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Adolescents' Educational Outcomes in a Social Ecology of Parenting, Family, and Community Risks in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of social ecological risks within the domains of parenting, family environment, and community in the prediction of educational outcomes for 770 adolescents (49% boys, 51% girls, $M = 13.6$ years, $SD = 2.0$) living in a setting of protracted political conflict, specifically working class areas of Belfast, Northern Ireland. Controlling for religious community, age, and gender, youths' lower academic achievement was associated with family environments characterized by high conflict and low cohesion. School behaviour problems were related to greater exposure to community violence, or sectarian and nonsectarian antisocial behaviour. Youths' expectations about educational attainment were undermined by conflict in the family environment and antisocial behaviour in the community, as well as parenting low in warmth and behavioural control. Findings underscore the importance of considering family and community contributions to youths' educational outcomes. Suggestions regarding targeted interventions toward promoting resilience are discussed, such as assessing both child and family functioning, developing multidimensional interventions for parents, and building community partnerships, among others.

Keywords

Adolescents; educational outcomes; academic achievement; educational attainment; school behaviour problems; social ecology of risk; parenting; family environment; community violence; political conflict; Northern Ireland

Youth living in regions of the world experiencing protracted political conflict experience a host of social ecological risk factors with the potential to undermine their educational outcomes. In these settings, youth often live in neighborhoods characterized by extreme economic and social deprivation, an even stronger determinant of educational outcomes than social class (Purvis, 2011). Furthermore, youth may be exposed to a substantial degree of chronic community violence that is either nonsectarian or sectarian in nature. Studies in both Northern Ireland and Palestine have shown that in the context of political conflict and community violence, the family environment is often high in stress and conflict (Cummings et al., 2010; Dubow et al., 2010) and parenting may be compromised (Merrilees et al., 2011; Qouta, Punamäki, & El Sarraj, 2008), placing youth further at risk for poor educational outcomes.

This study extends past research on social ecological risks and youths' educational outcomes to Northern Ireland, a setting of protracted political conflict. Long-standing sectarian conflict between Loyalists (Protestants), Republicans (Catholics) and the British state has led to over 3,500 deaths and 30,000 injuries since the height of the 'Troubles' in the early 1970s; frequent acts of sectarian antisocial behaviour and extreme segregation continue today. The goal of this paper is to examine the relative influence of multiple community and family risk factors in the social ecology on educational outcomes that have been identified as concerns in countries around the world (Gu, Lai, & Ye, 2011), specifically academic achievement, school behaviour problems, and expectations regarding educational attainment.

A social ecology characterized by chronic stress and violence may compromise youth academic achievement. Recent work suggests that exposure to community violence predicts lower test scores and grades. For example, in a study of an impoverished inner city in the United States, exposure to community violence was negatively correlated with academic achievement, although it was not related to achievement expectations (Overstreet & Braun, 1999). Neighborhood violence exposure places youth at risk for disruptive school behaviour problems, also compromising youths' developing capacity for self regulation and behavioural control, and thereby hindering academic performance (Schwartz & Gorman, 2003). Although there is a dearth of research on the topic, in societies with sectarian or political conflict, educational outcomes may be particularly threatened. Heightened periods of sectarian violence may disrupt school systems, increase truancy, and threaten youths' academic achievement and educational aspirations (Cairns, 1996). In Palestine, neighborhood disorganization has been found to be one of the most consistent and powerful predictors of youth problem behavior following experience with the Intifada (Barber, 2001). Yet educational environments may play an important role in rebuilding societies and provide adolescents with a positive sense of future orientation in settings of political conflict (Seginer, 2008). Exposure to sectarian conflict, such as politically motivated assault, and nonsectarian conflict, such as drug dealing and drunkenness, both merit consideration as factors that are likely to compromise youths' educational outcomes.

In communities experiencing violence, the family environment is often compromised, including less optimal parenting, less warmth, less cohesion, and higher levels of family conflict, all of which add to youths' risk for poor educational outcomes. Lower maternal

behavioural control has been linked with lower grades for African American youth who live in high-violence areas in the United States (Gonzales, Cauce, Friedman, & Mason, 1996), and low monitoring and poor parent-child relationships have been found to predict antisocial and aggressive behavior among secondary school students in Botswana (Malete, 2007). Moreover, conflict in the family is associated with adolescents' behaviour problems including in countries characterized by high societal violence such as Colombia (McClellan, Heaton, Forste, & Barber, 2004). Although associations among community violence, parenting, and family environment with educational outcomes have been considered separately, empirical research has not simultaneously tested these various social ecologies of risk as predictors of educational outcomes.

