Editors

Disentangling associations between poverty at various levels of aggregation and mental health

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Abstract. The present editorial discusses whether socioeconomic status of the individual and of the neighbourhood could be important in prevalence, treatment and prevention of psychiatric morbidity. Previous research showed that patients diagnosed with mental disorders are concentrated in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. This could be the result of (1) an association between individual socioeconomic status and mental health, (2) an association between neighbourhood socioeconomic status and mental health, or (3) social selection. Research disentangling associations between individual and neighbourhood socioeconomic status on the one hand and mental health outcomes on the other, reported that neighbourhood socioeconomic disadvantage was associated with individual mental health over and above individual-level socioeconomic status, indicating deleterious effects for all inhabitants both poor and affluent. In conclusion, subjective mental health outcomes showed stronger evidence for an effect of neighbourhood socioeconomic status than research focussing on treated incidence. Within the group of patients, however, service use was higher in patients living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Social capital was identified as one of the mechanisms whereby neighbourhood socioeconomic disadvantage may become associated with observed reductions in mental health. After controlling for individual socioeconomic status, there is evidence for an association between neighbourhood socioeconomic status and objective as well as subjective mental health in adults. Evidence for such an association in young children is even stronger.

INTRODUCTION

Mental disorders are concentrated in socioeconomically disadvantaged urban areas and individuals with psychiatric morbidity have lower socioeconomic status (Reijneveld & Schene, 1998). The association between poor mental health and lower socioeconomic status can be the result of several processes. The causation hypothesis indicates that lower individual or neighbourhood lower socioeconomic status causes mental health disorder, whereas the selection hypothesis suggests that patients diagnosed with mental disorders have drifted into lower individual or area socioeconomic status (Wiersma et al., 1983; Dohrenwend et al., 1992).

Socioeconomic status has been associated with both objective (Drukker et al., 2004a; Tello et al., 2005) and subjective mental health outcomes (Aneshensel & Sucoff, 1996; Xue et al., 2005; Drukker et al., 2003). Subjective mental health includes perceptions of a subject expressed as measures such as perceived mental health and quality of life, whereas objective mental health is based on objective criteria, such as mental health service consumption and DSM IV diagnoses made by clinicians. For example, individual level socioeconomic status has been associated with the rate of schizophrenia, although the direction of this association was inconsistent (Eaton, 1974; Turner & Wagenfeld, 1967; Dunham, 1971; Faris & Dunham, 1939; Hare, 1956; Higgins, 1986; Wiersma et al., 1983; Jones et al., 1994; Dohrenwend et al., 1992). In these early studies, socioeconomic status at the area level was included as a proxy for individual-level socioeconomic status and studies referred to each other without distinguishing between the use of individual level and area level exposures. Only recently, these two measures of socioeconomic status were identified as two different constructs. Although individual and neighbourhood characteristics are necessarily correlated, correlations are from unity indicating likely non-overlapping constructs. Even so, the two concepts are rarely included in the same set of analyses with the aim of assessing their separate and individual effects (Drukker et al., 2006c).

The present editorial discusses whether socioeconomic status of the individual and of the neighbourhood could be important in the prevalence, treatment and prevention of mental health outcomes.

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INDIVIDUAL SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

Individual socioeconomic status refers to the position on the socioeconomic ladder of persons or families (Van Berkel-Van Schaik & Tax, 1990). In terms of material wealth, individuals with a low socioeconomic status are poorer and individuals with a high socioeconomic status are more affluent. Usually, socioeconomic status is a family-level measure and children and adolescents are rated the same status of poverty/affluence as their parents. However, material wealth alone is not the only indicator of socioeconomic status. Thus, educational status, occupational status, and income were identified as the three main indicators of socioeconomic status in a Western European country (Van Berkel-Van Schaik & Tax, 1990).

