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## Special Issue Article

# Vulnerability and resiliency implications of *human capital* and linked *inequality presence denial perspectives*: Acknowledging Zigler's contributions to child well-being

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## Abstract

Edward Zigler's groundbreaking research on child development resulted in the historic Head Start program. It is useful to examine the theoretical implications of his work by applying a human development theoretical perspective. Phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST) is a strengths-based theoretical framework that engages the variability of resource access and coping strategies that promote positive identity development for diverse children. While skill acquisition is a key focus of human capital theory's engagement of early childhood needs, this article highlights the on-going status of human vulnerability that undergirds identity development over the life course. The authors note that "inequality presence denial" combines with high-risk contexts, framed by geography and psychohistoric moments (e.g., The Great Recession, COVID-19), to alter diverse children's developmental pathways. The acknowledgement of "morbid risk" motivates the urgency for research that builds upon Zigler's innovations and privileges human development imperatives. The case study explores these concepts by examining the challenges and assets available to mothers in a low-income community. The article's closing notes developments in the field of economics that ameliorate human capital theory's conceptual limitations, underscoring human development's theoretical strength in motivating research and policies that are maximally responsive to children's positive identity development.

**Keywords:** human development, identity, inequality, vulnerability

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## Introduction

Discourse and discussions of human capital and childhood status in America – particularly when focused on the country's diverse population and whether acknowledged or not – dictate and frame the specific nature and deployment of tax-based resources. The linkages made between human capital and childhood status character is strategically and primarily associated with children's adulthood role as economic actors. Analyses of human capital that include impacts on development generally ignore perspectives about shared human vulnerability. The latter is especially salient given socially constructed variations in access to opportunity (i.e., cumulative risk exposure and stable statuses of multilevel trauma). As a 2020 contemporary graphic of systemic and stable risk and challenges to basic survival as injustices targeting Black and Brown bodies, America's contemporary Black Lives Matter (BLM) social movement sets an agenda. As emphasized and observed in the United States and abroad, the amelioration of injustices as advanced by a broad and diverse array of ethnic and racial demonstrators is timely.

Organically founded as a social movement and functioning as not only a second Civil Rights schema while, simultaneously, forcefully communicating a Human Rights agenda, BLM's mobilization responds to diverse injustices. Most noticeable are ongoing *police-incited murders of citizens-of-color made worse during a global pandemic*, thus, precipitating an acknowledgement of intersectionality effects. The effect is exacerbating. It makes clear that the context of human development for America's Brown and Black citizens is fragile, at best, but normatively high risk when factoring in race, ethnicity, and class (Spencer et al., 2019). Supporters of recent demonstrations against social injustices have spanned the entire country. The May 25, 2020 police killing of African American father and citizen, George Floyd, generated huge protests, yet the circumstance surrounding his demise was not a singular event. Most instructive is that the timing of the anti-racism, multiethnic, and multiracial response occurred amid the global COVID-19 pandemic. The atrocity provides insights about the normative and differential risk status encountered by the Unites States' ethnically, racially, and economically diverse population, which – observed over 400 years – has continued into the twenty-first century, from before the country's founding, enduring throughout slavery, reconstruction and Jim Crow, continuing throughout the Civil Rights Era and persisting into the current era. The under-acknowledged continuation of America's untoward reactive coping processes when it comes to the nation's racial, socioeconomic, and ethnic heterogeneity are customarily met with assumptions, policies

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and practices that communicate *inequality presence denial* in public and private spaces. Specifically – and lacking any appearance of dissonance given the promises of a democracy and meanings of liberty – for those assumed as "others," untoward events happen across the life course. As systemic processes, they occur consistently from the "cradle to the coffin" for people living in poverty and citizens of color. Untoward experiences receive infrequent attention and ignored – albeit promises of equal protection and resource access as guarantees under the law.

Given its direct address to conditions of inequality and implications for children, Edward Zigler's conceptualization and "nurturing" of the 55-year-old Head Start program is important. Having served over 25 million poor children and their families, the programming appreciates the impact of lack of access to supportive resources on short- and long-term opportunity. Accordingly, our conceptual strategy forgoes the too frequently adopted and *limiting human capital analytic strategy* preferred in particular social science disciplines (i.e., frequently applied in economics, sociology, psychology). Alternatively, we posit a context-sensitive, interdisciplinary human development framing which acknowledges *vulnerability status variation* and *necessary inputs for resiliency promotion* vis-à-vis access to resources and significant risk exposure differences. Importantly, the conceptual strategy pursued and integrated aligns with the priorities of Head Start founder, Zigler (2010).

As a foundational resource of support, Head Start prioritized the essential role of parental engagement in the success of early childhood development. In 1970, five years after the start of the program, parental involvement became a requirement. Head Start's provision of support to both children and parents in low-income communities marked an innovative approach that embraced the powerful dynamic of the parent–child bond as a cornerstone for fostering healthy child development. As such – in addition to the conceptual shortcomings of scholarly traditions – this article considers the experiences as both challenges and available assets of mothers who raise their children in low-income communities. Specifically, mothers in low-income communities with access to few resources must negotiate neighborhood environments that can pose particular challenges to mothering young children safely, especially when those environments – representing under-acknowledged systemic policy relevant biases – are made worse by *patterned underinvestment in critical supports*. Acknowledging a vulnerability-resiliency emphasizing scaffolding theoretical framework, Spencer's phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST: Spencer, 1995, 2006, 2008, 2019), the conceptual orientation is specific. This article takes a critical look at research that has evaluated low-income mothers through the lens of a "culture of poverty" instead of a "strengths-based" perspective. It explores how mothers engage risks inherent in low-resource environments and leverage supports to improve the outcomes for youths. The coping strategies of the mothers in low-income areas – characterized by high degrees of risk – have direct implications for the coping and identity formation of youth and therefore require scrutiny of the contextual factors that support or undermine parenting efforts. Accordingly, our context-acknowledging human development approach attends to a different lens when considering the interplay between economics, psychology, and sociology as principal disciplines describing and prescribing effective interventions.

Hence, following the introduction that describes the challenges addressed, *we organize our article content and approach into five areas of emphasis*. First, the article describes Zigler's perspective on Head Start (i.e., in the first two sections). As the second article emphasis (i.e., section three with several subsections that includes a case study and acknowledgment of challenges to parenting), it provides a poverty and inequality focus. The third emphasis of the article is humanity stressing (i.e., sections four, five, and six highlight human development and vulnerability acknowledging perspectives including the individual and societal experienced problem of *inequality presence denial* as well as the stable salience of meaning making and identity processes). The fourth emphasis (i.e., sections seven and eight reinforce, again, the unique contributions of Zigler's insights and innovations) provides reflections about the themes reviewed while providing perspectives on remaining "unfinished business" including dimensions of vulnerability and risk as each interplays with race, ethnicity, and power. Finally, the fifth emphasis of the article (i.e., conclusions, cautions, and recommendations) presents supportive strategies for the design of evaluations as well as the publication of future reports, reviews and recommendations concerning what constitutes *success* and *opportunity*. In addition – as suggested by the globally united BLM movement – reflections about and candid addressing of the societal implications for the reticent but ever-present *inequality presence denial stance* are provided.

## Background: Zigler's Head Start Perspective and Challenges to Conceptualizations

It is critical to acknowledge that economics operates from a perspective of seeing the individual as a rational actor in not just the market place but in all realms of life. As a disciplinary analytic tool, it applies a theoretical perspective and empirical strategy, which frequently centers the "me" over the "we;" specifically and primarily, a person's utility is viewed in terms that are in-service to the market and capitalism more broadly. Edward Zigler's design of the National Head Start Program heralded a focus on *economic status changed and supported given high quality and early initiated preschool programming*. The parental engagement component underscores the different orientation of "we," thus, serving a more critical role than the noted "me" orientation, as noted, generally favored by economics.

Human capital theories emanate from the conceptual orientation noted and have permeated the social sciences; hence and unfortunately they *represent the evaluative framework for understanding what human value and developmental processes vis-à-vis skill development and acquisition* represent. The rational actor denotation may under-estimate situations of normative and uniquely high-risk situations. Accordingly, the strategy may *under-analyze the role of unique stressors which accompany everyday life choices as contexts experienced by impoverished communities and too many families and individuals of color in America.* At the same time, the *human capital theoretical orientation may ignore, as well, the heightened socioemotional impact of innovative supports*. Situated in the middle of a pandemic, however, the national and global significant stress reaction to yet another public execution of an unarmed citizen of color in the United States laid bare the lack of individual-context fit experienced by marginalized youth and families. As such, the emerging acknowledgements of immutable truths regarding the nature and degree of risk that diverse youth of color and poor people encounter in their environments necessitates novel assessments regarding the role of context in shaping developmental trajectories broadly and healthy identity development, specifically. This evaluative

review and analysis necessitates first considering the developmental purpose of childhood.

