THE RELATION BETWEEN SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS (SES) AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT: EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Arif Shala
Ludwig Maximilian University Munich

Albulene Grajcevci
University of Mitrovica

Abstract

Issues pertaining to child development have been an important topic in research. Not only is the development trajectory important but also the identification of factors that influence development trends in children. Socioeconomic status has received considerable attention in research as a factor determining development tendencies in early childhood. According to theories and frameworks, socioeconomic status influences family dynamics, parental techniques, parental investment and access to resources necessary for development. The frameworks consider that low socioeconomic status hinders development in children. Among the development domains that are influenced by socioeconomic status research documents impact language development, executive function, brain development, behavioral functioning, cognitive development and intelligence. The four theories dominating the research on the link between socioeconomic status and child development agree that lower SES standing hinders the development of children while parents with high socioeconomic status are able to provide the necessary preconditions for development.

Key words: Socioeconomic status, language development, brain development, behavioral functioning, cognitive development and intelligence.
1. Introduction

Family socioeconomic status predicts a number of notions in child development (Hoff, 2003) with SES continuously influencing the development trajectories (DeGarmo, Forgatch, & Martinez, 1999; Keating & Hertzman, 1999; Linver, Brooks-Gunn, & Kohen, 2002; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000), especially cognitive development in early childhood (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; McLoyd, 1998; P. Miller, Votruba-Drzal & Setodji, 2013; Sirin, 2005). Literature provides that poverty is linked to cognitive and social-emotional competences (e.g. Mayer, 2002; Gershoff et al., 2003; Dahl & Lochner, 2005). While some researchers still debate the value of the impact (Mayer, 1997), evidence suggests that an increase in the income of the family positively influences children (Costello et al., 2003; Gershoff et al., 2007). A considerable number of studies have reported that socioeconomic factors are detrimental to long term cognitive and language development in children (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Duncan et al., 1998; Aber, Jones, & Cohen, 2000). Finally other studies also documented the correlation between lower socioeconomic standing and behavioral outcomes (Dearing, McCartney, & Taylor, 2001). Specifically, learning environments that are poor influence language and cognitive skills in children (Feinstein, 2003), while in cases when poverty influences the practices of parents, children have behavioral difficulties starting with the age of 5 (Bore et al., 1997). Experts argue that parents invest in their children by obtaining equipment (books, toys) and invest time in carrying activities (reading books)-investments which are argued to increase the language and cognitive skills of children (Gershoff et al., 2007) but which can hardly be offered by parents of low socioeconomic standing.

The influence of socioeconomic disadvantages and behavioral functioning is explained by the impact that poverty has on the skills and capabilities of parents (i.e. family stress model) (Foster et al., 2005). To expand on this topic, parents who invest in home learning will influence the development of cognition and language in children (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001), which in return determine success in school (Whitehurst et al., 1999). Settings that are rich in books and other materials when joint to parents that are engaged, contribute to literacy and language (Raz & Bryant, 1990), emotional and behavioral regulation (Brinton & Fujiki, 1993). In addition to reading, parents conduct a number of other activities such as storytelling, teaching numbers and letters (Watson, 2002; Parker et al., 1999). Parents have financial resources and human capital (i.e. educational qualification) which determine how parents interact with children, what activities they emphasize as well as what the attitudes, beliefs and values the children will adopt towards learning (Hoff et al., 2002). Conclusively, socioeconomic status influences development across numerous domains but the discussion of all impacts is beyond the scope of this work. Instead present work will focus on the impact of socioeconomic status on language development, executive functioning, brain development, behavioral functioning, cognitive development and intelligence.
1.1 Language development