Early studies on the association between socioeconomic status and mental health mainly focussed on schizophrenia and psychotic disorders. The direction of the association was inconsistent with associations in the direction of both low socioeconomic status (Eaton, 1974; Turner & Wagenfeld, 1967; Dunham, 1971; Faris & Dunham, 1939; Hare, 1956; Giggs, 1986) or high socioeconomic status (Wiersma et al., 1983; Jones et al., 1994; Mäkikyrö et al., 1997; Dohrenwend et al., 1992). This inconsistency may result in part depending on the moment of measurement of socioeconomic status in the life course of the individual. Studies measuring socioeconomic status before the onset of illness e.g. socioeconomic status of the parents (Mäkikyrö et al., 1997) or social class at birth (Jones et al., 1994) reported an association between high social class and schizophrenia. This contrasts with some studies using current social status in patients (Eaton, 1974; Giggs, 1986; Faris & Dunham, 1939). As a consequence of the disease, subjects drop out of school, cannot find a job, or are fired because of malfunctioning and, therefore, do not achieve social class of origin (Wiersma et al., 1983). Therefore, studies measuring current social class (Eaton, 1974) or using current neighbourhood residence as a proxy for social class (Giggs, 1986; Faris & Dunham, 1939) showed an association between low social class and schizophrenia. However, not all studies are in line with this explanation. For example, one study (Turner & Wagenfeld, 1967) reported an association between schizophrenia and low socioeconomic status of the father, but the association with patients’ socioeconomic status was stronger and higher rates of schizophrenia were reported in an advantaged ethnic group compared to a disadvantaged group (Jews of European background vs Jews of North-African background) (Dohrenwend et al., 1992).

The mechanism of downward social mobility as a consequence of the disease may also play a role in the association between socioeconomic status and other severe mental illness outcomes. For example, lower material standards of living have been associated with common mental disorder (Weich & Lewis, 1998) and disadvantaged ethnic group has been associated with female rate of depression and male rate of antisocial personality and substance abuse (Dohrenwend et al., 1992). In addition, it has been reported that suicide rates are higher in groups of unemployed or permanently sick (Lewis & Sloggett, 1998). A Belgium study on psychiatric admissions showed that individuals with a lower socioeconomic status are underrepresented in psychiatric hospitals, but are more frequently admitted through compulsory admission and stay in wards for more severe patients (Lorant et al., 2003). Thus, it seems that these poorer patients experience more barriers to use mental health services, so that only the more severely ill persons causing social disruption or being a danger for themselves or society end up in (long-term) psychiatric care. This is in line with an Italian case-register study reporting that socioeconomic status was lower in cases that had a once-only contact with psychiatric services than patients who were longer in care (Rossi et al., 2005).

DISENTANGLING INDIVIDUAL FROM NEIGHBOURHOOD SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS: SUBJECTIVE MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOPATHOLOGY

Neighbourhood socioeconomic status is a primary concept of the quality of the neighbourhood social and structural environment. A very low neighbourhood socioeconomic status is synonymous with neighbourhood socioeconomic disadvantage, neighbourhood poverty, and neighbourhood socioeconomic deprivation. It has been operationalised by an array of social indicators that characterize a so-called “underclass” (Wilson, 1987; Kasarda, 1993). This measure is usually composed of objective indicators, such as the proportion of unemployed, proportion receiving welfare, ethnic composition, and mean income. Individual and neighbourhood socioeconomic status are two different constructs and neighbourhood socioeconomic disadvantage can have deleterious effects for all residents of an area, both poor and affluent (Leventhal & Brooks Gunn, 2000; Dalgaard & Tambs, 1997; Sloggett & Joshi, 1994; Diez Roux et al., 2001).

In the 1990s, multilevel regression analyses techniques were developed so that it is now possible to
include measures of individual and neighbourhood socioeconomic status in one regression model in order to disentangle the associations of these 2 constructs with mental health outcomes (Snijders & Bosker, 1999).

Using these techniques, neighbourhood socioeconomic status has been associated with subjective mental health and behavioural problems (Drukker et al., 2003; Aneshensel & Sucoff, 1996; Schneiders et al., 2003; Kalff et al., 2001; Drukker & Van Os, 2003), over and above individual differences in socioeconomic status. One study even showed a longitudinal association between neighbourhood socioeconomic status and changes in behavioural problems and mental health over a two-year period (Xue et al., 2005). However, several other studies did not show associations between neighbourhood socioeconomic status on the one hand and common mental disorder and depression on the other, or reported that area differences could be explained by individual-level socioeconomic status (Reijneveld & Schene, 1998; Weich et al., 2003; Henderson et al., 2005).

MECHANISMS OF THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN NEIGHBOURHOOD SOCIOECONOMIC DISADVANTAGE AND MENTAL HEALTH

Several mechanisms have been suggested explaining why neighbourhood socioeconomic disadvantage can affect the individual (Leventhal & Brooks Gunn, 2000; Jencks & Mayer, 1990). First, resources, such as green facilities, day care, parking places, social activities, employment opportunities and other institutional resources, may be more scarce in poor neighbourhoods, leading to stress because of competition for these resources (Leventhal & Brooks Gunn, 2000; Jencks & Mayer, 1990). Second, in residentially stable poor neighbourhoods in particular, residents may feel trapped and powerless in a dangerous and frightening place (Ross et al., 2000). Furthermore, problem behaviour can also be copied from deviant peers (Leventhal & Brooks Gunn, 2000).

