The Social Transformation of Environments and the Promotion of Resilience in Children

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The risk and protective factors that affect children's development are embedded within multiple levels of the social environment (e.g., setting, community, societal). Unless fundamental changes occur at these varied environmental levels, our interventions to promote resilience in children seem destined to fall short. Specifically, deeply embedded features of setting, community, and societal environments can influence critical risk and protective processes, nullify person-focused, "inoculation" programs, make it difficult to sustain and disseminate promising intervention approaches, and prevent the large-scale mobilization of resources that are necessary for making a substantial difference. It is proposed that successful social transformation requires simultaneous engagement of four key, interrelated processes: capacity building, group empowerment, relational community-building, and culture-challenge. These processes and related intervention approaches at setting, community, and societal levels are identified as potential targets for effective social action. Two intervention approaches, whole school reform and comprehensive neighborhood revitalization, are selected for review in more detail. Directions for future social transformation efforts to promote resilience in children are proposed.

Unless fundamental changes occur in the critical social environments which directly and indirectly affect children's lives, our efforts to promote resilience in children are destined to fall short (e.g., Levine, 1998; Maton, Schellenbach, Leadbeater, & Solarz, 2004). There are four reasons why it is critical to transform multiple levels of the social environment, including the setting (e.g., a local school), community (e.g., school system), and societal (e.g., national educational policy) levels. First, consistent with an ecological perspective, characteristics of social environments are viewed as critical aspects of the risk and protective processes linked to resilience. Deeply troubled schools, violent neighborhoods, and family poverty, for instance, are key proximal environmental risk factors linked to negative youth outcomes; natural support systems, opportunities for school engagement, and community-based programs, in turn, represent some of the key proximal environmental protective factors linked to positive youth outcomes and resilience (e.g., Black & Krishnakumar, 1998; Booth & Crouter, 2001; Garbarino, 1995; Sampson, 2002; Schellenbach & Trickett, 1998; Wandersman & Nation, 1998). Furthermore, each of these proximal social environments is directly influenced by the larger community social systems in which they are embedded (e.g., school, human service, and political systems). Each of these, in turn, is embedded in still larger societal, economic, political, and cultural environments (e.g., Caughy, O'Campo, & Brodsky, 1999; Kelly, 2000; Pilisuk, McAllister, & Rothman, 1996; Sarason, 1996; Thompson & Kline, 1990).

Influencing and ultimately transforming these multiple levels of the environment are thus essential, especially for children confronted with multiple, major risk factors. Transforming environments enhances resilience in part by reducing the number of environmental adversities impacting the child, thereby increasing the odds of a child's resilience in dealing with a smaller number of remaining adversities. The transformation of social environments also significantly increases available protective processes in the family, neighborhood, school, community, and the larger society (Maton et al., 2004).

A second reason for focusing on the transformation of environments is that person-centered intervention programs developed to promote resilience and wellness are often limited in their impact due to the powerful, countervailing nature of the local social environments in which daily life and social problems are embedded (cf. Levine, 1998). For instance, a school-based intervention program that enhances the competencies of inner-city youth may not be sufficient to prevent, or reverse, negative trajectories sustained through the neighborhood, family, and peer group environments. In public health terms, the interventions may not be sufficiently potent to "inoculate" youth against the noxious influence of powerful environmental forces.

Third, when promising programs are developed, fundamental features of social environments often do not allow sustained program operation at the initial host site, or effective dissemination and adoption in new host settings or communities (e.g., Elias, 1997). At the initial development site, demonstration projects may disband or lose effectiveness when demonstration funding ends, program champions move on, and changing priorities result in reductions in resources. In new host settings or communities, the promising conditions present in the initial program development may not be present, including knowledgeable and influential program advocates, active staff collaboration in program development, and the resources necessary for full, high-quality implementation.

Finally, our attempts to influence large numbers of children, and especially those at highest risk, are fundamentally limited due to a lack of social, economic, and political resources. Large-scale, ongoing mobilization across governmental, voluntary, and business sectors is necessary to harness sufficient financial and social resources to develop, disseminate and "bring to scale" effective approaches to promote wellness and resilience. Such a large-scale mobilization is ultimately dependent on major changes at the societal level—that is, in our national priorities, norms, and values.

In summary, deeply embedded features of setting, community, and societal environments influence critical risk and protective processes, can nullify person-focused "inoculation" programs, make it difficult to sustain and disseminate promising intervention approaches, and prevent the large-scale mobilization of resources necessary for making a substantial difference. In order to enhance the resilience of children and families, we need to focus on and transform social environments.