Literature supports the idea that socioeconomic status determines early vocabulary development (Hoff, 2003) with children of low socioeconomic status developing the vocabularies slower than children from higher SES families (Arriaga, Fenson, Cronan, & Pethick, 1998; Dollaghan et al., 1999; Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff, 2003a). The link between the two variables could be a result of factors such as biological characteristic defined by genes and influences abilities in children, effects that emerge as a result of differences in the way families function (Linver et al., 2002) and impact the differences in the language learning experience (Hoff & Naigles, 2002). Comprehensively, language development has traditionally been considered to follow a genetic blueprint (e.g., Pinker, 2002), an approach preferred by a considerable number of researchers (Hoff, 2003). The other approach considers the environment to be a stronger influence, suggesting that environments that are supporting tend to benefit development and environments that are not tend to inhibit development prospects (Hoff, 2003). Furthermore, the principle of environmental specificity, notes that the environment determines certain aspects of development (Wachs, 1991). To illustrate, maternal behavior is a predictor of language development in children as well as play development (Lyytinen, Eklund, & Lyytinen, 2003).

Parental influences- the speech of the mother mediates vocabulary development, and the differences between vocabulary sizes between high SES and low SES children can be explained by the differences in the speech of the mother. Socioeconomic status influences the development of language in children through maternal speech; specifically socioeconomic status influences the development of speech in mothers and in return the speech of the mother influences the growth of the language. In addition parents may vary on the beliefs that they hold on the value of interacting verbally with children or the wish to have a child that is verbally active, these differences in parents are argued to be a result of social stratification (Heath, 1983; Snow, de Blauw, & Van Roosmalen, 1979). Finally SES, is considered to influence the time that parents have interact with children as well as the manner in which the stress experienced by parents influences the quality of child parent interaction (Hoff et al., 2002; Snow, Dubber, & de Blauw, 1982).

Regarding the quantity of speech (Hoff, 2003b; Hoff & Naigles, 2002), mothers of low socioeconomic status talk significantly less and use the same vocabulary while communicating and interacting with children compared to mothers high on socioeconomic status (Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff, 2003a; Hoff-Ginsberg, 1991). The study of Hart and Risley (1995) documented that children from high socioeconomic families had 11 000 utterances in a day compared to children of low socioeconomic status who had only 700 utterances daily. The differences in the day to day interaction with children accumulate and define the communication experience of children in the period of childhood (Rowe, 2007).

Studies report that children are more likely to develop large vocabularies if they are exposed to more talk as well as diversity and complexity in speech received from parents (Arriaga et al., 1998; Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff, 2003a; Huttenlocher, Haight, Bryk, Seltzer & Lyons, 1991). The study of Rowe (2007) documented that child directed speech is fundamentally
influenced by the type of environment a child is exposed to. To illustrate, child-directed speech accounted for 10% in the variance in child vocabulary comprehension among children, attesting to the vital need of children to be exposed to communicative environments to foster language learning (Rowe, 2007; Hoff, 2003a).

Parent education—previous research studies have established a link between the development of vocabulary in children and socioeconomic indicators such as the educational level of parents and the income of the family. Reportedly, children who have developed vocabulary skills also have parents who are more educated and have more social advantages (Arriaga, Fenson, Cronan & Pethick, 1998; Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff, Laursen & Tardif, 2002; Hoff-Ginsberg, 1991). The explanation for this link—as provided by experts—is that parents who are more educated possess developed speech patterns and provide children with quality day to day interaction as a result of which children develop language skills (Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff, 2003a). The strongest evidence for this link has been provided by Hoff (2003a) who suggests that the vocabulary that mothers direct to children is what influences the development of the vocabulary skills. The study also provided that mothers of higher socioeconomic status were the ones to use long utterances as well as versatile words in their interaction with children, on the other hand mothers who were low in socioeconomic status exhibited the opposite behavior as a result of which children developed smaller vocabularies (Hoff, 2003a).

