Poor but happy?

Bill Grieve compares differing attitudes to poverty in the East and West and questions why Scotland's poor are made to feel so worthless and disempowered

WE GET used to what we have and I remember some years ago a sense of powerlessness and fear morphing into anger at the absence of street lighting as I stumbled about in Delhi one moonless night trying to find the GPO so that, homesick, I could 'phone home. It seemed bizarre to be in one of the world's major cities and be as helpless as in a Highland glen without a headtorch. I found myself on a patch of grassy earth which proved to be a road intersection.

Tentatively picking my way over this, I kept tripping over white inert heaps on the ground and it wasn't until one grunted that, startled, I realised they were human beings. There were a lot of them and they were sleeping. Quite literally, they had nowhere else to lay their head. There was something surrealistic as I tried to find space to put my feet down between them, feeling my way in the darkness. Their sheer, stark possessionlessness just didn't compute. I suddenly felt so tired I was tempted to lie down among them.

Seventy years previously, my great–uncle Tom (pronounced Tome) pulled himself up by the railings in Northpark Street in Maryhill, dying. He had gone to work as he was scared that if he reported sick, his job as a sawmill assistant would have been taken by someone else and no doubt he was right. His wage kept my father's family from sliding down the social ladder to the much-feared Lyon Street.

Lyon Street, Maryhill

He died a few days later owning only the clothes he stood up in. The only holiday he'd ever had was a few days in a TB convalescent sanatorium and he would speak in awed tones of the bed sheets being changed and the meals he didn't have to make. My father kept his braces until his mother-in-law threw them out some years later, a source of much bitterness. Poverty and the fear of it is in the genes of Scots, or at least in most of us.

This is a phrase I would have unthinkingly used until I recently listened to a talk given by Harry Burns, Scotland's Chief Medical Officer, and now I wonder if it might be literally true. Why, he ponders, should it be that someone in Easterhouse or Drumchapel or Pilton who smokes 20 a day is four times more likely to get lung cancer than, for example, a doctor who smokes the same amount? Why do poor people with cancer lose more weight than the middle class? Why do their wounds take longer to heal? What is it that's so potent about our place in the social hierarchy?

I won't reveal all the steps in this detective story in case you have the good fortune to hear him talk. But the usual suspects - diet and lifestyle - aren't by any means the whole story. Instead he sees the research on survivors of Auschwitz and other death camps as key. Of those who had been children at the time but had

survived into adulthood, 70 per cent had serious physical or mental illness. But 30 per cent were healthy and successful as adults. So what made them different?

What distinguished them could be summarised as them having a sense of coherence. They had an ability to make sense of what the world threw at them, no matter how awful it was. They understood what was happening to them. They were able to see their world as structured, predictable and explicable, and hence were able to make judgements about it.

Secondly, they had the confidence that they had the resources to deal with what was thrown at them and to make a difference. They had resilience. And thirdly, they wanted to survive. They had the motivation to keep going. Life was worth living. It seemed that these building blocks had been laid down in early childhood; there was something in the way they had been brought up.

I remember as a reporter to the children's panel talking to young people aged 13 or 14 from Possil in the early days of the heroin epidemic about the likelihood of overdosing, and being discomfited at their indifference - if they died, they died. This wasn't bravado: it was in effect a belief based on their experiences at the age of 13 that life had exhausted its potential for them.

For children to be healthy and successful, their social and physical environment has to be comprehensible, manageable and meaningful or they experience chronic stress. Early childhood is the key learning ground: if a baby is stressed and cries because it's

hungry or needs its nappy changed and is consistently picked up, cuddled, talked to and has its needs met and its stress resolved, then at a young age that child develops a sense of the world as comprehensible and manageable. It learns that it has control over its stressful experiences.

Consistency of parenting is key in this: inconsistency is what breeds stress. And, to compound the problem, if the baby gets signals that the world is dangerous and inconsistent, its stress responses reorient brain development. The amygdala (which specialises in fear, anger, threat) grows and the hypothalamus (planning, memory, learning, stress reduction) reduces in size.

