Hidden talents in harsh environments

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Little is known about the strengths people develop in harsh environments. If we learn more about these strengths, we will be able to leverage them in education, the workplace, and interventions.

Growing up under conditions of adversity can undermine children’s development and learning. Scientific research has illuminated these detrimental effects, generating knowledge that has, in turn, informed policies and interventions designed to prevent and repair deficits.

However, we know very little about the adaptive mental skills and abilities that people develop in harsh environments. Accordingly, we lack an empirical basis for designing policies and interventions that leverage these “hidden talents.”

This lacuna provides a critical opportunity and agenda for the future: We need to identify the mental skills and abilities that are enhanced by exposure to stress. These skills could be used as building blocks for success, while boosting confidence and motivation in youth and adults suffering from stigma and hardship.

Identifying these skills and abilities could lead to the development of an assessment battery that captures the “hidden talents” of stress-adapted individuals. Such an assessment battery, which would be the first of its kind, could then be used to assist these individuals through education, jobs, and interventions. But first, we need solid scientific evidence.

Through our current research, we are laying down the foundations for a “hidden talents” approach. We are learning more about untapped potential of stress-adapted individuals based on social and cognitive studies of humans, other primates, birds, and rodents. Four questions can help to guide research on hidden talents:

1. What challenges do people face in a given environment?
2. What mental skills and abilities do they develop for solving such challenges?
3. What instruments best measure these skills and abilities?
4. How might we leverage these skills and abilities?

To illustrate: If perceptions of social rank are highly salient to youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds, then these individuals may be better able to reason about social dominance than about abstractions (e.g., symbols, numbers). These enhanced abilities may be leveraged in teaching and intervention efforts.

Young people can be taught mental operations (e.g., transitive inference, syllogisms) in the context of social-dominance problems, which they may find more relevant, motivating, and engaging than other types of problems. Once they have mastered these operations in this “more applied” context, they may learn to generalize them to other contexts. This, in turn, can help to reduce educational gaps.
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It is useful to complement experimental research with structured interviews with young people living in high-stress environments and with those who work with them (e.g., educators and social workers). These interviews, which can provide valuable information about the respondents’ lives and daily experiences, should be conducted by qualitative experts. Such interviews would help to generate hypotheses that might inspire experimental research.

In the coming years, my collaborator Bruce Ellis and I intend to examine how learning environments can be optimized for stress-adapted youth. Specifically, we would like to explore variations in curricular content (e.g. abstract vs. social), information delivery (e.g. static books vs. dynamic touch screens), and instructional practices (e.g. sitting vs. moving around in the classroom). We plan to develop this work in collaboration with the Research Network on Adaptations to Childhood Stress.

The “hidden talents” approach has broad social implications: The better we understand stress-adapted minds, bodies, and brains—including their strengths—the more effectively we will be able to tailor education, jobs, and interventions to suit the needs and potentials of the affected individuals.

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