—between childhood SES and adult health is adult SES. Adult SES is considered a pathway because it is heavily influenced by childhood SES (for example, see Power and Matthews regarding this issue in the 1958 British Birth Cohort) and is itself predictive of subsequent health outcomes, including the ones studied by Harper et al. While Harper et al. found that childhood SES remained significantly associated with measures of adult psychosocial functioning after adult SES was controlled for, Lynch et al. previously reported that—in the same sample—childhood SES did not predict adult mortality independent of adult SES. Taken together, these findings indicate that adult SES is one, but not the only, pathway linking childhood SES to adult health. For those life course associations that are mediated by adult SES, programmes aimed at reducing adult SES gradients in health are needed. Even without a complete understanding of the pathways involved, though, research on the life course effects of childhood SES supports the assertion that improving the socio-economic conditions of children would have a long-term benefit for adult health and may be an especially powerful avenue towards the reduction of health inequalities.

Acknowledgement

Support received from the National Institute of Mental Health, grant MH 61953.

References