If it is imperative to influence and ultimately transform complex social environments, how should we proceed to do so? Four foundational processes for social transformation appear especially important: capacity-building, group empowerment, relational community-building, and culture challenge (Maton, 2000). These processes are interrelated and interdependent. Indeed, given the difficulty of transforming social environments, any one of these processes, if it does not engage the others, may not bring about enduring change. Rather, as indicated in Figure 8-1, it is the emergent, mutual influences between and among these processes which constitute the heart of social transformation. As depicted in the figure, these influences span levels and domains of the social environment. Below, these transformation processes are described. Then, two intervention approaches, one at the setting level (whole school reform) and one at the neighborhood level (comprehensive neighborhood revitalization) are detailed, and in each case the interrelationships among the four transformational processes depicted.
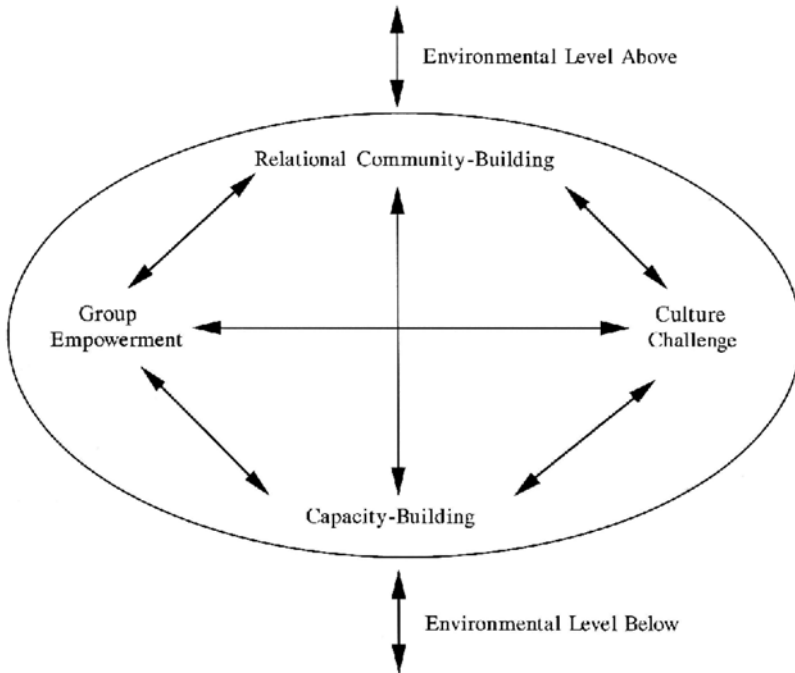
Figure 8-1   Model of social transformation process.

The chapter concludes with suggestions for future social transformation efforts to promote resilience in children.

TRANSFORMING SOCIAL ENVIRONMENTS

The four processes that guide social transformation—capacity building, group empowerment, relational community-building, and culture challenge—are shown in Table 8-1. Each focuses primarily on a particular facet of the social environment—respectively, the instrumental (e.g., tasks, activities), structural (e.g., power relationships), relational (e.g., interpersonal and intergroup relationships), and cultural (e.g., norms and values) facets. A variety of intervention approaches at setting, community, and societal levels exist related to each process.

Capacity Building

Capacity building emphasizes a participatory, grass-roots, strengths-based approach to change (e.g., Briggs, 2002; French & Bell, 1999).

Table 8-1 Four Transformational Processes[1]

	Transformational Processes			
	Capacity Building	Group Empowerment	Relational Community-Building	Culture-Challenge
Facet of Environment Targeted	Instrumental	Structural	Interpersonal	Cultural
Focus	Core methods Resources Problem-solving capability Leadership	Opportunity structure Distribution of resources and power	Connectedness Inclusiveness Shared mission Support Belonging	Belief systems Values Social norms Traditions Practices
Sample Intervention Approach: Setting Level	Participatory organizational development	Empowering setting development	School restructuring	Alternative norms development
Community Level	Community-building	Community organizing	Inter-group relationship building	Social activism
Societal Level	Strengths-based social policy	Distributive public policies	Shared national mission development	Social movements

[1]Modified from Maton (2000).

It assumes that the mobilization of setting and community resources from within is the essential foundation for effective and enduring change. Capacity building represents an alternative to the external, top-down, expert-dominated approaches to solving problems with which there has been increasing disillusionment over the years.

