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ABSTRACT

During the past decades, studies have begun to look at individual differences within groups of minority children, and at the psychological impact of discrimination, oppression, and political violence on their lives. This paper presents conditions that facilitate the well-being of minority children around the world and that seem to transcend ethnic, racial, religious, socioeconomic and geographic boundaries. The first section of the paper addresses emotional support from family members and its importance. The second section addresses caring adults and peers in the community and how children are assisted, while the third section addresses the roles of teachers, which include protective buffer, imparter of skills, counselor, and positive role model. The fourth section of the paper addresses faith as a sense of coherence in times of hardship. The fifth section addresses required helpfulness and describes the importance of supporting the family. The sixth section addresses internal resources such as special skills and talents. The paper concludes with an argument for consideration of a transactional model of development for minority children, advocating longitudinal studies that look at the development of minority children at critical transition periods, qualitative studies that describe this process, and examination of intervention programs and of governmental programs that promote or inhibit the well-being of minority children. (SD)

CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN STUDYING MINORITY CHILDREN: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Paper presented at the SRCD Mtg in Washington April 3, 1997

Webster's Collegiate Dictionary has two definitions of the term minority that seem especially relevant for a symposium on conditions that facilitate the well-being of minority children. A minority is (1) "a part of a population differing from others in some characteristics and often subjected to differential treatment," and (2) "a group having less than the number of votes necessary for control."

Both definitions alert us to the fact that the status of minority children is intrinsically connected to the social context in which they grow up and that both status and context can change over time — as it has, for example in Israel, after it became a homeland for the Jews, or in the dissolution of the former Soviet Union, and in the re-unification of Germany.

Everywhere on this planet, at any given time, large numbers of children have to deal with discrimination, prejudice and oppression. In the nearly two hundred civil wars that have erupted since World War II, ethnic and religious minorities, whether Asian, Black, or Caucasian, have born the brunt of political persecution and violence that have resulted in the deaths of more than two million children, the maiming of five million, in more than twelve million left homeless and psychologically traumatized, and in some fifty million refugees.

The anthropologist John Ogbu, raised as a member of the Christian minority in Moslem dominated Nigeria, has found in his research on minority education that problems with the educational, economic and social adaptations of minorities are not uniquely American. They are major concerns in many urban industrialized societies around the world — from the aboriginals in Australia to the Maori in New Zealand; from the Burkumin in Japan to West Indian immigrants in Canada and Great Britain (Ogbu, 1994).

Yet, there are also hopeful signs in this world that show us that it is possible to create conditions that facilitate the well-being of minority children. One of the most important legal

documents in history, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children, assures every child the right to survival, protection, education and development — without distinction or discrimination on account of race, color, sex, religion, political, national, or social origin. Since 1990, this document has been ratified by over 180 member nations of the UN. There is hope that even the United States which has signed but not yet ratified this treaty, will eventually join the world community in guaranteeing these rights to all children. Urging your Senators to give their consent to this treaty would be one of the most useful personal actions you could undertake to facilitate the well-being of minority children around the world.

But I am also encouraged that we are finally addressing this issue in research and social action programs sponsored by the members of SRCD. We are, I believe, slowly beginning to change the model of human development we carry in our heads from one that perceives all minority children as passive victims of discrimination (Coll et al., 1996) to one that recognizes the possibility of individual differences among minority children, many of whom turn out to be resilient individuals who have learned to cope effectively with adversity, with their self-esteem intact (Phinney, 1996).

In the classes I teach at the University of California at Davis, two-thirds of my students are now immigrant minorities. Most speak at least two, if not three or four languages. Side by side sit students from Ethopia and Erithrea who were on opposite sides of a bloody civil war. Some fled as children, at night, across the desert, with younger siblings in tow. Next to them are youngsters who remember the bombings of their home towns in Nicaragua. Others, the Khmer students, grew up as children in the killing fields of Cambodia. Next to them sit Hmong students who spent their childhood hiding in the dense forests of Laos, or languishing in refugee camps in Thailand. Their classmates now are Vietnamese students who were among the boat people raped

by pirates; Bahaiists who were persecuted after the overthrow of the Shah in Iran, and the sons and daughters of Punjabi farmers who settled in the peach groves of Northern California to escape religious persecution in India. My students have taught me a great deal about resilience and the protective factors in their lives that enabled them to cope effectively with risk, stress, and trauma.