Experts consider that parents hold certain cognitive abilities that influence beliefs and behaviors, which are the building stone of the ideas that parents develop about children (Goodnow & Collins, 1990). It is these ideas that fundamentally shape parenting practices and as a result also the development outcomes (McGillicuddy-DeLisi & Sigel, 1995). The Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment Inventory (Benasich & Brooks-Gunn, 1996), that measures the cognitive stimulation that parents provide for children, documented that there is an undeniable link between the knowledge parents have on child development and the level of cognitive stimulation that they offer to their children. To illustrate, the maternal questioning strategies utilized for children of 4 and 6 years old, differ according to the beliefs that mothers hold on the impact of environment on development outcomes (Donahue, Pearl & Herzog, 1997). Heath (1983), reported that African American parents held different beliefs on parenting and communication, while reporting that they did not respond to child utterances and believed that children will learn on their own and adults cannot teach children to speak. On the other hand, Caucasian parents, believed that parents play an important role in the development of children. The interesting revelation is that communication offered to children by their parents is fundamentally influenced by the level of education the parents have as well as the income of the family—both indicators of the overall socioeconomic standing of the family. Arguably, the more educated the parents the more likely they will be to talk to their children, utilize versatile vocabulary as well as longer utterances. The opposite is true for parents that are less educated (Rowe, 2007).

The language competence—as suggested by literature—is influenced by the educational qualification of mothers and the income of the family which also influence to similar degrees the social adjustment of children (Yeung et al., 2002). Children who have parents who are educated
are reported to be six months ahead in language abilities compared to children who are the offspring of parents without educational degrees. Similar finding were reported by the Millennium Cohort Study which documented that the children who were 3 years old and came from low socioeconomic families did not show advanced cognitive abilities and had higher possibilities to experience difficulties to externalize and internalize behavior (Kiernan & Huerta, 2008). The effect of socioeconomic factors depends on parents monetary and other capacities not related to financial resources, and the final important implication is the education of the parent which is agreed to influence the behavior of parents and parenting approaches.

Conclusively, Hills and colleagues (2010) suggest that social inequality which refers to the social background of the family is very important for linguistic, literacy and social outcomes in children. According to data, children who lived in poor families and children of mothers without any education qualifications where the ones to have low levels of development in language/literacy and social domains.

1.2. Executive functioning

Understanding the link between socioeconomic status and executive function is important for exploring the manner in which socioeconomic status influences development, health and achievement (Hackman, Farah & Meaney, 2010; Raizada & Kishiyama, 2010). In this regard it is important to understand the implication of executive function (EF) since this is the key ability for the development of cognition, and predicts achievement and school readiness (Alloway & Alloway, 2010; Blair, 2013; Bull, Espy & Wiebe, 2008; A.R.A. Conway, Kane & Engle, 2003; Daneman & Merikle, 1996; Ursache, Blair & Raver, 2012). To date literature has established the link between socioeconomic status and executive function (Hackman & Farah, 2009), with research studies reporting that the influences of SES are visible on EF of children between the ages of 2 and 5 (Blair, Granger, Willoughby, Mills-Koonce, Cox, Greenberg, Kivlighan, Fortunato& the FLP Investigators, 2011; Hughes, Ensor, Wilson & Graham, 2010; Noble, Norman & Farah, 2005; Raver, Blair & Willoughby, 2013; Rhoades, Greenberg, Lanza & Blair, 2011; Wiebe, Sheffield, Nelson, Clark, Chevalier & Espy, 2011). In terms of performance, studies suggest that children of lower SES backgrounds perform lower than other children on a variety of tasks including working memory, flexibility, attention, and planning (Lipina, Martelli, Vuelta & Colombo, 2005; Lipina, Martelli, Vuelta, Injoque-Ricle & Colombo, 2004). Similar conclusion are reported for middle childhood as SES background influences working memory, flexibility and attention, among others (Ardila, Rosselli, Matute & Guajardo, 2005; Sarsour, Sheridan, Jutte, Nuru-Jeter, Hinsh & Boyce, 2011). Additionally, SES based disparities are visible in the development of the cortical structure (Jednorog, Altarelli, Monzalvo, Fluss, Dubois, Billard, Dehaene-Lambertz & Ramus, 2012; Kishiyama, Boyce, Jimenez, Perry & Knight, 2009; Noble, Houston, Kan & Sowell, 2012; Sheridan, Sarsour, Jutte, D’Esposito & Boyce, 2012; Stevens, Lauinger & Neville, 2009), which indicates that SES differences determine executive function.
1.3. Brain development and behavioral functioning