## Meanings and Functions of Childhood

Given the impact and contributions of economics to thoughtful planning and implementing of programming innovations increases significance of Erikson's epigenetic model of development that centers identity development as an ever-evolving life course psychosocial process (Erikson, 1950, 1968). His theoretical framework acknowledges that human beings' positive identity development depends on the resolution of the crises encountered at various stages across varied social milieu. The incorporation of an epigenetic approach to development necessarily motivates a framing of the function of childhood. Erikson theorizes "that anything that grows has a ground plan, and that out of this ground plan the parts arise, each part having its time of special ascendancy, until all parts have risen to form a functional whole." (Erikson, 1968; p. 92 cited in Muuss, 1996). Childhood vulnerability is necessarily shaped by the contexts in which individuals' carry out critical developmental tasks. The cultivation of stable coping mechanisms is essential for the crisis of resolution for positive identity development for all children.

Of note, the necessity to mobilize and act speaks to perspectives about perceived coping needs and every-day adaptation process requirements not evenly experienced across individuals. They include responses to normative developmental tasks and social–emotional needs requiring attention; also included are nonnormative events such as a global pandemic that are shared by all as well as the public lynching of yet another unarmed Black man for which the impact is particularly salient to communities of color.

Also contributing to the character of developmental contexts over the life course are normative policy and practice traditions. When resource deployment differences are unaddressed, the consequences reinforce the pattern of resource distribution inequality. In turn, unequal resource deployment strategy affects the framing of scholarship, policy, practices, and outcomes and function as normative traditions and contexts of development and coping. As illustrations, they are numerous and include, first, outcomes-centered research that generates broad media and scholarly reporting content (i.e., disseminated as victim-blaming gaps [e.g., income, wealth, and education]). Second are reports on individuals at different points of the life course attempting efficacy in response to specific developmental tasks (i.e., which function to problematize entire communities). Third are outcome gaps frequently framed and addressed in the literature as life course shortcomings of the victims of unequal conditions. Finally, disseminated group stereotypes function to legitimize the unequal resource deployment methods and treatment framed as systems of "intended support." Human capital publicized "me" analysis solely emphasizing market utility versus implications for a human family and "we" orientation further discourages authentic interpretations. Accordingly, the stigmatized and disparate character of adaptive processes and patterned outcomes further contribute to under-acknowledged individual-context experiences for a nation's diverse citizens as groups navigate environments and attempt access to socially constructed supports constitutionally promised.

Highlighted is that life course access to supports and exposure to normative and nonnormative challenges serve as vehicles purposed for guaranteeing social inequality (i.e., no matter if the system of government touts the existence of a democratic state).

Suggested is that legally designed and constitutionally assisted practices, as unquestioned traditions, and the structured character of "intended" social assets, in fact – no matter their lack of representation in the conduct of social science – matter profusely. This fact differentially influences everyday practices and the need for nuanced individual coping and adaptations as a function of group membership. In effect, there continues to be a hesitance to acknowledge the suggested inequalities – usually aligned with race and ethnicity – and patterned inequities that continue 400 years following the population of the "New World" by individuals escaping economic and social injustices. Requiring reflection is that the United States of America is within one-half decade of its formal 250-year birthday. It has carried forward the undeniable trauma and cost of discriminatory practices. Importantly, the lack of equity in actions concerning the tension between human capital and human developmental tasks requires robust theoretical interrogation and inquiry to effectively describe and address the needs of diverse youths. In fact, it was the human capital differential experienced by economically challenged families and communities, which spearheaded Edward Zigler's significant press for Head Start.

This article advances the discussion of engaging human development as a systems-informed, identity-focused, and theoretical stance relative to the *developmental needs of diverse youth*. We use a particular framing to draw attention to the specific needs of diverse youth; the strategy and its set of tenets allows an interrogation of how systems shaping the developmental environment must adapt to the needs of those persons situated within it. In short, it will be possible to theorize and then to build effective necessary empirical measures to evaluate the efficacy of systems to meet the developmental needs of children. This necessitates a dynamic, interactive framework undergirded by core tenets that highlight which components in a given context actually promote positive identity development for America's diverse youths (i.e., diversity due to resource access differences, race, ethnicity, gender, immigration status).

## Zigler's Analysis of the National Head Start Impact Study: Vulnerability Status and Resiliency Matter

Zigler (2010) provides critiques of the response to the longitudinal follow-up to the National Head Start Impact Study. Our analysis of his critique is that it indicates that an analytic strategy that emphasizes vulnerability-resiliency is critical (i.e., protective factors and supports matter as well as risk variables and steady challenges) (see Spencer, 1995, 2006, 2008). Zigler (2010) suggests that findings of the National Head Start Impact Study suggest a roadmap for improvement and examines a number of areas where the Head Start program, in fact, could be improved given the findings of the longitudinal study in relation to the larger body of literature on Head Start. Zigler's review also included its methodology and the magnitudes of the findings analyzed. In fact, and importantly, he was critical of the study's methodological limitations, noting its reliance on comparing Head Start's outcomes with a control variable that included "everything else" while also suggesting that the control samples were oversaturated with students with lower levels of risk. He was also critical of the way length of treatment for different students was measured, suggesting that students with very limited amount of exposure to the intervention should not be compared to the control groups in the study. Quite forcefully, Zigler argues that it is important to remember the goal of Head Start is to prepare lower-

income children for school. Based on this criterion, Head Start demonstrated that it was successful while also pointing out the limits of Head Start programs when students go on to school. He describes the difficulty for Head Start students to maintain the momentum of their learning in their educational environments, which were not adequate. We would frame the dilemmas as one that insists that *the adequacy of contexts continues to matter*. Importantly, in fact, Head Start does not provide an inoculation against social and economic privation; development tasks requiring mastery and support are consistent with development and continue over time.

Zigler discusses the findings of the impact study in light of the several decades' worth of previous work. In reviewing earlier evaluation work, he suggests that there are favorable impacts on parenting practices and child outcomes in the cognitive, socioemotional, and health domains. Students who have gone through Head Start demonstrate higher test scores, lower grade retention, and reduced criminal behavior as adults. These benefits had further monetary and economic benefits in the way of reduced criminal justice costs that outweigh the costs of administering the program. He further notes the benefits and savings found from Head Start's health and nutritional component with its participants having lower levels of obesity, premature death, and dental problems.

In addition, Zigler (2010) highlights lingering issues in the Head Start program including a limited number of qualified staff and the lack of financial resources to support them. Additional constraints imposed by the financial burdens hampered the ability to expand to meet the needs of the targeted population, which made it difficult to provide greater length of time for intervention and responding to the realities of parents working outside of the household. Critical to acknowledge is that we agree with Zigler's analysis of the report and recognize the contributions of economic resources as well as parenting and the nature of the context as necessary considerations.

## Poverty and Inequality: Theoretical Implications for Human Development

Glen Elder's seminal work, *Children of the Great Depression*, was a longitudinal investigation into the implications of the Great Depression on youth development. It framed the field of life course studies, centering human developmental processes as elemental to understanding life outcomes in the United States. Years after its publication, Elder acknowledged that the approach requires adjustment to accommodate the nonlinear pathways and realities of complex lives when he stated:

> Each person generally occupies multiple roles at the same time, whether spouse and parent or spouse and employee. These concurrent roles are not part of the life cycle concept. Consequently, it did not orient research to the management of multiple roles. (Elder, 1999, p. 314)

Elder and Caspi (1988) built on Elder's earlier insights on the effects of economic shocks on youth development by acknowledging the importance of including precursor events and contexts that increase risk and create "deprivational effects" as families are able or unable to adapt to less income. They note that financial shocks create stress within familial relationships that inform how family members, collectively, shape developmental trajectories for children, either minimizing or exacerbating risk introduced by economic events. While Elder and Caspi acknowledge

that the generalizability of the study findings are limited by a sample comprising solely White respondents, this insight reveals the dynamism of economic instability on relationships.

