

... But without good health “all else is for naught”

Jianghong Li

Numerous studies show that poor health is closely linked to social, economic, and psychological factors. The poorer people are, the more frequently they become seriously ill, and the more limited is their access to health care. In 2005, the World Health Organization (WHO) set up a “Commission on Social Determinants of Health” to help countries throughout the world plan and implement measures to address this inequality.

52

The story, however, is even more complicated. The problem works both ways – health factors can influence people’s social and economic situations as well as the reverse. It is high time for us social scientists to take this more strongly into account in our research. The state of our health in the womb, in the period immediately after birth, and up to the age of five, lays the foundation for how we later learn, behave and live. There are robust studies that show that the physical and mental well-being of children has a direct impact on their later success in school, at university, and in their working life. Children with health problems perform more poorly at school and have lower social competence.

Adults with health problems struggle to find a job at all, and a “good job” can seem miles out of reach. If they do manage to find something, frequent absence

due to illness often hampers their advancement. Poor mental health, such as persistent stress, anxiety, depression, can lead to lack of motivation, lower self-esteem and reduced cognitive function. Under these circumstances, they are not up to the job, and can find it difficult to maintain steady employment. In one of our most recent studies, we were able to show that children from socially deprived families are more likely to have psychological problems than their more affluent peers. This creates a wick-ed cycle of poorer performance at school with its potential consequences following them throughout their whole career. This then leads to a generational impact whereby, social inequalities can be passed on and exacerbated.

Other studies also point out that a person’s state of health can influence their political participation. People who report that they have poorer health and

“Health factors, too,
can influence a person’s
social and economic
situation.”

CHALLENGES

lower cognitive functions, are less likely to exercise their right to vote. The impact is shown to be as great as the effect of people's level of education on voting turnout. What is more, people in poorer health have a lower life expectancy, dying younger than their healthier and wealthier fellow citizens, and limiting the time and resources they can devote to politics to make their voices heard. Political inequality and injustice are reinforced and the cycle continues.

In future, social research should pay greater attention to the fact that health, especially mental well-being, has a major influence on social, economic, and political participation. We need more studies to help us better understand the exact mechanisms

of this correlation. This can succeed only if we combine approaches from social science, health science, and medical research.

Jianghong Li is a senior researcher in the President's Research Group.

Student protests

Berlin's university students unleashed a storm of protest against the foundation of the Berlin Social Science Center. "The center is organized as a limited liability company. This means education and research are now openly incorporated in the valorization of capital." This is how a leaflet jointly produced by the "red cells" at Freie Universität Berlin and a "WZB action committee" at Technische Universität Berlin criticized the institute's legal form – in the jargon of the times. But it wasn't just the form but also the anticipated contents that were a thorn in the side of the 1968 student movement. Activists feared the WZB would produce "recipes for capitalist crisis management" rather than free science.

Poster calling on students to join a teach-in against the establishment of a WZB Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies, April 1970. University archive of Technische Universität Berlin, 705, poster collection, no. 389.

