Beyond Adversity, Vulnerability and Resilience: Individual Differences in Developmental Plasticity

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Abstract: It has long been appreciated by those studying diverse aspects of health and human development that some individuals may be more “vulnerable” to adversity than others. That is, due to some personal attribute(s)--which could be genetic, physiological and/or behavioral in character--some children and adults are more likely than others to succumb to the negative effects of problematic environmental conditions (e.g., poverty, malnutrition, pathogen exposure). This classic vulnerability framework, based as it is on dual-risk conditions, has been challenged in recent years by evolutionary-minded scholars who contend that the very individuals most vulnerable to adversity are also most likely to benefit from supportive or enriched--or even just benign--contextual conditions. Indeed, the claim has been made by those embracing this “differential-susceptibility (to environmental influences) hypothesis” that a medical or pathological model, focused as it is on disease and dysfunction, has misconstrued general plasticity or malleability in response to both good and bad contextual conditions for vulnerability to adversity. And that is because so much research has focused exclusively--even if for understandable, humanitarian reasons--on risk factors associated with disease and disorder phenotypes. Had this work also measured supportive environmental conditions and good health—not just the absence of adversity and disease—it would have discovered that the very same individual attributes, including genotype, that predisposes one to develop or function poorly under adverse conditions also predisposes one to develop or function especially well under positive circumstances. In other words, there are individual differences in plasticity or malleability that operate in a “for better and for worse” manner, depending on the circumstances in which a child grows up or an individual finds himself. Thus, whereas some people are highly sensitive and responsive to their environment, good or bad, others are much less so. In order to develop these ideas, observational and intervention evidence consistent with them are reviewed. Implications for programs and practices are raised.

Professor Belsky is an internationally recognized expert in the field of child development and family studies. His areas of special expertise include the effects of day care, parent-child relations during the infancy and early childhood years, the transition to parenthood, the etiology of child maltreatment and the evolutionary basis of parent and child functioning. Dr. Belsky’s research is marked by a focus upon fathers as well as mothers, marriages as well as parent-child relations, and naturalistic home observations of family interaction patterns. It is both basic and applied in its character. He is a founding and collaborating investigator on the NICHD Study of Child Care and Youth Development (US) and that National Evaluation of Sure Start (UK). He is the author of more than 300 scientific articles and chapters and the author/editor of several books, including most recently The National Evaluation of Sure Start: Does Area-Based Early Intervention Work (The Policy Press, 2007).