Diverse youths residing in under resourced contexts further experience exacerbated risks and challenges by virtue of where they live. Essentially, spatial inequality and discriminatory housing practices compound risk factors that inform development. Exposure to these types of environments raises the stakes for diverse youths to find sufficient supports to cultivate sufficient coping mechanisms necessary for positive identity development. Research by Allard (2009) and Rothstein (2017) indicates the nature and categories of discriminatory practices. Rothstein notes that decades of housing discrimination enforced by federal, state, and local policies engrained segregated housing patterns that became linked to segregated schools as families were forced "to move to segregated neighborhoods if they wanted education for their children" (Rothstein, 2017, p. 122). In his study of the social safety net, Scott Allard documented the effects of spatial inequality (Allard, 2009). He notes that sources of supports forming the fabric of social safety nets in a community are not optimally placed in high poverty areas where the need is the greatest. Residents from communities of color are disproportionately represented in these areas that lack resources. Allard's analysis of three large urban areas indicate that "mismatches in the spatial distribution of service providers can help to explain why many social programs experience low take-up rates, high rates of attrition, and less than optimal outcomes." (Allard, 2009, p. 86)

Since the launch of the War on Poverty in 1965, overall poverty has decreased while inequality has expanded as the population in the United States has grown more diverse. Reardon's macroanalysis of education longitudinal data *revealed the critical truth of the effects of inequality* – that is, it is far reaching and can cripple progress for US society overall. Reardon notes the failure associated with not interrogating the role of rising inequality as a key driver in education outcomes:

> "…[M]uch of our public conversation about education is focused on the wrong culprits: we blame failing schools and *the behavior of the poor* for trends that are really the result of *deepening income inequality* and the behavior of the rich." (Reardon, 2013)

These documented patterns of inequality in the United States that are present in various sectors of society, notably housing, education, and the judicial system, play out against a backdrop of growing negative effects of health outcomes for people of color. These negative effects are apparent in unequivocal terms. Disparities in mortality rates by race and ethnicity in the COVID-19 pandemic suggest their presence. In fact, they accelerate an already sobering pattern of lower life expectancy among communities of color in the United States (e.g., Millett et al., 2020). These effects have been particularly acute in urban areas. The City of Chicago serves as an exemplar in several ways. They include observations that, first, prior to the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic, Chicago was the site of significant disparities in health outcomes; and second, based upon zip code, the term "mortality gap" describes the enduring effects of segregation in the city where the life outcome estimates between the wealthiest, predominantly white zip codes and the poorest Black zip codes has grown to a 30-year difference (Spoer, Thorpe, Gourevitch, Levine, & Feldman, 2019). Ultimately, the enduring effect of living in a poor, predominantly Black zip code in Chicago will bring about death for its residents 30 years earlier than a person who lives

in a predominantly White, wealthy zip code. Ansell documents the stark reality of health inequality as "structural violence" with particularly virulent effects for communities of color in Chicago (Ansell, 2017). This highlights the importance of utilizing frameworks that engage the notion of "*morbid risk*" to account for these extreme effects of chronic economic inequality and racial discrimination on the life outcomes of diverse youths.

Taken as a whole, these empirical findings highlight the need for theoretically motivated social science research to account comprehensively for multiple dimensions of inequality and racial biases in institutional environments and residential contexts as they relate to the a priori status of vulnerability for diverse youth. By extension, it becomes critical to ascertain the unacknowledged biases in the systemic and institutional contexts delivering youth focused supports in order to assess accurately the ways that these actors increase risk levels encountered by diverse youths. In doing this, it is crucial to acknowledge, as well, the *inherent strengths* that diverse youths possess that support the cultivation of coping mechanisms commensurate with their developmental period, and to ascertain jointly those contextual drivers rooted in inequality that can undermine diverse youth's positive identity development processes. Spencer et al.'s (2019) study of minority youth development support programming provides guidance on how to implement an empirical strategy to address these considerations. Parents play a frequently compromised role in light of social and economic challenges that grow more salient over time. However, as exemplified by Alexander (2010) and described from a historical perspective by Hall (2020) and others, the criminal justice system abets the process of adult-criminal justice linkages.

## The Implication of Parents in Youth Criminal and Violent Outcomes

The exacerbating role of criminal justice, systemic inequality, and parenting suggests the complexity which Zigler (2010) infers in his critique. A Chicago-focused recent qualitative study by Hall (2020) affords definitive illustrations for Chicago as suggested by analyses provided by Spoer et al. (2019) as well as Ansell's (2017) analysis of the urban setting. In fact, Halls' efforts provide an unfiltered illustration of the individual-context parent relevant perspective demonstrating the impossibility of evaluating Head Start from a perspective which infers an inoculation-type efficacy.

As a reminder, Hall (2020) reminds us that on a September afternoon in 2012, a teenager was shot to death while riding his bike in the Englewood neighborhood of Chicago. At the time of his death, Joseph "Lil Jojo" Coleman, was fielding multiple record label offers and had made a name for himself in the local music scene. His most famous song, "Black Disciple Killer" was a very clear and provocative message to a rival street gang in Chicago. Employing traditional hyper-masculine symbols of power and aggression in the "BDK" music video posted to YouTube, Coleman and his teenaged entourage point large assault rifles at the camera while rapping about their mission to kill Black Disciples. To date, this video has over 6 million views and, in fact, fans at his funeral sang the song in tribute.

Two months after his death, Coleman's mother appeared on a talk show to discuss his murder along with her older son (Smithberg and North, 2012). Robin Russell stated that she was using the national platform in an effort to find justice for her son, despite being afraid of public threats of retaliation. Halfway through the interview, the show host asked Ms. Russell pointedly, "Did you know your son was affiliated with a gang?"

Caught off guard and immediately defensive, Ms. Russell paused for a split second and responded flatly, "No. I did not." Not satisfied and without missing a beat, the interviewer continued, "Umm, what are you gonna do moving forward to make sure that your other kids don't meet the same fate? Or do you feel powerless going up against the influence of the streets and of the peers that are around?" His message, left unsaid, was clear, "*This is your fault.*"

As described in Hall's study, a bit more bolstered, Ms. Russell responded more confidently, "Well I don't feel it's my fault because all I can do is raise my child. I can't hold his hand 24/7 when he goes in the streets. I teach him right from wrong but like I said, I have other kids. I can't be there with him 24 hr."

If Ms. Russell had ever listened to her son's most popular song, it is almost certain that she was aware that he was in fact "affiliated with a gang." Perhaps in the fraction of a second it took her to respond to the host's pointed question, she gathered that he was implicating her in her son's murder on national television. For his part, the host confirmed her suspicions with his follow-up question, "What are you gonna do to make sure that your other kids don't meet the same fate?" Embedded in this thinly veiled question was an accusation of negligent parenting at best and willful complicity at worst.

The talk show host was not the only member of the national media to have asked Ms. Russell about her knowledge of her son's gang involvement following his murder. In a *Chicago Tribune* article written just two days after her son's murder, it is documented that Ms. Russell refused to comment on whether Coleman was in a gang when asked by a reporter and she responded as such,

> I didn't get into what he did when he left my house. I tried to be there, tried to teach my son the right way. But you can't hold no child's hand every step of the way. So what he did in the streets I don't know about. What he raps about, I don't know about…Whatever's going on out there, I don't know. (Garner and Kot, 2012)

Ms. Russell's feigned lack of knowledge of her son's gang involvement can be read as an acknowledgement of and an attempt to shield herself from the negative judgment of mainstream observers who do not understand her family's circumstances. Further, Ms. Russell's seemingly contradictory statements that "all I can do is raise my child" and "I didn't get into what he did when he left my house," suggest that in at least some ways she considers her parenting actions and her children's outcomes to be unrelated. Ms. Russell's concern that middle-class observers will judge her is accurate. Examples of poor Black mothers commonly vilified in popular media are plentiful. Social science data of the character described exacerbate the process of vilification and stereotyping.

In a 2010 *Chicago Sun Times* op-ed, "Ghetto Parenting Dooms Kids," popular columnist Mary Mitchell tells the follow-up story to a 1994 murder of a 5-year-old boy who was pushed out of a fourteenth-floor window of a Chicago Housing Authority high-rise by two older neighborhood children while his 8-year-old brother tried to help (Mitchell, 2010). Sixteen years later, the 8-year old brother who witnessed his younger brother's murder was 23 years old and himself convicted of murder. While Mitchell insufficiently accounts for the trauma he experienced at 8 years old, "I can only imagine the nightmares that he must

have had after his brother's death," she argues that *it was the boys' mother who was primarily responsible for the poor outcomes of her children*. This mother, it seemed, had "failed her children in every way… the biggest share of the blame belonged to the mother who allowed her young sons to wander around the notoriously dangerous housing project unsupervised." Mitchell then draws a connection between this mother and all poor Black parents who raise families in racially segregated low socioeconomic neighborhoods. These parents were *guilty of a practice that Mitchell coins "ghetto parenting."* Mitchell writes,

> Ghetto parenting is cursing around, and at, a child. Ghetto parenting is brawling with your man or your woman in front of your child. Ghetto parenting is letting your child roam the streets until somebody else's mother has to tell the child to go home. Ghetto parenting is putting your child off on friends and relatives because you want to hang out in the street. Ghetto parenting is getting so hooked on substances that the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services has to remove your children and place them with strangers. (Mitchell, 2010)

To Mitchell, it is evident that undesirable outcomes experienced by Black youth in poor neighborhoods are willfully caused by their "ghetto parents" who "doom" their children to their fates through the sheer force of their ignorant and negligent behaviors. This narrative contends that if not for the immoral, selfish, and malicious behavior of individual parents, "ghetto children" would be better off. In short, their parents are holding them back from experiencing the success that is available to everyone else in a free society. This example, along with the media's handling of Ms. Russell, suggests that when poor Black youth become victims and/or perpetrators of violence and trauma, the root cause is always understood to be their bad "ghetto parents" and more specifically their mothers.

