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Abstract

**Neurological ‘Marred Identity’:
Reversing the Effects of Poverty through Relational Protective Factors**

In considering the task of participating in God’s mission in the context of a wounded world, we must grapple with the idea that children are made especially vulnerable to an array of unhealthy outcomes when they grow up in environments of income inequality. Specifically, children who grow up in urban poverty are exposed to cumulative and compounding risk factors that can create environments of toxic stress that can overload the Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal (HPA) axis of children’s developing brains. When the HPA axis becomes dysregulated, neurobiological malformations can occur that are related to behavioral maladaptations like poor impulse control, difficulty focusing attention, and difficulty controlling emotions, in addition to interconnected cognitive deficits related to working memory and language development, all of which can contribute to a feedback loop of deleterious realities that often persist and worsen throughout generations in the absence of intervention.

In this paper I will place the neurobiological malformations and related behavioral maladaptations of impoverished children at risk within the theological framework of Bryant Myers’ language of “marred identity,” calling the phenomenon “neurological ‘marred identity.’” Moreover, I will argue that any proposed method of youth development, including Myers’ holistic method of “transformational development,” must account for the effects of poverty at a neurological level. To conclude, I will suggest a missiological response to neurological marred identity by applying Myers’ transformational development model to low SES youth populations in light of research about the protective and restorative power of secure relationships for the development of young people’s brains.