The experiences and conditions early in life impact the development of structural and functional brains; specifically socioeconomic status is linked to the volume of hippocampus in adults. Additionally, studies also documented that socioeconomic status is linked to brain size with higher SES adults possessing larger brain sizes compared to low SES adults. Compared to other concepts there is a limited number of studies on the link between socioeconomic status and neuro-behavioural functioning in children (Noble, Norman & Farah, 2005; Rao, Betancourt, Giannetta, Brodsky, Korczykowski, Avants, Gee, Wang, Hurt, Detre & Farah, 2010). Socioeconomic status has been reported to impact the executive control (Hackman & Farah, 2009; Hackman, Farah & Meaney, 2010), suggesting that by the time the children enter school SES has influenced cognitive and neural systems. A study researching the neural activity in 5 year olds reported that low SES children had lower hemispheric specialization of inferior frontal gyrus (Raizada, Richards, Meltzoff & Kuhl, 2008). It is argued that low SES influences the development of infants because of the lack of parental education, low quality care of parents, poor settings and malnourishment among others (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). It is generally agreed that these differences that can be attributed to low SES result in differences in infants as early as 6-9 months, which reflect in the activity of the brain (Tomalski, Moore, Ribeiro, Axelsson, Murphy, Karmiloff-Smith, Johnson & Kushnerenko, 2013).

1.4. Cognitive development and intelligence

Cognitive deficits have been linked to the socioeconomic status of the families with deficits becoming evident in the two first years of a child’s life (Mackner, Black, & Starr, 2003). Studies have documented that beginning with 2 years old, poverty predicts IQ scores and neighborhood influences IQ scores by the age of 3 (Klebanov, Brooks-Gunn, McCarton, & McCormick, 1998). In addition to influencing IQ, poverty influences attention in children as young as 6 months (Clearfield & Jedd, 2013), as well as cognitive flexibility which represents the capability of the infant to process information from different sources at the same time (Clearfield & Niman, 2012; Lipina, Martelli, Vuelta, & Colombo, 2005). Similar influences of socioeconomic status have been reported in the exploratory activity of infants, with infants from low SES backgrounds spending less time playing which influences their capacity to explore objects (Milteer & Ginsburg, 2011). A number of researchers argue that nutrition—more specifically poor nutrition—can be an important influence on exploratory behavior. According to Arburto, Ramirez-Zea, Neufeld, and Flores-Ayala (2010) infants between 8 to 12 month who were initially malnourished and were given supplements for a period of 4 months exhibited more exploratory behavior in free-play tasks than did other infants who were malnourished but did not receive the supplements (Arburto et al., 2010).

In addition, studies reported that low SES infants failed to capitalize on the information for the objects and exploration surface which limited their opportunities to explore further. On the
other hand, high SES infants where capable to utilize the characteristics of the surface in order to explore further. Infants from low SES families compared to high SES infants did not use the chance to engage in exploratory behavior because they did not build on the information for the link between object and surface properties (Tacke, Bailey & Clearfield, 2015). Socioeconomic disparities proved to be important for the behavior exhibited by infants, since infants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to capitalize on banging behavior, while infants from high SES families employed more sophisticated behavior in their exploration (Tacke, Bailey & Clearfield, 2015). The study of Fontenelle et al. (2007) reported that children banged rigid objects at similar amounts; the difference was on flexible objects which were banged less as the age increased. The authors postulated that by the age of 8-10 months infants have learned that banging flexible objects is not a good used of their properties. Infants from high SES backgrounds exhibited greater sensitivity to affordances because they banged flexible objects significantly less than rigid ones. Consequently, higher SES infants made the optimal choice by utilizing the sound producing properties of the interaction object-surface (Bushnell & Boudreau, 1993; Gibson & Walker, 1984; Lockman, 2000). The findings of this study add to the literature suggesting a link between low SES infants and children and cognitive disparities (Tacke, Bailey & Clearfield, 2015) specifically arguing that low SES infants do not follow the typical development trajectories (Lipina et al., 2005; Clearfield & Jedd, 2013; Clearfield & Niman, 2012). To illustrate, infants of 6 months show disparities in their cognitive flexibility development trajectory (Clearfield & Jedd, 2013; Lipina et al., 2005). Importantly, low SES infants by the age of 12 months not only engage less in exploratory behavior but also exhibit less sophisticated behavior compared to high SES infants (Clearfield et al., 2014). The same study also reported that by 12 months, low SES infants exhibited less mouthing behavior, but in the mean time did not utilize any sophisticated exploratory behaviors (i.e. rotating objects, hand-to-hand transfer of objects) which suggests that low SES infants—unfortunately—have a difficulty to move from simple to sophisticated exploratory behaviors (Clearfield et al., 2014; Tacke, Bailey & Clearfield, 2015).