Like Ms. Russell, the parents included in this study maintain that they are doing their best given their circumstances but that much remains beyond their control and also, like Ms. Russell, see no contradiction in stating simultaneously "all I can do is raise my child" and "I didn't get into what he did when he left my house." This understanding of parenting is an extension of parents' understanding of their place within a broader social context as parents are acutely aware that they cannot control their own circumstances and therefore cannot control what ultimately happens to their children. As Hall's (2020) dissertation demonstrates and explores, Englewood parents expressed sadness and disappointment about undesirable youth outcomes while maintaining that though they have done their best to raise their children, children will ultimately do what they want. Hall reports in one frustrated participant's words:

> Those kids got a mind of their own. I can't be there when my son getting ready to do something. Then you looking at me like I'm the one that did it. He already knew it first not to do it, but he did it any old way. So why you blaming me? It's not fair. It's not fair at all. (Hall, 2020, p. 4)

Mainstream, middle-class society blames an imagined lazy, inept, and irresponsible "ghetto parent" for the undesirable outcomes of poor children. These parents, in turn, blame an imagined sense of excessive agency on the part of their children. However, neither conceptualization is accurate as both are ahistorical and devoid of the contextual realities in which poor Black families live.

## Englewood Neighborhood Context

Consistent with Ansell's (2017) economic analysis, Hall's (2020) study took place in the Englewood community on Chicago's south side. Her write-up of the context (Hall, 2020) notes that Chicago has become a central talking point in the national conversation on urban violence and gun control. In fact, Chicago is sometimes referred to the "murder capital" of the US due to the national media's coverage of the high rates of violent crime within the city (Gramlich & Desliver, 2018). This is what Zigler (2010) takes exception to as challenges and risks that Head Start programming has no control over. In fact, Hall (2020) notes that violent crime in Chicago is concentrated among specific groups in specific areas. Such crime within the city is overwhelmingly perpetuated by and against African-American male youth. In 2012, the National Forum on Youth Violence Prevention reported that,

> Violence affects everyone in Chicago, but it is particularly devastating for our youth. In 2010, 1,109 school-aged youth were shot, and 216 of those were killed. Nearly half of Chicago's homicide victims are young people between the ages of 10 and 25. In 2009, 65% of all violent crime arrests were of youth 25 or younger…The consequences of violence on youth are disproportionately concentrated among African-Americans in our most economically challenged neighborhoods. (National Forum on Youth Violence Prevention, 2015, p. 10)

In Chicago, violent crime is a problem for Black youth who live in devastatingly poor and racially segregated neighborhoods on the south and west sides of the city. In fact, there are 23 Chicago police districts, but just two of them, the 7th and 11th, accounted for 25% of the city's violent crime (Annual Report: 2010 A Year in Review, 2011). One of these two, the 7th, is located in Englewood.

Englewood is spread out over three-square miles on the city's southwest side. At its peak in 1960, Englewood was home to over 97,000 people. However, Englewood, along with the rest of the city, has experienced a sharp population decline over the past 50 years losing more than half of its population, and today there are only 30,000 residents. More than 46.6% of neighborhood residents live in poverty, more than twice as many than the city average of 20% (US Census, 2014).

Englewood's story is similar to that of other segregated African-American urban communities (Wilson, 1990) which are frequently supported by Head Start programming assistance. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the neighborhood was a growing community with a strong economic pulse and a steady inward flow of European immigrants, primarily from Sweden, Ireland, and Germany (Roberts & Stamz, 2002). Due to the neighborhood's proximity to the Chicago stockyards and industrial areas of the city, Englewood was an ideal residence for workers to travel to and from their working-class jobs. The first Black residents came to the area during the 1880s and 1890s as domestic workers but remained only 1% of the area's total population for many decades. This pattern changed during the Great Migration during the years immediately following the Second World War, which brought Black migrants from the US south to northern cities. As Blacks came to settle in Englewood, white residents began to flee to neighboring communities and suburbs during the 1950s. As white residents fled, too few Black residents replaced them, resulting in numerous neighborhood properties vacant and abandoned. A great deal of this surplus housing stock and abandoned buildings was eventually burned down to rubble or demolished, leaving large patches of vacant lots in

their wake. Those abandoned properties that were not burned to rubble or demolished, simply remained unoccupied and unmaintained. Businesses ultimately failed as well due to the sharp population decline and left the neighborhood to start again in other parts of the city. In a matter of a few years, the population fell from its peak of 97,000 in 1960 to about 59,000 by 1980 (University of Illinois Great Cities Institute, 2019).

White flight and community divestment also coincided with the rapid de-industrialization of the national economy in the 1960s and 1970s in which menial jobs that were traditionally occupied by low-skilled Black workers were no longer available. Seemingly overnight, unemployment rates increased among Blacks throughout the country and the proliferation of a widespread drug economy developed in large part due to limited alternative economic prospects. The propagation of a drug economy in urban inner cities of the 1970s and 1980s meant that undereducated Black youth had unprecedented access to money and a livelihood that would not have been available to them in any other sector of the formal economy. However, because of the drug market's inherent illegality and its cutthroat competitive nature, participants are permanently under the threat of arrest or assault from law authorities and other drug economy participants. In order to participate in the only available trade market available to them, an increasingly violent gang culture developed to help ensure safety, coordination of effort, and protection of "turf".

Infamously draconian "War on Drug" policies of both conservative and liberal government officials made the penalties of drug market participation increasingly harsher with mandatory minimum prison sentences in the 1980s. The result of this is that a whole generation of poor Black youth have spent at least part of their lives incarcerated. Pettit and Western (2004) note that nearly 60% of Black men who dropped out of high school born between 1965 and 1969 spent time in prison by 1999.

In 2003, over half of all prisoners released from Illinois state prisons reached Chicago – concentrated to just six communities out of Chicago's 77 delineated community areas. Englewood and West Englewood account for two of these six neighborhoods. In other words, roughly 15% of all exiting prisoners in the state of Illinois reach Englewood at some point in their re-entry process (LaVigne, Mamalian, Travis, & Visher, 2003).

## The Hyperghetto–Carceral Complex

Englewood families exist within a historical tradition of poor African-Americans in which family relations are disrupted and influenced by omnipotent social institutions with physically coercive power. Loïc Wacquant's theory to explain racialized marginality within the postindustrial city denotes four derivative and chronologically consecutive "peculiar institutions" that have historically defined the lives of the US Black poor – chattel slavery (1619–1865), Jim Crow (1865–1965), the northern ghetto (1915–1968), and the hyperghetto-carceral complex (1968–present). Each successive institution is informed by the previous one and each has not only worked to "recruit, organize, and extract labor" but also to "demarcate and ultimately seclude [the Black poor] so that they would not contaminate the surrounding white society that viewed them as irrevocably inferior and vile…" (Wacquant, 2001). In Wacquant's theorization of the hyperghetto–carceral complex of the present moment, the prison and the hyperghetto become mere extensions of one another as the ghetto becomes increasingly violent, militarized, and surveilled

and the prison becomes more residential and racially segregated. The prison and the ghetto form a symbiotic relationship, in which they feed off one another with frequent and recurrent cyclical movement between the two.

The hyperghetto–carceral complex is the context in which Englewood parents raise their children. They and their children experience unpredictable violence within their neighborhoods and the omnipresence of the carceral state, which militarizes schools, basic neighborhood establishments, and social services. The hyperghetto–carceral complex is a constant reminder that Englewood residents are operating under the authority of a coercive power that can be enacted upon them at any moment. This power stakes random claims upon their children and supersedes their own parental authority.

As Wacquant constructs a direct lineage connecting the ways the Black poor have historically been defined by an ever-evolving political economy, so, too, must we construct a direct line through the family relations that must exist within these systems. To fully understand the challenges and constraints of mothers such as Ms. Russell, we must interrogate what it means to be both a parent with a presumption of full authority over your children's lives while simultaneously being subjected to an all-encompassing coercive institutional power.

## Contemporary Parenting Anxieties and Expectations

At the same time that Englewood parents must contend with the hyperghetto–carceral complex while raising children, all parents experience anxieties concerning their children's outcomes. Parents are members of a societal category and are subject to a set of societal expectations, some of which seem obvious and universal. Minimally, every parent must provide materially for their children to the best their resources allow and keep children out of immediate harm's way. Other parental expectations are, however, nuanced, unspoken, and reflective of the historical moment in which parents happen to exist.