Substantively, capacity building focuses on the instrumental facet of the social environment, including the tasks and activities to be performed. Specifically, it attempts to enhance the ability of a setting, community or society to accomplish its core mission. This may involve fundamental changes which enhance core methods (e.g., type of pedagogical approach in education), resources, problem-solving capability, or leadership.

At the setting level, a capacity-building approach with transformational potential necessarily involves the active participation of major constituents in analyzing problems and devising solutions—this might be termed participatory organizational development. In the realm of

education, for example, whole school transformation through a capacity-building process marks the work of well-known school reformers such as Comer (Comer, Haynes, Joyner, & Ben-Avie, 1996) and Levin (Finnan & Levin, 2000). Enhanced school engagement is a major protective factor for children which can result from school transformation initiatives.

At the community level, attention to community building has greatly expanded in recent years (cf. Ferguson & Stoutland, 1999). A range of community-building techniques can be employed to increase community capacity, including coalition building, community-based economic development, and comprehensive neighborhood revitalization (e.g., Perkins, Crim, Silberman, & Brown, 2004). Enhanced community-based job opportunities, safer neighborhoods, and an enhanced array of family supports are examples of resilience-promoting factors that can stem from such efforts.

At the societal level, strengths-based social policies have a critical role to play in the capacity-building process (cf. Maton et al., 2004). These policies view citizens as valuable assets and self-determining agents; this contrasts with a deficits-based approach which often views citizens as in need of remediation, punishment, control, or guidance provided by external experts. Strengths-based approaches, for example, direct resources to citizen and community groups via programs which support child, family, school, and community development, thus promoting resilience in children.

Group Empowerment

Group empowerment as a transformational process seeks to enhance the access of marginalized and oppressed families and communities to resiliency-related economic, psychological, and political resources. Economic resources are strongly linked to health, child development, and a vibrant community (e.g., McLoyd, 1998; Taylor, Repetti, & Seeman, 1997; Wilson, 1987). Psychological resources, such as self-esteem and self-efficacy, are also linked to a diversity of resiliency outcomes (cf. Dalton, Elias, & Wandersman, 2001). Political power enables marginalized groups to garner both economic and psychological resources.

Group empowerment focuses on the structural facet of the social environment, including power relationships, control over resources, and relative status. As such, change aims to enhance the opportunity structures (e.g., educational and occupational opportunity) for marginalized groups, and reduce inequalities in the distribution of resources and

power at setting, community, and societal levels (Fisher et al., 1996; Rappaport, 1981).

At the setting level, one approach to group empowerment is the development and strengthening of local empowering community settings, such as social action groups, faith communities, self-help organizations, and voluntary associations. Consultation and coalition building efforts can contribute to the ability of such groups to empower their members (cf. Dalton et al., 2001).

At the community level, a key empowerment strategy is community organizing, which strives to influence access to decision making, local policies, and resources. Grass-roots citizen organizing and mobilization of community-based organizations represent two primary community organizing approaches (e.g., Pilisuk et al., 1996), potentially enhancing resilience in children through reducing economic, social, and political adversity affecting families and communities.

At the societal level, distributive public policies contribute to group empowerment through enhancing the resources and opportunity structures available to low-income families, thus reducing adversities and mobilizing protective processes (cf. Briggs, 2002; Lotz, 1998; Saegert, Thompson, & Warren, 2001). Partnerships with allied disciplines, advocacy organizations, and citizen groups enhance our capacity as social scientists to generate policy-relevant research and contribute to policy advocacy in this arena (Maton, 2000).

Relational Community Building

Relational community building represents a third key transformational process. Within local settings (e.g., school, church, neighborhood), within communities, and in the larger society, it speaks both to a vital process, bringing people and groups together, and to critical resilience resources for children and families, including connectedness, support, and meaning.

Relational community building addresses the interpersonal facet of the environment. Thus, it encompasses the quality and nature of personal and intergroup relationships. Environments characterized by high levels of connectedness, inclusiveness, shared mission, support and belonging contribute to positive socio-emotional and behavioral outcomes (e.g., Henderson & Milstein, 1996; Moos, 1996). Relatedly, social analysts posit that a basic cause of many social problems, and a contributing factor to their apparent intractability, is a weakening in the overall social-relational fabric—i.e., the erosion of community (e.g., Putnam, 1996).