During the past decade, about a dozen studies on four continents have begun to look at individual differences within groups of minority children, and at the psycholgical impact of discrimination, oppression and political violence on their lives. These studies have assessed the lives of minority children of different races, ranging in age from three to seventeen, at different points in time. They show fairly convincingly that internal and external resources can influence the extent to which minority children perceive themselves to be possible victims of discrimination or become resilient actors who are able to surmount great odds and grow into competent, confident and caring individuals.

Among the studies I have in mind are those of children who survive on the streets of Latin American cities (Aptekar, 1988; Felsman, 1989); of refugee children and unaccompanied minors in Africa, Europe and Southeast Asia (Ressler, Boothby, & Steinbock, 1988); of rehabilitated boy soldiers from Angola (Wessels, 1996) and Mozambique (Boothby, 1983; 1988); of child survivors of ethnic and religious wars in Lebanon (Maksoud, 1991) and Bosnia (Nixon et al, 1996), and of Khmer children who survived the horrors of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia and are now settled in California and Minnesota (Werner, Randolph, & Masten, 1996). In addition, there are two long-term follow-up studies into adulthood that have examined the lives of Jewish child survivors of World War II concentration camps, and of the offspring of partisan fighters during the Greek Civil War who, as young children, were incarcerated with their mothers in a maximum security prison (Dalianis, 1994). Despite their traumatic childhoods, most of these children have grown

into remarkably well adjusted adults who "learned to love despite hate."

Among protective factors in their lives that ensured, in the long run, positive developmental outcomes, were a number of internal and external resources that we had also found in the lives of the "vulnerable but invincible" children of immigrant plantation workers on the Hawaiian Island of Kauai who were born in chronic poverty and whom we have followed from birth to midlife (Werner & Smith, 1992).

A network of interdependent loyalties shielded these children from the negative impact of discrimination, persecution, and violence. But it was their social and cognitive skills in successfully mastering adversities that contributed to their remarkable autonomy and independence. Interdependence and independence are the "developmental scripts," as Patrica Greenfield (1994) would say, that have become intertwined in their lives. They are the warp and woof of the texture of their resilience, their ability to cope successfully despite seemingly insurmountable odds. Such resilience is the end product of buffering processes that did not eliminate the stresses associated with their minority status, but made it possible for these youngsters to deal with them effectively.

Let me briefly summarize the most important conditions that facilitate the well-being of minority children around the world and that seem to transcend ethnic, racial, religious, socio-economic and geographic boundaries.

Emotional support from members of their family:

The importance of family cohesiveness has been well documented by comparative studies of minority children during wartime, who either remained with their families or were separated from them. From World War II to contemporary political upheavals, the extended family has

emerged as the principal source of support for children during wars, natural disasters, and refugee movements. Whether they are survivors of civil wars in Latin America or refugee children fleeing Communist soldiers in South-East Asia, most children find their primary source of nurturance among their kinfolk, especially their mothers, grandmothers, and older siblings. Members of such families often feel themselves united by their shared destiny and cling to their mutual affection as their last remaining possessions (Ressler, Boothby & Steinbock, 1988).

Under such conditions, older siblings often take on major responsibilities for the support of their family and have proven to be sources of strength and models of competence for younger brothers and sisters. Under some traumatic circumstances, children have even served as surrogate parents. A classic example are the Jewish orphans of Terezin whose parents died in that concentration camp. When they arrived in England after World War II, these children had developed strong attachments to each other and looked out for each other with fierce loyalty. They were extremely sensitive to each other's needs and provided constant emotional support for each other. Remarkable in their resilience as children, they have remained so as adults (Moskoviz, 1983).