In contemporary US society, to truly be considered a "good" parent, it must be recognizable to others that they ascribe to an ideology that places their children's experiences above all else, and much of that burden has traditionally fallen upon mothers. In a marked shift from previous generations that blamed social problems on over-involved mothers, and preferred regimentation and child conformity, the current expectation is that mothers must be involved in all aspects of children's lives (Coontz, 2010; Vincent, 2009). In recent years, "the helicopter mom," the "soccer mom," and the "tiger mother" have become well-worn archetypes for an involved parent, again mother, who steers her child on the path to success. These archetypes are indicative of what Michaels and Douglas (2005) call "the new momism."

> The new momism: the insistence that no woman is ever truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional and intellectual being, 24/7 to her children… The new momism is a set of ideals, norms, and practices most frequently and powerfully represented in the media, that seem on the surface to celebrate motherhood, but which in reality promulgate standards of perfection that are beyond your reach. (Michaels & Douglas, 2005, pp. 4–5)

One vital way that the concept of "the new momism" is operationalized into actual behaviors is through the cultural practice of "intensive mothering." "Intensive mothering" is "child-centered,

expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive" (Hays, 1996). This exhaustive practice of intensive mothering has now become the standard by which all mothers are judged (Vincent, 2009). These outward displays should also signal to others that one is anxious about their child's future and doing all they can to ensure their child's upward mobility.

In order to best prepare children to compete in a world of ever-increasing income inequality and a shrinking middle class, contemporary middle-class parents "cultivate" their children's childhoods in order to prepare their children to inhabit middle-class lifestyles (Lareau, 2011). Failure to meet this standard results in socially sanctioned scorn, sympathy for children, and demonization of parents who do not publicly live up to these increasing standards. In other words, if parents do not appear to use all their resources to ensure advantages for their children, they are thought to be remiss in their parenting role.

Since the late twentieth century, parenting standards have grown progressively higher and more encompassing. The result is that nearly all parents experience anxiety around parenting and child outcomes. As Michaels and Douglas (2005) note, all parents today receive pointed messages which make it clear "you are responsible for your child's welfare: The buck stops with you and you better be a rock star." Contemporary parents are doing more and providing longer for children than in previous generations have in order to manage this precariousness (Miller, 2018). This unprecedented resource provision and anxiety has resulted in an extended parenting period, known as emerging adulthood between the ages 18–25, as young people need longer periods of preparation and training (Arnett, 2011). Middle-class parents now feel as if they must do whatever it takes to provide opportunities and advantages for their children.

Perhaps the most egregious recent example is the college admissions scandal in which wealthy parents illegally paid large sums of money, some more than a million dollars, to ensure their children's admission into Ivy League and other elite institutions. This scandal spurred a larger conversation about the amount of resources some parents expend legally to ensure their children's future success that are beyond reach for most. What became clear was that access to elite institutions, long considered the hallmark of upward mobility, was guaranteed through a "backdoor" by the extremely wealthy who can donate millions or pass along an inherited legacy placement to their children (Golden, 2007). Furthermore. less wealthy middle-class parents are able to make investments, including buying homes in exclusive areas with better school districts, spending thousands of dollars on tutoring, relying on social networks for impressive internships and participation in expensive extracurricular activities (Bray, 1999). Even with these increasing investments, however, wealthy parents are still anxious about their children's prospects. It never seems to be enough.

If ensuring a middle-class life for children requires large amounts of resources, then it is almost certain that poor Black parents with limited social and financial capital will never be able to provide the same for their children. In fact, some have been criminally penalized when they have tried to ensure their children access to good public education (Applebome, 2011). Why, then, are poor Black parents vilified for not being able to provide a middle-class lifestyle for their children? Similarly important and unacknowledged is why *privilege denial* is such a critical part of our lexicon. Does it serve to maintain the social hierarchy, which continues to define American interracial relationships?

## Considerations of Theoretical Tenets of Human Development and *Inequality Presence Denial*

As described by historians of relevance (David, 1975; Foner, 1998) to the opening of the twenty-first century's second decade, the theoretical discourse on developmental needs and trajectories of diverse youth continues to be inadequate. Our approach necessitates acknowledgement of two principle points. The first is that *all humans are vulnerable and need active supports in their contexts in order to cultivate stable coping mechanisms for positive identity development and productive life stage specific outcomes*. The second is that *the denial of the existence of structures, policies and practices that produce and exacerbate inequality limits the reach of research and practice that seeks to produce inclusive, positive developmental outcomes for all children*.

The application of these two principles requires evaluating human development in context. They point to the need to shift perspectives to focus on the sources of support for diverse youth (i.e., by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status (SES), immigration status) as they carry out requisite developmental tasks to mature and pursue their ambitions for their lives. In particular, allowing for the interrogation of the ecology of supports and structured risks (i.e., presence or absence of significant challenges; quality of accessible supports; degree of risk considered "normative" that is in fact the source of trauma) in diverse youths' contexts opens possibilities for novel theoretical and empirical insights anchored in the youths' perspectives. When evaluating the sources of support in a context, it is also necessary to account for absence of the supports. Resources can be in the form of supportive adults, faith communities, or social service organizations, to name a few. Poverty-stricken contexts pose higher risks for development mainly due to the situation wherein the availability and quality of supports are not commensurate with or capable of overcoming the crushing realities of impoverished environments.

Professor Edward R. Zigler's groundbreaking innovating of the Head Start program sought to ameliorate the risk differential across diverse young children's lives by providing supports in context. Zigler understood clearly that improving outcomes for children living in poverty necessitated acknowledging the role of context in shaping outcomes. Specifically, he noted the limits of SES as an explanation for environmental impact although without regard for social supports (Zigler, Lamb, and Child, 1982) and that social competence was an important measure of choice in assessing levels of overall adjustment (Zigler & Trickett, 1978).

Since the launching of Head Start, the United States has undergone significant demographic and social changes. The United States has endured the shocks of the Great Recession and, most recently, COVID-19 global pandemic, which have had a far-reaching impact on the citizens' lives and exacerbated inequality. These events highlight the need for novel theoretical insights on the developmental needs and trajectories of diverse youths' development, with an understanding that childhood status neither provides the same level of risk and challenge across race, ethnicity, gender, or immigration status nor accessible and equal quality supports given long-term systemic traditions of inequality. However, outcome evaluations across groups occur without acknowledgment of long-term untoward systemic practices. Accordingly, differences function at the various levels of the social ecology of development as problematic stereotyping. Specifically,

then, it is imperative that research ameliorate the pernicious effects of *inequality presence denial*. The effects of not operationalizing the role of inequality in contexts, not accounting for those elements that are either difficult to measure or too costly to incorporate into a research design, are costly (see Spencer et al., 2019). It is important to note openly that acknowledging inequality can be uncomfortable and unpopular. Nonetheless, the failure to acknowledge inequality can result in ascribing adverse outcomes to youths who, in fact, are the site of unmeasured effects from residing and being educated in high-risk contexts. The *effects of inequality further add to the unavoidable status of human vulnerability*. The point emphasized is that the outcomes of stable inequality is a no-win for diverse youths frequently viewed through the lens of their failure to "meet the mark." Accordingly, our highlighting inequality presses for the use of a model for understanding childhood that reveals the interactions of human beings and their contexts as a composite variable. In our use of a vulnerability-resiliency framework, which accomplishes the framing, unique opportunities are unveiled. The use of PVEST (Spencer, 1995, 2006 2008) provides an opportunity for understanding variability of resource access and coping processes linked to life course ego identity development and patterned outcomes. This celebratory edited volume honoring Edward Zigler provides an opportunity to emphasize the variability in human vulnerability and to accentuate authentic strategies for effectively supporting what amounts to trauma exposed youths and particularly young children.

## Maximizing Conceptual Opportunities: Diverse Perspectives Regarding Human Vulnerability

There are varieties of perspectives about human vulnerability status. For example, Cardona (2013) characterizes vulnerability as an internal risk and suggests that all forms of risk share a common division between reality and possibility. In other words, interpretable from Cardona's definition is that perception matters. Others have theorized vulnerability "as the risk of exposure and loss of control, as a construct through which to understand people's feelings of insecurity and unsafety" (Carlson, 2014; Killias, 1990). Fineman (2008) argues that vulnerability is perceivable as a universal, constant, and inherent part of the human condition. In contrast to the traditional model of equal protection, he proposes a "post-identity" inquiry concerned with privileges and structures that manage vulnerabilities and aims to move "toward a more substantive vision of equality." (Fineman, 2008, p. 1). There are differences in the definitions and use of the construct, however, there are also overlapping "grains of commonality."