At the setting level, various approaches are used to enhance relational community. For example, within school settings, two promising approaches are development of school-wide pro-social norms (e.g., Solomon, Battistich, Watson, Schaps, & Lewis, 1996) and secondary school restructuring (e.g., Felner & Adan, 1988). As key protective processes, enhanced support and community in school and related settings directly contribute to resilience for at-risk children.

At the community level, varied approaches to enhancing relationships in communities are also being undertaken. These include intergroup relationship building through intergroup action coalitions, multicultural training and recruitment initiatives, and community dialogue techniques (e.g., Bond, 1999; Rossing & Glowacki-Dudka, 2001).

At the societal level, there is a critical need for leaders who are capable of shaping a sense of shared purpose and mission. Also essential are concrete practices and policies which are inclusive, bringing together rather than polarizing subgroups within a society. Enhanced inclusion and connectedness at the community and societal levels can reduce discriminatory and related adversities for marginalized populations, and directly enhance resource mobilization for resilience-related efforts.

Culture Challenge

Challenging and transforming extant cultural norms, beliefs and values is the fourth, critical social transformational process. Extant peer norms may curtail resilience for youth either through enhancing risk processes (e.g., norms which support substance use, aggression, teen pregnancy) or impeding protective processes (e.g., norms which discourage school engagement and academic success) (cf. Kupersmidt, Coie, & Howell, 2004). Cultural beliefs which devalue targeted, marginalized groups (e.g., ethnic minorities) similarly impede development and resilience (Weinstein, 2002). Finally, mainstream cultural values linked to self-absorption and individual materialism severely limit the mobilization of the economic and social resources sorely needed to truly make a difference for those children most in need.

Culture challenge addresses the cultural facet of the social environment, encompassing belief systems, values, norms, traditions, and practices. Settings, peer groups, ethnic or population groups, communities, and societies all have unique and vibrant cultures with the potential to promote, or curtail, resilience in children (Martin, 1992; Sarason, 1971).

At the setting level, maladaptive peer norms which directly influence youth behavior can be targeted in various ways. For example, school-based interventions can promote alternate peer norms (e.g.,

anti-bullying; Olweus, 1994). Also at the setting level, mainstream cultural norms which support problematic adult priorities can be targeted. One strategy is the creation and strengthening of local settings that promote alternative cultural values (e.g., progressive social action or political groups; some self-help, spiritual, or religious organizations).

At the community level, problematic peer norms guiding youth behavior can be addressed via community-wide promotion programs that include media and community-outreach components (e.g., Jason, 1998). Concerning problematic mainstream cultural values, social activism through grass-roots campaigns and coalition-development represent viable strategies at the community level (Saegert et al., 2001).

At the societal level, federal policies can transform extant norms through the creation of new behavioral options or constraints (e.g., non-smoking areas; seat-belt use). Equally important, problematic cultural norms can be effectively challenged by emergent social movements (e.g., women's and civil rights movements, a needed children's movement), in part inspired by countervailing social science ideas and writings and support for social movement organizations (cf. Etzioni, 1993; Ryan, 1971; Wilson, 1987).

SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT TRANSFORMATION INTERVENTIONS: TWO EXAMPLES

As delineated above, there are many different intervention approaches that have potential to transform important social environments and promote resilience. Below, two of these approaches are examined in more detail. The first, at the setting level, focuses on transforming schools. This is an area where current empirical evidence indicates promising outcomes. The second, at the community level, aims to revitalize impoverished urban neighborhoods. Perhaps not surprisingly, efforts in this domain have a way to go to achieve their transformational goals. Taken together, these two examples illustrate both the potential and the challenges of environmental transformation in two critical domains that affect the well-being and resilience of children and families.

Whole School Reform

In the 1990s, a number of comprehensive approaches to reform schools with high proportions of at-risk students emerged. Often termed "whole school reforms," these efforts aim to transform the school

environment in order to enhance student engagement and academic success—key protective processes for at-risk children. Well-known efforts supported by empirical findings include the School Development Program, aiming to transform relationships among educators, students, and parents (Comer et al., 1996); the Child Development program, targeting the creation of a caring school climate (Solomon et al., 1996); the School Transitional Environmental Project, focusing on a transformation of the structure of 9th grade (Felner & Adan, 1988); and Success for All, aiming to transform core classroom pedagogy (Slavin & Madden, 2001).

