

[Psychology course]: Social Development, Paper 2

University of Michigan-Ann Arbor

A Hope in the Unseen was a phenomenal read in which Ron Suskind chronicled the life of Cedric Jennings's journey from the threatening streets of Washington, D.C to the middle class green-lands of Brown University. Cedric's remarkable story is one of inspiration, encouragement, and influence as his story captures insight into the real lives of inner city students on their path to higher education. Cedric's story has an influence from poverty, shows his resiliency, and concludes his individual characteristics, family attributes, and aspects of broader community involvement during the early 21st century.

Cedric faced many obstacles during his education at Ballou High School as well as outside of the walls of the semi-gated yet still unsafe community. He also lived with the reality of poverty during his childhood development.

Poverty is considered a pervasive and nonspecific stressor, whether than a bounded one, because it negatively affects many aspects of individual and family functioning (Owens & Shaw, 267).

According to Prof. Ceballo in lecture 11 (R. Ceballo, poverty and homelessness, November 6, 2013), 60% of all children in poverty live in single parent homes. Cedric only lived with his mother and had an inconsistent relationship with his father. Due to family instability and being a single parent, Cedric's mother Barbara may have suffered from economic distress. The Family and Stress Model from Professor Vonnie McLoyd explains psychological discomfort and anxiety as the inability to cope with financial problems (lecture 11, slide 10). Research from lecture also states that risks such as family instability and experiencing many negative life events can be obstacles children face during their childhood development. Cedric's mother (who was uneducated and worked low wage jobs for many years) was forced to move to different neighborhoods due to lack of financial stability (Suskind, 1998, Chapter 2). Family instability

plays into existence as Cedric's older sisters were in and out of his mother's home during his childhood; he also didn't have a strong relationship with his father due to Cedric Gilliam's detachment of fatherly duties. These factors can play into the risks children in poverty face; Cedric's family instability of moving from neighborhood to neighborhood caused a lack of family roles by living in different family arrangements. These may have caused Cedric to experience negative life events.

Other risks associated with poverty according to lecture are children attending under-resourced schools. "At Frank W. Ballou Senior High, the most troubled and violent school in the blighted southeast corner of Washington, D.C" (Suskind, 1998, p 1), Cedric had a history of outstanding grades, attended MIT for a summer program, and received many awards per academic year. "Children experiencing poverty might be considered positively adjusted if they are demonstrating the achievement of age-appropriate cognitive skills or receive good grades at school" (Owens & Shaw, 269). Cedric was well advanced at school and matriculated high grades; these results may have put him on a positive pedestal for upward adjustment even while in poverty.

Cedric still however faced obstacles outside of his schools' community. He faced the harsh realities of making conscious decisions when it came to which less dangerous buses to take home (anxiety), how he should act while walking home (impoverished, dangerous neighborhoods), and what, if any, food he was able to eat when he arrived home (poor nutrition). These can be stressful life events because they can cause negative effects on Cedric's physical health, psychosocial outcomes, and academic performance (lecture 11, slide 13).

According to lecture 12, resiliency is defined as the ability to maintain positive adaptation despite experiencing significant adversity. It can also be defined as

the power or ability to return to the original form after being bent, compressed, or stretched (DictionaryReference.com). I consider Cedric to be resilient because during his time at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) he was faced with the challenges of failure, being seen as the ghetto-less privileged student, and was discouraged from applying to his dream school (MIT) for the next fall term.

It's only midway through the first week of the program, and the intensity is already palpable. All the MITES were given diagnostic tests on Monday to divide the group into advanced and basic-level classes for math and science. Yesterday Cedric found out that the only advanced group he's in is calculus (Suskind, 1998, p 80).

This shows how Cedric initially is put at a lower pedestal to succeed due to his lack of resources from high school and the strong intellect of the other MITES students. Another example is Cedric failing his midterm exam; this showcases the academic pressures and intensity of the MIT program. Cedric was also seen as the ghetto student of the group and often made jokes to handle that he was different from the rest. "On balance, he's learned to be reserved, for fear of slipping into a mispronunciation or some embarrassing parochialism. Better to listen than to risk speaking (Suskind, 1998, p 83). Lastly, Cedric is discouraged from applying to the MIT program due to his below average grades from his classes. "Well, I don't think you're MIT material, the professor says flatly. Your academic record isn't strong enough" (Suskind, 1998, p 96). Though these obstacles were difficult and novel for Cedric causing him to bend (into asking peers for help), be compressed (into thinking he didn't fit in to succeed), and be stretched (into facing harsh realities that he might not be suitable for MIT or even complete the program), he still was able to return to his original form as an over achiever and dream believer (him being resilient

despite harsh realities). He studied as hard as he ever did for his finals in the MIT program, didn't let Professor Trilling's words prove him wrong, and received better grades in the mail regarding his classes upon his arrival home. This shows Cedric's resiliency because during these difficult times, Cedric still changed back to his regular form of believing in himself, encouraging and motivating himself, and understanding that he had to prove himself right if not to anyone else.

Contributions that added to Cedric's resiliency were his individual characteristics as being a self-reflective and hard-working person, his mother's constant words of encouragement, and his faith in the church community and God. Going back to Ballou for the fall helped Cedric get back into the mood of things and excel like before. "While that dose of sobering sophistication has slowed his step, the last few months walking the halls of Ballou have slowly restored some of his old balance" (Suskind, 1998, p 108). This caused Cedric to remember his intellectual abilities to succeed in school even if it meant he didn't do as well at MIT that summer. Using protective factors from Zolkoski & Bullock's (2012) review on Resilience in Children and Youth, Cedric had a supportive child-parent relationship with his mother that gave him optimistic views and positive self esteem, "In any case, Lavar, don't start losing faith. Nothing you can't do if you set your mind to it. Always remember that" (Suskind, 1998, p 80). And lastly, Cedric reiterated his faith in God as he completed his essay to Brown University. "God, this is where I want to be. I've worked so hard. I deserve it. If this is where I'm supposed to be, let your will be done" (Suskind, 1998, p 109). Cedric used these outside influences to contribute to his resiliency of him not giving up faith, as well as him understanding that life's obstacles have a way of making a way possible and promising as long as one works hard, keeps the faith, and doesn't let circumstances overtake one's destiny.

The obstacles of poverty, resiliency, and protective individual and family factors played a huge role in Cedric's upward mobile and positive adjustment. This was also a great book to read and analyze.

References

Bullock, Lyndal M.; Zolkoski, Staci M. (2012). *Children in youth services review*, 34, 2295-2303. Retrieved from <https://ctools.umich.edu/portal/site/f5bb235f-369c-4226-9343-64bd1564959c/page/3d26443d-67ca-4905-b9cd-dedcf151c17d>.

Ceballo, R. (2013). *Resiliency, community violence exposure, & traumatic life events*.

[PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from <https://ctools.umich.edu/portal/site/f5bb235f-369c-4226-9343-64bd1564959c/page/3d26443d-67ca-4905-b9cd-dedcf151c17d>

Ceballo, R. (2013). *Poverty and homelessness*. [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from

<https://ctools.umich.edu/portal/site/f5bb235f-369c-4226-9343-64bd1564959c/page/3d26443d-67ca-4905-b9cd-dedcf151c17d>

Owens, E.B., & Shaw, D.S. Poverty and resilience (2003). [Poverty and early child adjustment](#). In *Positive adaptation in children at risk* (pp. 267-292), S. Luthar (Ed.). Boston, MA: Cambridge University Press

Suskind, Ron. (1998) *A hope in the unseen: an American odyssey from the inner city to the Ivy League* New York: Broadway Books,