Hurst (2008) explores vulnerability in the context of research ethic and proposes a three-part taxonomy: consent-based, harm-based, or comprehensive. Consent-based vulnerability refers to those who are unable or limited in their ability to protect their own interests thus rendering them at risk to abuse by others. Harm-based refers to those social groups that are more susceptible to outside interventions (harms) because of physical or mental dispositions. Comprehensive-based vulnerability refers to a combination of the other two; emphasizing the limited ability to defend their interests as well as their own risks associated with group membership. Gilson (2011) agrees on the universality and pervasiveness of vulnerability but suggests that it is neither positive nor negative. Instead Gilson suggests that vulnerability embodies conceptions of passivity, affectivity, openness to change, dispossession, and exposure. Taken together, Gilson argues that in

contrast to seeing vulnerability negatively, it actually represents a condition that makes other conditions possible.

Some have divided discussions of vulnerability into two broad categories: social and physical (Rader, Cossman, & Porter, 2012; Skogan & Maxfield, 1981). Physical vulnerability refers to physical characteristics that increase one's feelings of being vulnerable to victimization. Gender, age, and health are the most notable examples of this form of vulnerability. In contrast, social vulnerability involves social characteristics that enhance feelings of vulnerability at different levels. Contextually this can include environmental hazards including neighborhood crime/violence (Rader et al., 2012) or areas prone to natural disasters or the impact of climate change (Carmalt, 2014). On the individual level, this can also mean race and SES. There are, of course areas, where these forms of vulnerability overlap as in for example the elderly during natural disasters (Gilson, 2011).

Highly significant is that Zigler's (2010) feedback regarding the Head Start Impact study is quite correct. That is, following Head Start program completion, there are risks and challenges potentially significant for increasing human vulnerability and later achievement and social progress levels that early Head Start enrollment can neither prevent, decrease, nor neutralize. Rader et al. (2012) suggest the importance of this interplay noting that neighborhood conditions "may lead to an increased perception of social vulnerability which may, in turn, lead to increased levels of fear of crime. Likewise, existing physical vulnerabilities are likely to negatively affect the existence of neighborhood disorder. Therefore, focusing on individual level vulnerability within a neighborhood disorder context is an important aspect of fear of crime research." (Rader et al., 2012, p. 135). They explore this idea in a nationally representative sample of Americans using self-reported feelings of being unsafe as a proxy for fear of crime. They found that physical vulnerability and social vulnerability are directly related to fear of crime, but the mediating effects highlight a relationship among the social and physical vulnerability indicators. They also suggest that the "effects of social vulnerabilities, in relation to their association with fear of crime, work indirectly through some physical vulnerability indicators and likewise the effects of some physical vulnerability indicators are directly linked to social vulnerability indicators." (Rader et al., 2012, p. 140).

As described elsewhere (e.g., see Spencer, 1995, 2006, 2008; Spencer, Swanson, & Harpalani, 2015), the conceptual strategy used in this article is informed by James Anthony (1974). It promulgates that human vulnerability suggests a tendency toward apprehension and fearfulness and is universally present. It implies the presence of conditions of risk and protection. As such, Anthony refers to highly vulnerable individuals as those who might not be indelibly injured as long as the environment is safe, responsive and predictable (e.g., one may be highly impoverished but psychological and physical safety serve as buffers). That said, PVEST capitalizes on Anthony's (1974) perspective and also represents elements of the previously reviewed perspectives referenced (also see Spencer, 2006, 2008; Spencer et al., 2015; Spencer, Dupree, & Hartmann, 1997; Spencer, Fegley, & Dupree, 2006a,b). As a synthesis developmental systems life course theoretical framework, PVEST provides a heuristic device for understanding and demonstrating the unique and undergirding coping and adaptive processes that matter for an individual's stable identity process. The latter becomes associated with particularly patterned outcomes given the developmental tasks confronted at the various life course stages. Using PVEST as a template, it is also useful, then, to engage the role of privilege for making meanings and

the contributions of critical race theory (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Roediger, 1994) for appreciating differences in human vulnerability.

## Meaning Making in Identity Development

Centered on the premise that all humans are vulnerable as a function of shared humanity status, Spencer's PVEST engages the dynamic nature of development, (Spencer, 2006; Spencer et al., 2019). With a particular eye on the contextual risks and protective factors, the strategy unpacks factors that can undermine or strengthen developmental trajectories for diverse youth (i.e., human variation as a function of gender, race, immigration status, ethnicity variation). Particularly informed by context-sensitive insights by early ecological psychologists, Robert Barker, Paul Gump, and Herbert F Wright (e.g., see, Barker & Gump [1964]; Wright [1967]), clinically oriented psychologists such as James Garbarino (1982), and most significantly contained in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, it provides a robust conceptual and empirical framework. With the critical goal to understand a given context's dynamic and interlinked components (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), Spencer's PVEST describes the meaning-making or perceptual dimension of how diverse youths' identity develops – that is, who they are, is determined by their experiences and understanding of the risks and supports in their environments. PVEST is a system-based, identity-centered theory of human development that holds, as highlighted previously, that all humans are vulnerable. The reinforced perspective is that basic humanity makes vulnerability unavoidable; the status transcends racial, ethnic, SES variation. PVEST also accounts for what Spencer has termed "the downside of privilege." It is illustrated in youths who experience high supports (e.g., material wealth and social status by virtue of membership in a dominant racial group, Whites, in the case of the Unites States) may not have had the opportunity to develop coping skills to engage high risks. The dilemma results in the adoption of maladaptive coping which, in extreme cases, can be harmful to both self and others. Of course, as a cultural norm, White privilege is not the only link between identity, learning, and culture but also represents as global exemplars (e.g., see Spencer, Bertrand, Harris, & Velez, 2020). Particularly salient to the United States, given the nation's under-acknowledged history of slavery, dehumanization practices, and systemic oppression, there are contemporary residuals made evident with the concerns of the Black Lives Matter Movement's demonstrations noted which have extended around the globe. White privilege is one down-sided manifestation of the stable and uneven privilege status phenomenon (see Ansary & Luthar, 2009, Spencer, Dupree, & Fegley, 2006). Of course, one question salient for early childhood programming is the character, form, and onset of the particular mindset of concern.

The yawning social and economic inequality present in US society lays bare in the devastating social impacts of COVID-19, revealing the elemental risks of applying an *efficiency-driven* rather than *human-driven approach* in theoretically motivated social scientific research, and any ensuing empirical strategies that can drive additional research and policy priorities. As the United States looks ahead to a post-COVID-19 era, and evaluates effective approaches to support early childhood development based on Zigler's Head Start accomplishments, new modelling is required. Specifically, theoretically informed *research and policy interventions will find success by **actively avoiding the denial of the presence of inequality** and alternatively engaging youth

*development from a strengths-based perspective centered on context awareness and the cultivation of stable coping mechanisms that promote positive identity development of diverse youth.* PVEST-motivated inquiry centrally positions the incorporation of the dynamic interplay of human vulnerability status with the context, enhancing the empirical and explanatory value of research and policy interventions.

## Stable Status, Dynamic Contexts

Spencer's PVEST holds as a foundational tenet that all humans are vulnerable and, as such, in examining the development of youths and their identity development processes, the theory ascribes an a priori status of vulnerability that is intrinsic. A dynamic environment presents a variety of risks of varying levels in which the coping skills required may or may not be developed sufficiently to meet developmental tasks. It is here that the protective factors available in the form of supports can aid in cultivating emergent adaptive coping skills in service to positive identity development.

Given Spencer's PVEST acknowledges that identity development processes do not occur in a static context, variability and the multileveled nature of vulnerability set the context as a key agent that can affect identity development outcomes. In addition, the cultivation of adaptive or maladaptive coping strategies when encountering risks is critical to positive identity development. Children of color – too frequently designated as the "other" – therefore may be denied entitlement to fundamentally human developmental processes; this can exacerbate risks these children encounter. For example, Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta, and DiTomasso (2014) find that there is a dehumanization of Black boys; the pattern permits a form of "moral exclusion" regarding what is considered appropriate treatment of Black boys, in which they are dehumanized and "treated with adult severity" (Goff et al., 2014). Epstein, Blake, and Gonzalez extends Goff's findings on Black boys in revealing the deleterious effects of the "adultification" of young Black girls; accordingly, "Black girls [are viewed] as less innocent and more adult-like than their white peers, especially in the age range of 5–14…Black boys are more likely than their white peers to be misperceived as older, viewed as guilty of suspected crimes and face police violence if accused of a crime." (Epstein, Blake, & Gonzalez, 2017, p. 1). In addition, Spencer et al. (2006) note the physical health challenges experienced by Black girls due to the higher expectations placed upon them (see Spencer et al., 2006a). The separation of young children from their families at the US–Mexico border also constitutes dehumanizing treatment of immigrant youths due to a denial of their vulnerable status as human beings. These examples of extreme risk for which youths do not have adequate coping or sufficient supports can have consequences for development that can endure over the life course. PVEST holds that processes underway (i.e., cultivating of adaptive coping mechanisms to address encountered risks) should be the priority for all children, with supports in service to positive identity development. This shifts the discussion toward a more inclusive model that acknowledges humanity of all children.