An additional whole school reform program, Levin's Accelerated Schools Project (ASP), represents a good example of whole school reform with an ambitious social environment transformation agenda. ASP incorporates an in-depth, empowerment-oriented process of change in an attempt to turn around low-achieving elementary and middle schools, many in urban areas. As Finnan and Levin (2000) describe it:

> "The project introduces a process by which the school takes over its own destiny and that of its students. This process includes fundamental explorations of all dimensions of the school, the construction of a living vision and goals, a setting of priorities, a governance system in which all participate, and a systematic approach to action research and problem solving" (pp. 93–94).

ASP, over time, comprehensively targets instrumental, structural, relational, and cultural facets of the school environment. It does so through the four transformational processes of capacity building, group empowerment, relational community building, and culture challenge. For example, the ASP facilitators explicitly work to challenge and transform the culture of low expectations in the school. The assumption is that all students can be fully incorporated, and will respond positively to an enriched learning environment—the type reserved for students identified as gifted and talented (Finnan & Levin, 2000). Such a shift in belief systems helps open the door to new core methods (i.e., a student-centered, action-learning teaching approach). In addition, the opportunity structure allows empowered teachers and parents to contribute productively to educational planning. Furthermore, enhancing capacity-building processes appears to contribute to greater relational community (i.e., a sense of connectedness and shared purpose). In synergistic fashion, the emerging capacity building, group empowerment, relational community, and culture-challenging processes appear to mutually reinforce and contribute to each other.

ASP has been introduced into more than 1,000 elementary and middle schools. Evaluations to date, albeit preliminary, have been positive

(e.g., Bloom, Ham, Melton, & O'Brien, 2001). Longitudinal studies of ASP, and the other whole school reform efforts noted above, are needed. There is no reason to believe that systematic attempts to transform in-dividual inner-city schools—much less entire school systems—will be easy. Nonetheless, whole-school reform, with its potential to enhance the critical protective factors of school engagement and school success, exemplifies the resilience-enhancing potential of a focus on transform-ing local settings.

Comprehensive Neighborhood Revitalization Efforts

At the community level, comprehensive neighborhood revitaliza-tion efforts aim to transform poor, urban neighborhoods. A primary goal is to bring about changes in the community environment through re-forming multiple community systems, including those in the economic, health, housing, family support, and education arenas. Such efforts would enhance resilience in children by decreasing risk factors and enhancing protective processes. These large-scale, privately-publicly funded initiatives generally take place over extended periods of time—i.e., 5–10 years (Connell & Kubisch, 2001; Kubisch et al., 2002).

A key element of these initiatives is a commitment to long-term community capacity building. The capacity-building emphasis is a di-rect response to the unsuccessful history of previous top-down, exter-nally driven approaches. The participatory, capacity-building process aims to develop community leadership, personal networks, and social capital. Representatives from multiple citizen groups and multiple sec-tors take part.

The community capacity-building process is meant to result in more effective, better-functioning community institutions (schools, human services, health agencies, etc.). In addition to these changes in the instrumental domain, changes in the structural, relational, and cul-tural domains are expected as well. In the structural domain, economic empowerment is the focus, based in part on living-wage job and busi-ness creation. Relational community-building, in turn, is expected to result in part from citizens working together to enhance the community and in part from activities such as local newspaper development, com-munity celebrations, and block watches. Finally, culture challenge is reflected in the strengths-based view of the positive potential of inner-city residents and institutions.

A representative example is the Sandtown-Winchester Neighbor-hood Transformation Initiative (Brown, Butler, & Hamilton, 2001). Sandtown-Winchester is a West Baltimore neighborhood of 10,000 residents. It is characterized by high rates of housing abandonment,

unemployment, substance abuse, and violent crime. In 1990, the mayor of Baltimore appointed a task force to design a "neighborhood-driven" planning process that could transform the neighborhood. A local foundation made a long-term commitment of resources and staff to the initiative. Town meetings were held, resident-led planning groups created, and a vision for change developed in multiple substantive areas (e.g., economic development, family support, health, education). A new community-based organization was formed to coordinate partnerships across private and public sectors, including citizen and community groups.

From 1991 to 1999, over 20 new projects across community sectors were initiated. These include Healthy Start (1991, to reduce low birth weight), Family Assistance Network (1993), Home Instructional Program for Preschool Youngsters (1994), Compact Schools Summer Institutes (1995), and direct instruction curriculum in area elementary schools (1997).

Evaluations of the Sandtown-Winchester and other comprehensive neighborhood initiatives have primarily focused on the overall capacity-building process (cf. Brown et al., 2001; Kubisch et al., 2002). Thus, they do not directly reveal the extent to which specific protective factors have enhanced resilience in children and families. However, the studies do reveal a number of valuable contributions, including bringing new resources (e.g., funding, staff) into poor neighborhoods, developing new capacities and relationships, physical improvements, enhancing the quality and quantity of social services, and increased economic activity.