2. Theories and frameworks explaining the impact of SES on development

Socioeconomic status is a notion that incorporates concepts such as economic well being, prestige and power (Hoff, Laursen, & Tardiff, 2002; Oakes & Rossi, 2003). In quantitative research, scholars generally agree that SES can be measured by three indicators: job type, level of education and income (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Ensminger & Fothergill 2003). In this regard education is an important indicator of SES since it determines income and education (Krieger, Williams, & Moss, 1997; Mueller & Parcel, 1981). On the other hand, job type and income level are used jointly as determinants of SES (Conger, Conger and Martin, 2010). Socioeconomic status is important because it is argued to influence adults and children, more specifically, disadvantaged socioeconomic standing brings negative consequences for adults and children (Conger et al., 2002; Haas, 2006). Since studies report a link between socioeconomic status and child development,
two major theoretical frameworks have been developed to explain this interaction, it is important to note that both theories emphasize family financial capital or income (Conger & Donnellan, 2007; Gershoff, Aber, Raver, & Lennon, 2007; Yeung, Linver, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002). According to the first theory—family stress model (FSM)—the relationship between parents and children is impacted by the financial difficulties that the family is undergoing (Conger & Conger, 2002). Stress that comes with the economic situation influences the development of children because it influences the quality of care giving (Hackman et al., 2010).

Similarly, the second framework—the investment model (IM)—explains that high economic resources result in more parental investments on child development as a result of which parents provide children with versatile social and economic competences (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Mayer, 1997). Socioeconomic status influences learning resources, settings, opportunities and the assistance that parents offer. Arguably, parental care and home environment determine the development of brain region involved in executive function, cognitive and behavioral development (Hackman et al., 2010).

Conclusively, in explaining the influence of SES differences in development, two models are evident, namely the family stress model and the family investment model (Conger & Donnellan, 2007) but present research adds two other contemporary models explaining the link namely the social causation perspective and interactions perspective.

### 2.1. Family stress model (FSM)

The Family Stress Model postulates that negative economic influences result in less qualitative parent—child interaction along with more negative parenting practices such as lack of involvement, inconsistence and harsh parenting practices (Conger & Conger, 2002; Conger et al., 2002). The underlying hypothesis of the framework is that child development including but not limited to competency (cognition, social and academic competences), internalizing (e.g. depression and anxiety) and externalizing (e.g. aggression and antisocial actions) are determined by the economic resources of the family (Conger, Conger and Martin, 2010).

A number of existing studies have found support for the FSM and its predictive abilities (Conger et al., 2002; Mistry, Vandewater, Huston, & Mcloyd, 2002; Yeung, Linver, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002; Solantaus, Leinonen, & Punamäki, 2004; Parke et al., 2004 Linver, Brooks-Gunn, & Kohen, 2002), additionally the assumptions of the theory have been replicated by studies which utilized different ethnic and racial groups (Conger et al., 2002; Solantaus et al., 2004; Parke et al., 2004). Studies have found support for the assumption of the theory that (a) economic hardship results on economic pressure on parents, (b) economic pressure leads to parent emotional distress, (c) parent emotional distress result on conflict among parents, (d) conflict between parents result in maladaptive parenting behaviors and (e) disruption in parenting practices leads to child maladjustment (Conger, Conger and Martin, 2010).
Figure 1. Extension of the family stress model to the lives of children

Adapted from Conger, Conger and Martin (2010).