That said, the seminal contributions of Zigler's groundbreaking work on early child development has been elemental in driving prescriptions for policy and research priorities engaging the unique needs of children in poverty. PVEST builds on this research tradition by offering insights on how to engage the needs of diverse youths from a strengths-based, rather than

deficits-centered, frame of analysis. "Gap analyses" have limited explanatory value as they rely on depicting diverse youths as the "other" in relation to White youths who are the demographic majority. These are not new insights as Zigler's critique suggests; however, there appears to be somewhat of a motivated forgetfulness in the social science community that remains specifically associated with economics, sociology and traditional developmental psychology efforts, as previously referenced. The proclivity as a conceptual shortcoming – once more redundantly commented on by Spencer (2019) and may be inferred from Zigler's (2010) analysis – is illustrated by this statement that is often attributed to Einstein:

> "Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing it is stupid" (Goodreads Quotable Quote).

Head Start alone is an early childhood programmatic experience and opportunity that does not function as a life course inoculant; thus – even with supportive parental training – it cannot insure individuals against subsequent systemic and adverse encounters of children and resource-thin supportive adults.

## Psychohistoric Moment: The Launch of Head Start and the War on Poverty

As a source of empirical insights on the effects of a nationwide initiative focused on children's development, Head Start is a policy program deeply rooted in a unique moment in US history. Launched on May 18, 1965, Head Start was a part of a seminal suite of programs created by President Lyndon B. Johnson to eradicate poverty. A key program within Johnson's War on Poverty, Head Start was envisioned to "Break the cycle of poverty, providing preschool children of low-income families with a comprehensive program to meet their emotional, social, health, nutritional and psychological needs. A key tenet of the program established that it be culturally responsive to the communities served, and that the communities have an investment in its success through the contribution of volunteer hours and other donations as nonfederal share." (Office of Head Start, 2019). Initially enrolling 560,000 children in 1965, by 2019 Head Start served over 36 million children across 50 US states and territories. Over the years, the program has moved from a summer program to a full-day program, evolving its focus and expanding its reach to reflect population trends so it is inclusive of diverse constituencies in need of its services. Within five years of its launch, the program made one of its significant refinements by requiring parent participation in order to enhance parenting skills. Between 1976 and 1980, the program developed a bilingual curriculum for Spanish-speaking children and issued guidance to include children with disabilities. Based on its 1991 report Multicultural Principles for Head Start Programs, in 2010 Head Start refined its recommendations to individual Head Start centers on practices and procedures that embrace cultural diversity and English language acquisition. (Office of Head Start, 2008). While the program acknowledges increasing cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity within the programs, recommendations for updates continue to prioritize language acquisition as a key enhancement, framing these changes as predicated on the concept of culture as "dynamic and complex" (Office of Head Start, 2008, p. 41) and, without mention of racial or ethnic discrimination, centers are encouraged to realize the presence of negative stereotypes and avoid them (Office of Head Start, 2008, p. 27). Of course, given the continuation of systemic racial and class bias, the attenuation of authentic support but significant and increasing threats to well-being (e.g., a global pandemic), there remain added and unacknowledged threats to the efficacy of Head Start, making Zigler's insights (2010) more poignant, in need of additional supports and not sources of misinterpretation.

## Unfinished Work and Fragile Achievements: From Brown v. Board to the War on Poverty

Sixty-six years after the landmark Brown v. Board of Education decision, and 56 years after the signing of the Civil Rights Act, the United States continues to struggle with realizing the ambition of an equal and just society. Societal shocks over the last 10 years, notably the Great Recession of 2008 and the COVID-19 Global Pandemic, have revealed deep cleavages that require a reassessment of the key assumptions that govern theoretically motivated social scientific research broadly, and developmental research more specifically. The Great Recession was an historic shock that resulted in job losses and disastrous economic effects not experienced since the Great Depression with implications for human development (Nichols Lodato, 2018). While it was declared over in 2012, the recessionary effects endured for many years after with the loss of economic security felt greatest among African American and Latinx communities. The Global Pandemic COVID-19 has become both a health and economic crisis of epic proportions for persons around the globe, with African American and Latinx communities in the United States suffering particularly lethal consequences. Compared to their White counterparts, members of these communities have job losses at higher rates and have suffered higher rates of infection and mortality, with death from the virus six to seven times higher than White in some areas (see Laurencin and McClinton, 2020; Yancy, 2019). For youths who already experience high levels of risk because they live at or below poverty level in lower-resourced environments, many encounter morbid risks as they navigate lives in which sources of supports found in their families, schools, and communities are significantly reduced, disrupted or eliminated altogether.

From the re-emergence of school segregation (see Frankenberg, Ee, Ayscue, & Orfield, 2019) to challenges passing a federal anti-lynching law (Fandos, 2020) to racial health outcome disparities noted above – further compounded by the COVID-19 virus – the negative effects of discrimination and economic inequality matter deeply. They continue to be modeled based upon hypothetical scenarios that assumed systems as (a) functional and (b) neutral are now contradicted by the growing set of descriptive statistics showing patterned effects of these shocks by race and income level and SES. Furthermore, the assumed conditions of equality in access to education, health care, and housing are frequently revealed as fragile in many cases and, in some cases, illusory (see Rothstein, 2017 for discussion of how discriminatory housing policies affected schooling policy). John Hope Franklin, in reflecting on the unfinished work in education 50 years after the Brown decision, stated:

> So Brown got off to a bad start, a terrible start, and I don't think it ever recovered, frankly. And it's one of the great tragedies of the twentieth century, that we could close the century with no more significant advance to the full realization of Brown than we had in 1955 or 1956. And so I can only say that the Court did its job, but almost no one else in this country

did the job that needed to be done in order to move significantly toward a society that was equal. (Franklin, Greenberg, & Pollack, 2009, p. 10)

"America's birth mark" permeates understanding of developmental processes of children of color as "othered" and, thus, distinctive from "standard" developmental processes observed among majority members of society. This dissonance between the aspirations for and realities of equality is undeniable. That said, the following question is proposed to engage the effects of inequality on developmental processes:

How is exposure to inequality (this could be termed as inequality dosage) germane to the developmental needs of diverse youths in the United States?

Specifically, ascertaining the interacting effects of economic inequality, educational deprivation, wage depression, jurisdictional discriminatory practices (i.e., levels of adverse and positive encounters with police; incarceration rates by geography; familial exposure to the judicial system) are salient to the development of nuanced, comprehensive investigation of the developmental trajectories of youths. It is important to note that the measurement of SES is a multifaceted construct comprising varying factors. (NCES, 2012

- If a geographic context has historically engaged in policies that actively discriminated against groups based on race, ethnicity, or other characteristics, what is the empirical strategy to account for measuring effects?
- How are the meaning making processes accounted for when modeling developmental trajectories?

PVEST provides guidance on its empirical applications to derive robust insights on the risks and the cultivation of coping in high-risk environments (Spencer et al., 2019). Involving the considerations noted above supports building measures that incorporate the realities of inequality and captures the phenomenological perspectives of youths to reveal clear and robust findings on how diverse youths engage with developmental tasks.

### Dimensions of Vulnerability and Risk: Interplay of Race, Ethnicity and Conceptualizations of Poverty in US Context

"Othering" of children of color that denies that inherent strengths and humanity consigns them to a status that does not properly interrogate the absence of supports for positive identity development to offset exacerbated risk. The historic moment defined by pandemic, economic insecurity and acknowledged racial strife dictates inclusion of a category of risk beyond high risk that diverse youths must engage: morbid risk. When considering the lethal implications of combined risk of racial and ethnic discrimination along with living in poverty, marred by extreme paucity of supports and resources, the advantages granted certain groups by virtue of skin color, bring into stark relief privileges that neutralize risks that diverse youth living in less resourced areas face on a regular basis.

The particular insights of Spencer et al. (2006b) around the saliency of White privilege in the theorizing of human development, particularly in evaluating the developmental trajectories of diverse youth, merits focus, as noted earlier in this article. Social scientific theoretical frameworks – in general – frequently fail to interrogate the role of structural racism and discriminatory practices at work in the lived contexts of youths and their families.