Caring adults and peers in the community:

Several studies of the responses to major disasters that befell minority children around the world, such as the enforced flight from Laos by the Hmong and the exodus of the Vietnamese boat people, show that members of such affected communities will often go to considerable lengths to help not only their kin, but friends and neighbors. During the saturation bombings of major cities in England and Germany in World War II, and more recently, during the civil war in Lebanon and the shellings of border kibbutzim in Israel, it was repeatedly noted that children

benefited from the presence of familiar adults and peers, and from the general resilient morale of their community (Maksoud, 1991). The relative low incidence of acute anxiety symptoms in children under these conditions was in part related to the presence of trusted adults and the common bonds that evolved when children and grown-ups faced these adversities together. Likewise, in their rehabilitation of child soldiers from the civil war in Mozambique, the patience and dedication of caretakers from the local African communities made a successful transition of these boys to re-integration with their families possible. By the end of one year, these six to sixteen-year-old youngsters, who had been taught to be "killing machines," showed the beginnings of trusting relationships with adults and peers and had learned to control their aggressive behavior toward outsiders (Boothby, 1991). And studies of street children in Latin America have shown that even the gamins can count on the help of adult benefactors and older peers for their survival (Aptekar, 1988; Felsman, 1989).

Teachers:

Teachers who work with minority children in refugee camps, rehabilitation centers and in resettlement communities have played an important role as protective buffers in the lives of minority children, imparting survival skills, such as literacy and numeracy, but also serving as counselors and positive role models.

Two long-term investigations deserve special note: One is a follow-up study of child survivors of the Holocaust who were sent from concentration camps and orphanages to a therapeutic nursery school in England at the close of World War II (Moskovitz, 1983). Excerpts from follow-up interviews after some forty years reveal an extraordinary affirmation of life. Furthermore, all of the resilient survivors considered one woman to be among the most potent

influences in their lives — the nursery school teacher who provided warmth and caring, and taught them "to behave compassionately."

The other is a follow-up study at midlife of men and women who had spent their infancy and early childhood with their mothers in a maximum security prison during the Greek Civil War (Dalianis, 1994). Most had lost their fathers who had been killed as resistance fighters; their mothers were awaiting execution. The people who sustained these children were fellow prisoners — mostly professional women — who taught these youngsters how to read, who sang and played with them, and who sustained their health and spirits until they were liberated. Now middle-aged, these former child prisoners have grown into competent and caring adults who have established roots in their respective communities.

Faith: A sense of coherence

A number of studies of resilient minority children from a wide variety of socioeconomic and ethic backgrounds have noted that their families have held religious beliefs or were committed to a political ideology that provided stability and meaning to their lives, especially in times of hardship and adversity (Anthony, 1987; Dalianis, 1994; Moskovitz, 1983; Werner & Smith, 1992). The content of their beliefs varied from Buddhism to Catholicism and fundamental and liberal versions of Protestantism and Judaism. What such faiths appear to give minority children is a sense of rootedness and coherence (Antonosky, 1987), a conviction that their lives have meaning, and a belief that things will work out in the end, despite unfavorable odds. This sense of meaning persists, even among children uprooted by wars or scattered as refugees to the four corners of the earth (Dalianis, 1994; Moskovitz, 1983; Werner, Randolph & Masten, 1996).

Required helpfulness:

Throughout the world, the need to take on domestic responsibilities and to work to support the family have proved to be sources of strength and competence for children, whether in Lebanon, Laos or Kauai. Many take on responsibility for the care and education of younger siblings. Others manage the household when parents have died, are ill, or incapacitated; still others work part-time to support their family (Werner & Smith, 1992).

Such acts of "required helpfulness" (Rachman, 1979), in the context of close family ties, were important protective factors for these children. At some time, usually in middle childhood and adolescence, they assumed responsibilities that were essential to the well-being of their family or community. This experience bolstered their self-confidence and strengthened their belief that they could surmount the hardships in their lives.

Internal Resources:

But cross-cultural studies also show us that minority children who beat the odds come not empty-handed to this task. They usually have a special skill or talent that is valued by their elders and peers and the majority culture. Most studies of resilient minority children and youth report that adequate health and nutrition, good problem-solving skills, the ability to master a second or third language, and motivation to succeed in school, have been major assets for those who managed to rise above poverty and discrimination in their lives (Werner, Randolph & Masten, 1996).

The need for a transactional model of development:

One of the purposes of the cross-cultural study of children is to provide a corrective for

the inevitable biases and misconceptions that arise when we only look at our own culture. A comparative world-wide view on conditions that facilitate the well-being of minority children may help us to see possibilities for the development of their potential that we may tend to overlook in our concern with the negative consequences of racism and discrimination in the lives of "children of color" in the USA.