Families and communities help to shape youths' attitudes toward education. For example, over 41% of the workforce in Northern Ireland has no educational qualifications at the General Certificate of Secondary Education level (exams usually taken at 16 years of age and the minimum required to be registered as having educational qualifications) or above, and 25% are functionally illiterate (Purvis, 2011). Many parents in such a context may be unable to provide the instrumental, financial, or emotional support necessary, and may even actively dissuade their children from aspiring to continued education because of their own limited school experience (Connolly & Neill, 2010). A similar phenomenon has been identified in the United States, with parents' high academic expectations of their children limited by awareness and unfamiliarity with the education system (Kirk, Lewis-Moss, Nilsen, & Colvin, 2011). A context of economic deprivation and sectarian violence may limit youths' mobility and encourage greater dependence on the local neighborhoods and interpersonal relationships (Connolly & Neill, 2010). This dependence may make them more susceptible to internalizing the anti-school cultural norms. Therefore, youth may rely heavily on their parents for guidance and information about their future, including attitudes toward education, and their aspirations for academic achievement may be constrained by aspects of their social ecology.

In the current study, we describe multiple educational outcomes of youth living in contexts of multiple risks in Northern Ireland, a setting of protracted political conflict. We consider three domains of educational outcomes: youths' academic achievement, school behaviour problems, and expectations regarding educational attainment. The goal of this paper is to explore the extent to which social ecological factors in the community, family, and parenting domains differentially predict these distinct youth educational outcomes.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Data were drawn from 770 mother-child dyads living in economically and socially deprived communities in Belfast, Northern Ireland, who participated in the third wave of a longitudinal project examining a social ecological model of the influence of exposure to violence on children and families. Mean age of youth was 13.6 years ($SD = 2.0$), and the sample was balanced in gender (49% boys). The majority of youth were in grammar school: primary 6 (4%), primary 7 (6%), year 8 (17%), year 9 (18%), year 10 (16%), year 11 (16%), year 12 (15%), and had left school (7%). Consistent with the demographics of Northern

Ireland, 61% of families were Protestant and 39% were Catholic. Based on the 54% of mothers willing to answer the question, the median family income after taxes and deductions was less than £11,000 (approximately \$18,000), with less than 3% earning more than £22,000 (approximately \$35,000).

A stratified random sampling strategy was used to recruit representative sample of boys and girls, from selected Catholic and Protestant areas with varying degrees of sectarian violence. To limit differences due to socio-economic status, the sample was drawn from working-class, socially deprived neighborhoods. Based on the multiple deprivation ranking (NINIS, 2005), a metric determined by income, employment, health, education, proximity to services, crime, and the quality of the living environment, nearly all children lived in the most deprived quartile of wards in Northern Ireland.

Surveys were conducted as interviews in the home by an established market research firm employing interviewers native to the region. Mothers' interview lasted approximately 1 hour and youths' interviews lasted 30 minutes. Families were compensated £40. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Boards at all participating universities, and participants provided assent and consent prior to the start of the interview.

Measures

Community—Youth awareness of sectarian (SAB) and nonsectarian (NAB) antisocial community behaviour were assessed with instruments designed for use in this study (Goeke-Morey et al., 2009). The 12-item SAB scale assesses youth awareness of sectarian-motivated antisocial behaviour such as stones or objects thrown over walls and politically-themed name-calling and taunting. The 7-item NAB scale assesses youth awareness of nonsectarian antisocial behaviour such as drugs being used or sold, and robberies without political motivation. Youth reported with 5-point scales ranging from 0 (*not in the last 3 months*) to 4 (*everyday*). SAB and NAB scores were correlated $.55, p < .001$. Z-scores were averaged to form a composite, with higher values reflecting a more negative community environment (i.e., high sectarian violence, high nonsectarian violence). Cronbach's alpha for the combined scale was $.71$.

Family environment—Both mothers and youth reported family conflict and cohesion using the Family Environment Scale (Moos & Moos, 1994). This measure is widely used in family research and has demonstrated adequate psychometric properties. Correlations among these measures/reporters ranged from $.29$ to $.55$ ($M = .40$), all $p < .001$. Scores on the cohesion scales were reversed, and Z-scores for the measures were averaged to create a composite scale, with higher values reflecting a more negative family environment (i.e., high conflict, low cohesion). Cronbach's alpha for the combined scales was $.73$.