For example, Bronfenbrenner's macrosystem, exosystem, and ecosystem that infer racism and discrimination as emanating from a neutral-functioning sets of systems miss the opportunity for a more robust assessment of those dimensions that expand the conceptualizing of normative developmental pathways. Alternatively, Spencer et al. note, "…by ignoring the fact of race and ethnicity linked negative social structural conditions and associations with resiliency, the omission further compromises individual coping and allows the continued interpretational liberties about youth of color that frequently and narrowly label their lives and efforts as suggesting solely deviancy, pathology, deficits and problems." (Spencer et al., 2006a, b, p. 629)

### Human Development and Human Capital

Studies have evaluated the effects Head Start and other early childhood programs utilizing theories of human capital to motivate their empirical strategies (e.g., Johnson & Jackson, 2019). In their work, Heckman and Mosso link the purpose of early child development for the development of skills that can prompt social mobility (Heckman & Mosso, 2014). Evaluating the objectives of life course developmental in creating skills, Heckman and Mosso state:

Life is assumed to last four periods: two periods as a passive child who makes no economic decisions (and whose consumption is ignored) but who receives investment in the form of goods and two periods as a parent. When the parent dies, she is replaced by the generation of her grandchild. (Heckman & Mosso, 2014, p. 699)

Human Capital theory, which has matured as a central, motivating framework throughout the social sciences (for example, see Tan, 2014 for a discussion of human capital theory in education research), centralizes the importance of human beings as rational actors in a market economy. As the construct has radiated throughout the social sciences, the dimensions of the identity developmental processes in context need to be interrogated for the explanatory value they can bring to expanding how to support healthy human development in all its facets.

Using education as a site of skill development, Nichols Lodato (2018) highlights the evolution of human capital theory's encounter with education, accounting for how educational attainment has been used as an index of how a person's role in society is defined and actualized. Dewey's call for an education system that develops productive workers clearly situated education as an elemental force in developing ideal citizens for society, with the students emerging from their educational training poised to assume their appropriate roles in a rapidly advancing society undergoing a technological revolution in the early twentieth century (Dewey, 1915). While Dewey held primary interest in the development of citizens in a democratic society, Schultz, in framing investment in human capital, highlighted the significant returns in the form of higher earnings for workers who pursue additional education (Schultz, 1961). Becker's work further expanded the notion of human capital, posting that citizens are of value to the market and play a central role in the generation of profits that can improve their overall well-being by improving their skills (Becker, 1964). Bourdieu seeks to bridge the sociological and economic perspectives by describing various forms of capital, identifying other categories of capital, such as embodied capital and cultural capital, that can accrue to an individual and impact their success in a broader labor market (Bourdieu,

1986). Coleman's theorizing of social capital, on the other hand, sought to repair deficiencies he observed in sociology's conceptualization of the role of social systems which deprived individuals of an "engine of action" and economics' theorizing about human capital which assumed unrealistically atomistic motivating factors governing individual behavior (Coleman, 1988).

A human development lens that considers meaning making in context in support of identity development expands the terrain for theoretical reasoning beyond a rational actor's utility to the market. The investigation of an individual's dynamic relationship with the context, as advanced by PVEST and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (EST), stages investigation into the explicit and nuanced components driving identity development. Accordingly, as noted by PVEST, identity development processes are intrinsically shaped by how individuals make meaning of the risks encountered, supports available, and coping strategies cultivated over the life course. This occurs in a series of systems and contexts. When the systems and contexts where individuals and supports, such as family, schools, organizations, reside are undermined by the presence of unequal distribution of resources – that is, inequality, based on racial and ethnic discriminatory practices – then the sources may cease to deliver the full complement of support as intended or described. In addition, PVEST holds that if a support is not understood as such it can be rendered effectively inaccessible. As such, if programs designed to promote development are evaluated through the lens of their efficacy in the cultivation of human capital rather than the complexity of identity development processes, without accounting for dimensions of inequality and racial and ethnic discrimination, then the explanatory value of the findings will be consistently limited.

The study of inequality by the work of economists such as Chetty, Saez, and Pikkety highlights inequality as an empirically proven economic phenomenon worthy of study and inclusion in models of economic behavior, acknowledging the effects on life outcomes of individuals. Here, the study of inequality as a measurable variable that can produce negative effects creates the conceptual space where economics and human development find common cause in de-centering human development as a process of maximizing utilization of human capital, but rather can situate inequality as a factor impacting the systems and networks where individuals reside. Furthermore, acknowledging that inequality exists as an empirical fact then necessitates consideration of the violent effects of poverty on development for all children, with particular virulent effects on youths of color who are also impacted by the heightened, morbid levels of risks owed to discriminatory practices in the education, health, and judicial systems in the United States

### Conclusions, Discussion, and Implications Moving Forward

In short, measuring a social service program's efficacy and impact based on how a person performs on skills-based tests is a *part* of the puzzle, not the solution to the entire puzzle of how best to support human developmental processes in context. One critical additional dimension necessary is to acknowledge and incorporate the human developmental processes at work in how an individual *makes meaning* of the supports, and develops coping mechanisms in service to positive identity development. How youths view themselves and cultivate an identity is a critical component of understanding what type of supports are needed, and how much, in context. The latter includes consideration of

contexts relevant to each developmental period. The clarity that can be achieved in augmenting the evaluative frame can prevent programming such as Head Start to be interpreted as an inoculant versus a component of necessary supports specific to and surrounding early childhood. Thus, supports considered should reflect the character of contexts navigated as linked to the developmental tasks pursued as one progresses across the life course. PVEST allows for a nuanced assessment of critical components that frame the entirety of a human being's developmental journey over the life course, which can include periods of skill development and acquisition, and periods of retreat. This includes diverse youth making sense of their identities as they encounter challenges, risks, and opportunities in varied contexts with different levels of supports.

As addressed, economic models – while having practices of inquiry to understanding human beings as rational actors apply a particular evaluative judgement on outcomes – too frequently miss the mark on the broader developmental journey at work. A recent interview of the president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, Neel Kashkari – a rare event in itself – provides a hopeful and "awakened" perspective from the economic sector. (Smialek, 2020) He posted on Twitter that the killing of George Floyd indicated "institutional racism that is actively taught and reinforced." Also reported by Smialek (2020), a couple of days later Mr. Kashkari's colleague, Mary C. Daly, President of the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco followed suit with the following post that "hate thrives when people stay quiet." In his interview with Smialek (2020), Kashkari noted that racial disparities are holding back workers from reaching their full potential. Critically important about the Fed-sourced comments is that they are unusual and strongly implicate the uneven character of the context as experienced by diverse citizens. Importantly, relative to motivation for change, this awareness introduces the possibility of opportunities for real impact by noting *interest convergence* (i.e., the policy-relevant perspective shared by critical theorists). The latter heightens the probability of authentic impact. The less-than-desirable positions in which many poor and minority parents find themselves impede the forces of change imagined by Edward Zigler's program innovation. The under-support of programming hinders its maximized impact. The contributions of parenting are restrained as a function of the inequalities and race-based inequities encountered by parenting adults attempting the support imagined by Zigler's groundbreaking programming innovation. The very fact of Head Start envisioned by Edward Zigler signaled that something extra was foundationally required as a better start for particular children not assisted by privilege. As reported by Smialek (2020) in her interview of Neel Kashkari when questioned about his reactions to the recent Black Lives Matter demonstrations, Kashkari remarked:

> It had been in the news for the past day or so, and I'd seen it, and I'd seen other footage Black men being killed by the police, and I was struggling to figure out – why did this feel different to me? And it felt so different to me because you could see, there were witnesses standing around the police officers and the police officers didn't care. They were so confident in sending a message, that we're not doing anything wrong.
> I think I've just learned – if we don't speak out about what we're seeing, if everyone doesn't speak out about what they're seeing, then nothing changes."
> Kashkari continues…in answering the question from Jeanna Smialek as whether institutional racism hurts the economy:
> If white children in Minneapolis had the educational attainment that

African-American children have, this problem would have been solved a long time ago. I think racism is an undercurrent of the status quo, and then, you have huge chunks of our population who are not getting a good education, who do not have good job opportunities – it absolutely holds our economy back.

There are big chunks of our population whose innate human capital basically is being squandered because they are not getting an education that enables them to take advantage of their natural talents and gifts. That not only hurts them, it hurts all of us. It hurts our society and our economy. (Smialek, 2020)

Optimistic about Fed President Neel Kashkari's sentiments is its "socially awakened" character when juxtaposed against the traditional human capital and childhood status mindset initially described in this article. That is, the human capital conceptual strategy provided by social science disciplines is static and unresponsive to systemic racism (i.e., economics, sociology, and psychology): that is, suggesting a "racism presence denial" performative mindset. Kashkari's economic analysis – as a "socially awakened" and race conscious viewpoint does not shelter behind the "racism presence denial" countenance described. More similar to the inequality consciousness perspective that Head Start programming acknowledges, the Fed President's perspective provides hope. Kashkari's viewpoint asserts positionality parallel with the tradition invoked by Zigler with Head Start programming innovation. Systemic racism commonly nurtured by "racism presence denial" requires up-hauling and reconfiguration of systems of oppression. However, the first step in the process needed is to cease "racism presence denial" and –unavoidably – the inculcation of practices designed for maintaining multiple levels of systemic inequality.

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