2.2. The Investment Model (IM)

The Investment Model emphasizes the advantages that the child has in development due to the financial and wealth of the family. According to the framework, families with high economic resources will be able to invest in the development of children, while families that are economically disadvantaged are unable to invest in development of children because they must invest in families’ basic needs (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Duncan & Magnuson, 2003; Linver et al., 2002; Mayer, 1997). To illustrate, families that are well off economically are able to support child learning through advanced training and tutoring, they are able to provide appropriate nourishment, housing, clothing, and health care and finally, families that have high economic resources live in advantage regions which further support the development of competences in children. While the IM model does not take into account the role of parents education Conger and Donnellan (2007) argue that education of parents is similar in influence to family wealth or income. The basic argument is that educated parents will have higher level jobs and are more likely to make child development a priority. To summarize, family income predicts academic, professional and financial success (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Mayer, 1997; Teachman, Paasch, Day, & Carver, 1997) and family income enable parent investments that develop social, emotional and cognitive competences in children (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Mayer, 1997).

2.3. Social Causation Perspective

According to the Social Causation Perspective the characteristics of the individual will determine socioeconomic achievement and the family relationships they will build (Lerner 2003; Mayer 1997; Rowe & Rodgers, 1997). Individuals who have positive characteristics will be more likely to persist in challenging situations and as a result gather economic and social capital that will transfer from parents to children. As such SES is considered to be an accumulation of notions
that are determined by individual specific characteristics such as intelligence and personality (Conger, Conger and Martin, 2010).

According to Mayer (1997) parent characteristics such as skills, honesty, conscientiousness and reliability will increase the life chances of children. On the other hand the interpersonal skills of parents influences parenting techniques and family structure in the way that children who have parents with weak interpersonal skills will be exposed to lower quality of parenting and will yield negative development outcomes for them (McLanahan and Percheski, 2008). In accordance with what the social causation perspective assumes, research has linked traits and dispositions of individuals to achievements in status (Conger, Conger and Martin, 2010). Reportedly, individual based differences in cognition and personality will predict SES indicators such as income, job type and economic stress (Donnellan, Conger, McAdams, & Neppl, 2009; Feinstein & Bynner, 2004; McLeod & Kaiser, 2004; Shiner, Masten, & Roberts, 2003).

2.4. The Interactions Perspective

Conger, Conger and Martin (2010) argue that in light of recent developments in research, a comprehensive model that notes the joint influence of social selection and social causation may be the ideal theory in explaining the link between family dynamics and socioeconomic status. Similar to the hypotheses of social causation, the study of Schoon et al. (2002) reported that children of low SES families had lower academic achievement and continuous life stress. Additionally, as noted by the social selection approach, children who had lower academic achievements and more stress during their lives were also the ones to belong to lower socioeconomic classes when they reached adulthood. Consequently, Conger, Conger and Martin (2010) suggest that both perspectives should be brought together in order to explain the impact of socioeconomic status on development—the so called interactionist perspective.

The interactionist perspective was supported by the study of Wickrama and his colleagues (2008) and Haas (2006) who reported that children of low SES families had a higher risk of mental and physical problems which in the end resulted in economic hardship in adulthood. Relying on these findings the internationalist model of SES, family interaction processes and child development build on the interaction between social selection and social causation. According to the model, SES standing of the parents (G1- first generation) will influence the traits and dispositions of the children-namely the second generation (G2). Similar to IM, the framework postulates that G1 family dynamics incorporate family stress, marital conflict, parenting practices and parent investment. In line with what the social selection approach argues, the interactionalist model presents that the traits and dispositions of the second generation (G2) will predict SES, family dynamics and as a result also the adjustments prospects for the third generation (G3). This line of argument (G2 SES and family dynamics will influence G3 children) is in accordance with the FSM and IM frameworks as well as with the hypothesis of the social causation model (Conger, Conger and Martin, 2010).
The study of Schofield et al. (2011), conducted on 200 adolescents from early adolescence to parenthood found supporting evidence for the interactionalist model. The results of this study provided that G1 SES and support provided to G2 during adolescence resulted in positive personality characteristics, low neuroticism, and a positive work ethic in G2-s. Consequently, G2 SES in adulthood predicted care and concern for children along with less emotional stress and interparental conflict in G2-s. Finally, G2-s family situation predicted the adjustment of G3, namely positive adjustment such as academic and language competences, attachment to parents and prosocial behavior. In conclusion, as the model hypothesis, the G1 SES predicted G2 SES, and G1 family dynamics predicted G2 family dynamics (Conger, Conger and Martin, 2010) (please see figure below).