Parenting—Mothers' behavioural control (i.e., rules and restrictions placed on youth by mothers concerning issues such as the use of money, going out, and activities with friends) was measured by mother and youth report on a 5-item index created by Kerr and Stattin (2000). Parental warmth was assessed based on mothers' report of the 10-item Parenting Styles Questionnaire (Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991). Each of the measures/reporters were significantly correlated $p < .001$, with coefficients ranging from $.22$

to .54 ($M = .38$). Z-scores of the inverse of each of the three scales/reporters were averaged to create a composite variable, with higher values indicating less optimal parenting (i.e., less behavioural control, less warmth). The alpha for the composite variable was .63.

Academic achievement was assessed based on the students' grade on the 11+ exam (A=0, B=1, C=2, D=3). At the time of data collection, the 11+ was a compensatory, standardized examination taken in the last year of primary school with implications for grammar school placement. Grades were available for 445 participants (58%); 58 primary school children had not yet taken the exam/received their score and 267 eligible students did not take the exam. Independent sample t-tests compared the students who took the test to eligible students who did not. Youth who took the exam had higher expectations about educational attainment ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 1.12$ and $M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.08$, $t(647) = -3.11$, $p = .002$) and fewer problems in school ($M = 1.41$, $SD = 0.86$ and $M = 1.62$, $SD = 1.06$, $t(769) = 3.05$, $p = .002$) than those who did not, respectively. In addition, they were less aware of violence in their community ($M = -0.07$, $SD = 0.87$ and $M = 0.09$, $SD = 0.94$, $t(728) = 2.48$, $p = .013$), but exposed to more negative parenting ($M = 0.12$, $SD = 0.78$ and $M = -0.14$, $SD = 0.79$, $t(771) = -4.54$, $p < .001$) and family environments ($M = 0.11$, $SD = 0.73$ and $M = -0.13$, $SD = 0.76$, $t(770) = -4.62$, $p < .001$).

School behaviour problems were measured by youth report of the frequency with which they had been in trouble in school during the previous 12 months because of their behaviour (1=*never*, 2=*rarely*, 3=*sometimes*, 4=*often*, 5=*very often*). Students were also asked whether they had been suspended or expelled.

Expected educational attainment was a youth report of the age at which the student expected to leave full time school. Respondents indicated 1 (*leave school at 16 years old for good*), 2 (*leave school at 16 for educational training elsewhere*), 3 (*leave school at 18 for good*), or 4 (*leave school at 18 for educational training elsewhere*). Two participants refused to answer and 122 reported they 'didn't know.' These participants were eliminated from analyses of this variable.

Results

Descriptive Analyses: Educational Outcomes

Academic achievement—Scores on the 11+ exam were as follows: 11% scored A, 17% B, 12% C, 18% D, 7% had not yet received their score or were too young to take the exam, and 34% of eligible youth did not take the exam.

School behaviour problems—Two hundred thirteen youth (28%) reported being in trouble in school in the previous year because of their behaviour. Sixty-two participants (8%) reported having been in trouble in school that led to being suspended or expelled. Of those, 43 adolescents had been suspended or expelled in the previous twelve months. Two adolescents responded that they 'didn't know' and were excluded from analyses of this variable.

Expected educational attainment—Youth reported the age at which they would likely to leave (or had left) full-time education: 17% expected to leave school at 16 years for good, 28% to leave at 16 years for educational training elsewhere, 14% to leave school at 18 years for good, 24% to leave at 18 years for educational training elsewhere, 16% don't know or refused to answer.

Predictors of Educational Outcomes

A series of multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the relative association between community, family, and parenting variables and educational outcomes (see Table 1). Controlling for demographic differences (i.e., Protestant or Catholic, child gender, and child age), in the context of extreme financial and social deprivation and political conflict in Belfast, conflict and the lack of cohesion in the family environment predicted lower academic achievement. Achievement was also lower for youth in the Catholic community. School behaviour problems were associated with higher levels of exposure to community antisocial behaviour; boys were at greater risk of problem school behaviour than girls. Expectations about leaving school sooner were associated with all three risk aspects of the social ecology, specifically, greater exposure to community antisocial behaviour, more negative family environments, and parenting characterized by low warmth and behavioural control. Protestant youth were more likely to expect to leave school sooner than Catholic youth.