These positive effects notwithstanding, it is clear that this generation of comprehensive neighborhood initiatives did not lead to the complete transformation of neighborhoods, as had been hoped (e.g., Kubisch et al., 2002). Limitations in outcome are due to multiple factors, including difficulties in implementation and the economic, social, and political forces and policies external to inner-city neighborhoods that constrain the potential for change. Analysts propose that future efforts involve more intensive and aggressive efforts focused in part within poor neighborhoods, and efforts extending beyond the neighborhood to the external, surrounding region and to national policies (Kubisch et al., 2002).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

A variety of intervention approaches will be necessary to influence, and ultimately transform, the facets of the social environment that are critical for child development and the promotion of resilience

in children. These approaches must include organizational restructuring, neighborhood and community development, and social policy initiatives. The transformational processes which need to be mobilized include capacity building, group empowerment, relational community building, and culture challenge. As the efforts reviewed in this chapter reveal, much work remains, and many challenges will need to be overcome, to successfully alter environments in ways that truly make a difference in the lives of children who are most at risk.

One key question for our field that arises in environment transformation efforts is whether the research and intervention foundation for such work resides in disciplines external to psychology. After all, psychology's area of expertise traditionally has resided at the level of persons, not environments. Should research and intervention in organizational restructuring be left to organizational development fields, neighborhood revitalization efforts to community development fields, and social policy initiatives to fields with policy expertise?

No one discipline has the knowledge base to understand the various facets and levels of the social environments within which children, families, and our interventions are embedded. Relevant subfields of anthropology, political science, psychology, sociology, urban studies, and others, have important theoretical and methodological knowledge to offer. Indeed, in most cases, research foundational to the transformation of environments will necessarily be multidisciplinary in nature. Thus, at the level of both individual investigators and research disciplines, numerous bridges will need to be built, spanning psychology and other fields (Maton, 2000).

Similarly, in most cases intervention efforts will prove maximally successful and sustainable if they draw upon the expertise and participation of diverse practitioner fields. Early childhood education, community development, government, public education, public health, social work, and youth development are but a sampling of relevant fields. Collaborative partnerships with multiple practitioners and stakeholders will enhance our potential to bring about substantive change across environmental levels. Much knowledge about the challenges and benefits of developing such coalitions has emerged in the past decade (e.g., Briggs, 2002; Wolff, 2001).

The distinctive contributions of psychology to larger, comprehensive efforts to transform environments are critical. We bring to bear expertise on established child-centered, family-centered, and, increasingly, community-centered intervention programs that can be integrated into, or aligned with, larger reform efforts. In addition, we possess invaluable, experience-based knowledge about the important proximal environments within which children and families are embedded.

Although we cannot do it alone, we are important partners in comprehensive, multi-level efforts to promote resilience in children.

Given the difficulty in bringing about change in complex environments and the extensive resources needed in comprehensive, multi-level change efforts, a second major question involves the wisdom of placing too much emphasis on social transformation approaches, in contrast to more narrowly focused efforts. For example, would the wellness and resilience of the children in inner-city neighborhoods addressed by the neighborhood revitalization efforts of the 1990s have been better served by investing those resources in high quality, child- and family-centered promotion efforts? More generally, should incremental change, beginning with person-centered and single-setting programs, serve as the primary strategy, with the expectation that when successful they are our best hope for mobilizing resources for further work in the field?

Research is needed to shed insight on the relative contribution of person-centered versus comprehensive, multi-level change efforts. Important outcomes to examine include enhanced resilience in the population of children at large, and levels of change in the environments that affect children's lives. In part, this research needs to focus on the relative sustainability over time of successful person-centered and environment-centered programs, their successful replication in other settings, and their relative potential to mobilize the levels of human and economic resources necessary to promote resilience in those children most at risk.

Influencing and transforming social environments is a most challenging and daunting endeavor. Although containing their own challenges, person-centered interventions are more consistent with extant theory, training, and practice in psychology and related human services fields. Nonetheless, consistent with the social ecological theme of this volume, our efforts to promote resilience in children, including those most at risk, depends substantially on our capacity to devote greater effort and to make sustained progress in the environmental transformation area. The current chapter contributes to that end by identifying multiple targets for such social transformation efforts, and indicating how they have, and can be, effectively addressed.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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