**Figure 2. The Interactionist Model**

Adapted from Conger, Conger and Martin (2010).

### 3. Conclusion

The past 10 years of research have advanced the understanding of the interplay between socioeconomic standing and development (Conger, Conger & Martin, 2010). Research has resulted in the emergence of four frameworks that explain the impact of socioeconomic standing on child development, based on the assumption that family income and parental education as indicators of socioeconomic status determine and shape the development experience. According to the family stress model, families that are low in income and other financial resources tend to experience more family stress which negatively impacts parent-child interaction and the quality of parental care. According to the model, parents that experience more stress will be less involved and harsher in parenting (Conger & Conger, 2002). This is expected to negatively influence the development of language, executive function, behavioral functioning and cognitive development processes in children. The opposite is true for parents who have more advantageous socioeconomic backgrounds who will experience less stress and employ more proactive parenting techniques.

A second influential framework is the investment model according to which the development outcomes of children are determined by the investments that parents make in their children’s
education. As such the framework considers that parents who are of high socioeconomic standing or who have higher levels of education will be the ones to invest more in the development of children in terms of time and financial resources. Research on this framework has found evidence that parents who invest more have children that are more advanced on skills and competences. The opposite is true for parents who lack financial resources and education. Their parental techniques are expected to be less than ideal and as a result negatively impact development processes such as language development, behavioral functioning, executive functioning as well as cognitive development.

The social causation perspective is another framework aiming to provide an explanation for the impact of socioeconomic status on development trajectories in children. According to this approach, development discrepancies are result of parent characteristics such as skills, reliability and conscientiousness (Mayer, 1997; Donnellan et. al 2009). To clarify the framework considers that parents who have weak interpersonal skills will provide lower quality parenting for children, since parents’ cognition and personality is a predictor of family income, job type and economic stress (Shiner et. al 2003; Conger et. al, 2010). This is the only framework to place the individual at the at the center of the correlation indicating that interpersonal skills are what determine SES indicators and not vice versa. In this particular case the theory explains that differences in language development, cognition, executive functioning, behavioral functioning and brain development are attributed to interpersonal skills of parents.

The final framework has been developed by Conger et. al (2010) postulate that the link between development and socioeconomic status can be explained through social selection and social causation perspectives. The interactionist perspective, as such, considers that socioeconomic standing expands across generations, with the socioeconomic status of parents influencing development, family dynamics, parenting quality and parent investment in child development of the second generation. Similarly, these trends of the second generation are transferred to the third generation. Unlike previous theories, this approach considers that bad parenting practices of the second generation can be a manifestation of bad parenting practices inherited from the first generation, suggesting that the vicious cycle may be a better explanation than current socioeconomic status of parents.

While research on the link between SES and child development has progressed rapidly during the years several gaps remain evident in research. First, future research studies should evaluate the impact of nationality, ethnicity and race (Conger et. al, 2010) in the development trajectories of children. Secondly, researchers should focus to identify and explore the impact of mediating variables in the causal pathways proposed by frameworks. A number of studies have reported that several variables (i.e. neighborhood) serve as mediators in the correlation between SES and development (Conger et.al, 2010; Gutman et al. 2005). Consequently, in the future more should be done to understand how other variables influence the impact of socioeconomic indicators in the development trajectories of children.
References