Discussion

The goal of the current paper was to consider the influence of social ecological risk factors on the academic achievement, school behaviour problems, and educational attainment expectations of youth living in socially and economically deprived areas in Northern Ireland, a setting of protracted political conflict. As expected, educational outcomes were reasonably poor in these communities. Only 40% of eligible students took and earned a score of A through C on the 11+ exam. Nearly 20% earned a D and over 30% elected to not take the exam at all, a decision common for students in poor academic standing or who are unable to or uninterested in continuing their schooling. Only one third of youth expected to complete grammar school. Over one quarter of students reported school behaviour problems, with 40% of those students reporting having been suspended or expelled.

Of particular interest was the relative influence of the multiple risks faced by these adolescents for specific educational outcomes. A family environment high in conflict and low in cohesion was the sole environmental predictor of poorer academic achievement, controlling for demographic variables and other risk factors. Findings supporting the importance of the family in children's educational in this context are consistent with the substantial literature documenting negative associations between family conflict and youths' adjustment and academic achievement (Gonzales et al., 1996). A peaceful home environment may provide youth both the instrumental and emotional support necessary for academic success, including emotional and biopsychological regulation, adaptive sleep patterns, a sense of emotional security, self confidence, and a culture of achievement. Also noteworthy, Protestant youth had higher academic achievement than Catholic youth, counter

to reports of greater relative educational underachievement in youth from Protestant working class communities (Purvis, 2011).

Youth school behaviour problems may be related to other developmental changes in externalizing problems, such as aggression, among adolescents (Kim, Kamphaus, Orpinas, & Kelder, 2010). In this study, more extreme externalizing problems, such as getting trouble at school and being suspended or expelled, were associated with awareness of sectarian and nonsectarian antisocial behaviour in their community, after controlling for family environment and demographic considerations. This finding suggests that youth may carry over the antisocial behaviour that is common in their neighborhoods into their school experience. In this context of hostility in the community, youths' strategies for coping or problem solving may be limited. Alternatively, youth who are exposed to antisocial behaviour in their community may consider violence and misbehaviour an adaptive way to control their environment (Schwartz & Gorman, 2003) or gain status.

Youths' expectations for future educational attainment were predicted by each level of risk in the social ecology. Feelings of pessimism about the future, common in communities fraught with sectarian and nonsectarian conflict, may undermine youths' sense of efficacy and hope for a promising future (Seginer, 2008). This may be especially true for Protestants in Northern Ireland, who are sometimes characterized as the group on the decline in terms of political influence. On average, Protestant youth were more likely to expect to leave school sooner, despite greater relative academic achievement than Catholic youth. By contrast, disadvantaged Catholic communities in Northern Ireland have traditionally emphasized education (Purvis, 2011), perhaps as a means to improve their status and future options. Furthermore, parental warmth coupled with high expectations has long been considered an optimal parenting context, in part because it instills in children a sense of security, self worth, and efficacy, each of which is fundamental to academic success, particularly in a context in which continued schooling is not the norm. In the absence of this type of parenting, or in families fraught with conflict, youth may be unable to discuss goals and options, which may lead to lower expectations for educational attainment. To encourage youth to remain in school, a multi-pronged intervention strategy that addresses community, family, and parenting constraints on educational attainment may be necessary.

Implications for Practice

This study expands the understanding of educational outcomes for youth living in at-risk neighborhoods to include a setting of political conflict. The data underscore the contributions of families and communities toward enhancing resilience processes, or exacerbating youths' poor academic achievement, low educational aspirations, and school behaviour problems in contexts of violence. Although the study is set in a particular society experiencing protracted political conflict, the social ecological approach to evaluating risk and resilience may apply in other regions of the world (Toland & Carrigan, 2011). The findings of this study may inform targeted interventions aimed to enhance resiliency and coping strategies for youth living in context of multiple risk, including but not limited to societies emerging from political conflict.