In a recently published theoretical paper in Child Development, Cynthia Garci Coli and her co-authors (1996) offer an integrative model for the study of developmental competencies in minority children as a guideline for future research. The model, admirable in its complexity, puts social position variables, such as race, social class, ethnicity and gender in the driver's seat, and shows uni-directional connections between these variables, and a number of putative negative consequences, such as prejudice, discrimination and segregation, which, in turn, effect the context in which minority children grow up and the families and sub-cultures they live in. The child in this model is affected by his/her social position and environments, such as school, neighborhoods, the legacies of his "adaptive culture" and his family and, in turn, develops competencies that help him deal, more or less successfully, with bi-culturalism and racism.

While I have no quarrel with the variables that are contained in this model, I believe that the findings of cross-cultural studies of minority children around the world suggest that we need to consider a transactional model of development where most of the major pathways are bi-directional. We have found in our own longitudinal study of resilient children from a variety of ethnic monorities that, over time, a child's health status, temperament, self-help skills, and cognitive competencies can significantly moderate the negative impact of risk factors associated with his/her minority status. Children also actively elicit varying degrees of support from members of the extended family, from caring neighbors, peer friends, teachers and elder mentors

and from their community of faith (Werner & Smith, 1992).

By focusing on individual differences among minority children in their response to the risk factors in their lives, and in their use of both internal resources and external sources of support we may get a better picture of how they actively shape and change the conditions they live in and what avenues they find or construct to turn the balance of their lives from a position of vulnerability to resiliency.

To examine the usefulness of (alternate) models of development that purport to account for individual variations in the life trajectories of minority children, we need the interdisciplinary cooperation that is the hallmark of SRCD: the perspectives and skills of cultural anthropologists, developmental psychologists, economists, educators, pediatricians, and sociologists to name but a few.

We need longitudinal studies that look at the development of minority children at critical transition periods, from refugee camps and emigration to re-settlement, from home to school, from school to the world of work, marriage and parenthood. There are only a handful of such studies around the world that have taken this approach. Most of these have focused on health issues and educational attainment. Conspicously absent are studies that focus on intragroup variability and on the process of how children become bi- or multicultural.

There is need for both in-depth qualititative studies that describe this process in detail, using the life histories of individuals who have managed to make a successful bi-cultural adaptation, and for large-scale multivariate studies that can examine the balance between risk and protective factors that affect the adaptation of minority children at different points in time.

We also need to carefully examine how intervention programs, conducted by governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations, both here and abroad, can enhance

the well-being of minority children by (1) decreasing their exposure to debilitating risk factors (poor health, nutrition, substance abuse), (2) nourishing their special talents and competencies through education and (3) utilizing informal sources of support in the extended family, school, church and the community to build a bridge between the minority culture and the society at large which controls access to resources and opportunities.

A number of such intervention programs are being conducted in different parts of the world under the auspices of UNICEF and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees; the World Bank, and by non-governmental agencies, such as the Save the Children Federation, The Society of Friends (Quakers), the Center for Victims of Torture in Copenhagen, and the Bernard van Leer Foundation in the Hague. Many of these organizations have data bases that could be utilized by behavioral scientists interested in comparative studies of minority children around the world. A useful introduction to such international intervention programs and their sponsoring agencies in contained in the Coordinator's Notebook (1996.19), an international resource for Early Child Development, that is published by the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development.

But we not go abroad to examine conditions that may promote or inhibit the well-being of minority children. Programs in states that serve recent immigrants from the developing world can be a major laboratory for the study of coping skills of children and families who were oppressed minorities in the Third World and now find themselves under siege in the U.S.A. The "Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act" that became federal law on August 22, 1996 will deprive both legal and illegal immigrants of access to Food Stamps, Medicaid and Supplementary Social Security. In my home state, California, where minority children **are** the majority, that law will affect nearly half a million individuals.

These children, all across this land that was built by immigrants, need neither sophisticated conceptual models nor studies of great methodological depth and complexity. They need your voice — your vote. There is still time to alleviate the worst consequences of this legislation by action on the state and federal level, but time is running out! Please, speak out on their behalf to your elected representative in the state house and the U.S. Congress. You, individually and collectively, are the only voice they have. Let it be heard!

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August 22, 1997

Dear Colleague:

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