Another mechanism, mediation of social capital, has specific interest. Neighbourhood social capital has been defined as the availability of social resources, social support and social control that neighbourhood residents can count on (Drukker et al., 2006b). This measure has frequently been associated with the mental health of the source population (De Silva et al., 2005; McKenzie et al., 2002; Harpham & McKenzie, 2006). It has been shown that poverty, heterogeneity and mobility undermine neighbourhood networks and social ties, contributing to a breakdown in social capital (Warner & Rountree, 1997). In addition, the social disorganisation theory describes that collective efficacy is lower in residents of disadvantaged neighbourhoods, resulting in reduced efforts of residents to invest in the neighbourhood environment and thus in low levels of social capital (Shaw & McKay, 1969; Sampson & Morenoff, 1997; Markowitz et al., 2001). Unfortunately, it was not possible to unravel the effects of neighbourhood socioeconomic disadvantage and social capital in some recent studies, due to the high correlations between these neighbourhood variables (Drukker et al., 2003). However, perceptions of neighbourhood cohesion and cosiness (aspects of social capital) were identified as mediators in the association between neighbourhood socioeconomic status and subjective mental health based on the SF36 (a quality of life questionnaire, short form of the Medical Outcome Study questionnaire) (Drukker & Van Os, 2003).

TREATED PSYCHIATRIC MORBIDITY

Population measures of quality of life and mental health may yield different results than more objective measures of mental health service use (or: treated psychiatric morbidity). In the psychiatric service use literature, the importance of neighbourhood socioeconomic disadvantage has also been identified (Tansella et al., 1993; Driessen et al., 1998; Tello et al., 2005; Boydell et al., 2001) paving the way for studies disentangling neighbourhood socioeconomic status from individual socioeconomic status. Two types of research are of particular interest.

First, several studies reported that the association between neighbourhood socioeconomic status and the proportion of persons using psychiatric services was reduced to non-significance after controlling for individual level confounders (in various groups of patients: all diagnoses, schizophrenia service use, depression and substance abuse) (Drukker et al., 2006c; 2004a; Silver et al., 2002). However, the latter study hypothesized that this could also be the result of over-control for individual variables (Silver et al., 2002; Sampson et al., 2002), which one author has referred to as the “fallacy of the ecological fallacy” (Schwartz, 1994). Two other studies showed the importance of the neighbourhood in relation to mental health in children. First, neighbourhood poverty was associated with the proportion of children using psychiatric services (Silver et al., 2002a; Silver et al., 2004b). Second, a study on behavioural problems in young children (aged...
help, although severely ill, or their need for care is not
recognised when contacting general practitioners or other
physicians and they may, therefore, not receive the care they
need; (3) selection into treatment: some patients may
receive care that they do not need (over met needs)
(Driessen et al., 1998). These three factors may explain
the findings on the quantity of service consumption
described above. Thus, the (statistically imprecise) asso-
ciation between neighbourhood socioeconomic disadvan-
tage and total quantity of service consumption for any
psychiatric disorder may be a consequence of the severity
of the psychiatric disorder, but could also be the result of
differences in help-seeking behaviour or treatment
selection.

In sum, in adults there is only limited evidence that
neighbourhood socioeconomic status impacts on propor-
tion and quantity of service use. In children, evidence for
such an association is stronger. These associations (in
adults and children) can be the result of illness severity
and prognosis, but also of help-seeking behaviour or
selection into treatment.

CONFLICTING INDIVIDUAL AND
NEIGHBOURHOOD SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

A previous study hypothesized that low neighbour-
hood socioeconomic status has stronger effects on the
mental health of poor residents than affluent residents,
because poor people may be more dependent on local
facilities, but the analyses presented did not show evi-
dence in this direction (the authors suggested a larger
study) (Stafford & Marmot, 2003). Contradictorily, it has
been reported that self-esteem of poor adolescents living
in a poor neighbourhood increased more over a two-year
follow-up period than self-esteem of other poor adoles-
cents (Drukker et al., 2006a). Thus, while the first paper
(Stafford & Marmot, 2003) hypothesized that poor peo-
pole are worse off in poor neighbourhoods, the second
(Drukker et al., 2006a) suggested that they are better off
among peers with similar characteristics, in particular as
regards socioeconomic status.