Our results complement previous studies emphasizing the need to adopt a 'protection or safeguard' approach (Woods, Bond, Tyldesley, Farrell, & Humphrey, 2011) to promote youth resilience through the school system (Toland & Carrigan, 2011). Results might be optimized if school psychologists and service providers are trained to assess, consult, and intervene with children *and* their families in high-risk settings. For example, they could administer brief questionnaires about parenting practices and the family environment to screen for youth who may face multiple risks. These data could also help external researchers interested in comparing risk and educational outcomes across schools. School psychologists may also offer to facilitate discussions or convene support groups for parents, including guest speakers or experts on topics such as marital and family conflict, parenting, or college placement. These groups may provide parents with knowledge to help their children succeed, as well as additional support mechanisms to relieve parental stress at home. Improving family knowledge and interactions around school-related issues may enhance students' academic achievement and aspirations educational attainment. These types of multidimensional services for children *and* their families may help the school function in the micro-system as a protective factor for child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

However, there is a relative scarcity of school psychologists in many regions of the world (Cook, Jimerson, & Begeny, 2010), particularly areas with weaker socioeconomic development such as often experienced in areas of political conflict. The lack of a formal, school-based infrastructure necessitates the development of intervention systems that can be more widely applied. Professional and community partnerships may be an avenue to streamline and combine resources to maximize the beneficial impact for youth. As noted above, programs designed to enhance the academic achievement of youth in deprived environments may be more effective if they contain a component targeting conflict and cohesion in the family environment. Service providers and those interested in tackling school behaviour problems may benefit from seeking partnerships with the police or community programs in an effort to decrease overall antisocial behavior in violent neighborhoods. Those efforts, combined with interventions that strengthen families and increase parental warmth, may also help ensure youth stay in school throughout adolescence. Past research has also found that teachers can play a key role in encouraging students to stay in school and pursue higher education (Studsrod & Bru, 2011); interventions may maximize the number of avenues through which youth receive this information to enhance efficacy. These findings complement earlier studies which recognize a shared responsibility for youths' welfare (Woods et al., 2011). Partnering with other service providers, such as teachers, social welfare offices, law enforcement, or community centers, through multi-stakeholder intervention strategies, may improve educational outcomes for at-risk youth.

Limitations and Future Research

In this paper, we limit investigation to direct associations between contexts of risk and educational outcomes. However, within an ecological-transactional model, it is important to consider other pathways of influence between various levels in the system. That is, community violence exposure may also influence youth indirectly by potentiating risk factors within the family environment. Furthermore, aspects of the family environment may

moderate the association between community violence exposure and outcomes (Overstreet & Braun, 1999). Finally, the focus of this paper was child development in a setting of protracted political conflict (Cairns & Dawes, 1996). This chronic stress may function differently than acute stress, such as that experienced during natural disasters, although notably both types of experiences may be related to lower educational outcomes or opportunities for post-traumatic growth (see Little & Akin-Little, 2011). Recent work on trauma experienced by children, naturally-caused or man-made, and their ability to rebound (or not) from those forces, merits consideration (Little, Akin-Little & Somerville, 2011; Nastasi, Overstreet, & Summersville, 2011). Future research could examine which aspects of intervention programs designed for wide-spread natural destruction response are relevant to contexts of historic and ongoing threat. These, and additional, directions are important considerations for future research, and may be vital for creating programs and policies to enhance the educational outcomes of youth exposed to multiple contexts of risk.

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Table 1

Summary of Series of Multiple Regression Analyses for Predictors of Education Outcomes

Model 1 DV: Achievement	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>
Constant	1.75***	.46
Community Antisocial Behaviour	.01	.06
Family Environment	-.31***	.08
Parenting	-.11	.08
Religious Community	-.27*	.12
Gender	-.15	.11
Age	.01	.03
<i>R</i> ²	.05	
<i>F</i> (7,403)	3.70***	
Model 2 DV: Behavioural Trouble	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>
Constant	1.64***	.25
Community Antisocial Behaviour	.48***	.04
Family Environment	.05	.05
Parenting	.01	.05
Religious Community	.11	.07
Gender	-.16**	.06
Age	-.01	.02
<i>R</i> ²	.23	
<i>F</i> (7, 704)	35.71***	
Model 3 DV: Expected Attainment	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>
Constant	1.75***	.33
Community Antisocial Behaviour	-.18***	.05
Family Environment	-.18**	.06
Parenting	-.28***	.06
Religious Community	.50***	.09
Gender	.08	.08
Age	.04	.02
<i>R</i> ¹	.14	
<i>F</i> (7,621)	16.36***	

Note: Religious Community (0=Protestant, 1=Catholic), Gender (0=boy, 1=girl)

*
p<.05

**
p<.01,

p<.001