In addition, it has been argued that every resident, poor
or affluent, benefits from a more equal income distribu-
tion (Kawachi et al., 1999); it may not be the absolute
levels of neighbourhood socioeconomic disadvantage, as
described above, that contribute to health problems (the
absolute income hypothesis), but rather that the causal
factor is income inequality within a geographical unit
(Kawachi et al., 1999). Residents may compare their eco-

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population sizes reported a difference in association in these two types of areas (Franzini et al., 2001, Soobader & LeClere, 1999). Thus, the relative income hypothesis seems applicable only to geographical areas with large population sizes (i.e. large counties or larger) (Wilkinson, 1997; Drukker et al., 2004b; Soobader & LeClere, 1999). If a large area consists of various small areas that are homogeneous in socioeconomic status (high), this large area can have a high level of income inequality. Therefore, associations between neighbourhood socioeconomic disadvantage and mental health in small areas and associations between income inequality and mental health in large areas are likely to co-occur. One can hypothesize that the reference frame of individuals is not located within small areas, but may be determined nationwide, for example by television. Thus, although there is evidence for what has been called the “absolute” income hypothesis at neighbourhood level, the effects of objective socioeconomic deprivation can also be the result of a person’s sense of their status using a reference frame outside the neighbourhood of residence.

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In sum, after controlling for individual socioeconomic status, there is evidence for an association between neighbourhood socioeconomic status and objective as well as subjective mental health in adults. Evidence for such an association in young children is even stronger.

Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that several studies consistently reported associations, it may be that reported associations between neighbourhood socioeconomic status and objective as well as subjective mental health are the result of social selection; in epidemiological studies, causality can never be proven. Most researchers disentangling neighbourhood socioeconomic status from individual-level socioeconomic status are interested in true contextual effects, rather than compositional effects (social selection). Contextual effects have been defined as true neighbourhood effects, while compositional effects are based on the individual characteristics of the neighbourhood residents (Pickett & Pearl, 2001; Cullen & Whiteford, 2001). However, compositional effects and contextual effects are interrelated and not mutually exclusive (Subramanian et al., 2003). People usually evaluate the neighbourhood before buying or renting a house. Thus, theoretically, individuals with similar preferences and characteristics will concentrate in particular neighbourhoods (social selection), and even after controlling for known individual characteristics, neighbourhood-level associations may still be (partly) compositional. This also implies that there is a possibility that residual confounding leads to spurious results at the neighbourhood level, because of “omitted variable bias” (Leventhal & Brooks Gunn, 2000). To put it more simply, families moving into or not moving out of neighbourhoods may differ from their peers in other things than the confounders (e.g. in motivation, literacy etc.). This makes it even more difficult to discriminate between true contextual effects and true compositional effects. However, even if the association between neighbourhood socioeconomic status and mental health (service use) is fully explained by individual characteristics, the fact remains that psychiatric patients mainly live in low socioeconomic status neighbourhoods. Furthermore, when disentangling individual from neighbourhood socioeconomic status, this also brings along the risk of over-control for individual-level variables, resulting in underestimations of neighbourhood effects (Sampson et al., 2002). Thus, even if associations with neighbourhood factors are small, social workers and mental health professionals may focus on disadvantaged neighbourhoods. For example, availability of psychiatric facilities in poor neighbourhoods may be increased, thus raising the level of access to services. For example, a multidisciplinary team of mental health professionals opened an office in a community centre in a disadvantaged neighbourhood in a medium-sized city in the Netherlands (project “Pecunia”, Maastricht). This enables people with mental health problems and their healthy neighbours alike in directly contacting staff members. Therefore, access to care is facilitated. Patients are not only helped with their psychiatric problems, but other problems, such as accommodation and finances, are also addressed, so that patients have one contact person taking care of all their problems.

Because social capital has been identified as a likely mechanism why neighbourhood socioeconomic disadvantage is associated contextually with mental health, future research on neighbourhood socioeconomic status should include data on both individual socioeconomic status and data on neighbourhood social capital.

As stated above, it may not be absolute levels of neighbourhood socioeconomic status that are responsible for the association between neighbourhood socioeconomic disadvantage and mental health, but rather relative disadvantage compared to adjacent areas or to a nationwide frame of reference. These factors will need to be taken into account in future work.