There is even evidence that maternal stress affects the foetus in this way so that at birth, the child is already programmed to see the world as a dangerous place: the building blocks of chronic stress are already there.

If you learn life is dangerous, inconsistent and not manageable, stress can cause passivity and hopelessness to quickly set in. A large-scale study of men at high risk of premature death, for example, found that those who had a high sense of hopelessness - in the sense of negativity and pessimism - had a multiply higher risk of dying than those who found meaning in life.

The startling discovery was that the negative group deposited fat on their arteries at a faster rate than the others and stress hormones were responsible, in particular cortisol which mobilises fat in the blood to produce fuel for muscles, for fight or flight. The lower down the social hierarchy your job is, the higher your cortisol and adrenalin levels will be, as research in the civil service has revealed.

The key factor here seems to be manageability: the lower level your job, the less you're able to be in control of your workload. Studies in eastern Europe showed that countries where people felt more in control of their lives - Poland, the Czech Republic, for example - had much lower death rates than those where people felt less control - Russia, for example.

The same applies to children. Children living in deprived areas have significantly higher cortisol levels than middle class children. And the longer a child is in care, for example, the higher their cortisol levels.

There are other important elements in relation to stress, principally the inflammatory response, triggered by an anticipation of the body's possible need to heal. Measured by the levels of a particular protein (CRP), those living in deprived areas will have twice the level of CRP compared to those living in a middle class area. And obese smokers will have eight times the level of skinny non-smokers living in a middle class area: each factor doubles the level. The significance of this is that CRP is a much better predictor of heart attack than cholesterol because CRP causes the artery lining to become "sticky" and break up, leading to blood clots. CRP also leads to diabetes.

Thirdly, stress is thought to cause telomeres, a part of the DNA, to be shortened, leading to biological ageing, reduced lifespan and increased risk of disease. There is even a suggestion that children of those with shortened telomeres may inherit the condition.

The point of all of this is that stress sustained over the long-term wears us out - it accelerates aging and prematurely exposes us to a constellation of diseases. Poverty, and all that goes with it including living in a poor area, is a breeding ground for stress. It's as if the body's defence mechanisms are chronically turned up to full like a boiler's thermostat, permanently, and this wears the body out faster.

A typical slum beside the Bagmati River in Kathmandu

In Scotland, it is a so far unexplained fact that we are peculiarly prone to ill health, even allowing for poverty and deprivation. We have the highest mortality rates and lowest life expectancy in Western Europe. We have a 50 per cent higher risk of heart disease than England, even once individual social circumstances (and other risk factors such as smoking or alcohol consumption) have been controlled for. This "Scottish Effect" exists in all geographical regions of Scotland and at all levels of deprivation but is most evident in the most deprived post industrial region of West Central Scotland, with Glasgow at the region's core.

Could it be, Harry Burns asks in his Chief Medical Officer's report last year, that the prolonged period of social and economic disruption experienced by large parts of the Scottish population has left them less of the psychological resilience they need to face off the challenges of modern life? Or has what one historian called our tradition of "municipal feudalism" made us passive recipients of often shoddy services instead of active citizens demanding better?

On my last trip to Nepal, a Nepalese NGO Director very kindly gave me her copy of a book about contemporary spiritual and secular issues in the East, written by a much admired author. It's often instructive to read what is written by and for another culture, especially when it comments on your own culture.

SacredSecular by Lata Mani talks of the poor and socially marginal in the West seeming so much more dispirited than their non-First World counterparts. Anger, pessimism, nihilism, abjection and sense of disempowerment among the materially disadvantaged have become serious obstacles to political mobilisation. "The hopelessness and worthlessness often felt by the poor," she comments, "is expressed in self-destructive life choices and a tragic indifference to oneself as well as others."

Aware of the dangers of generalisation and stereotyping, she nonetheless remarks that the sense of apathy and paralysis that characterises the poor in the West is in direct contrast to the inventiveness, joy, sense of dignity and gratitude for life that one routinely encounters among the disenfranchised in urban India. Those whose material circumstances are often even more dire than their First World comrades manifest a dynamism and sense of self-worth that present a striking contrast.

Giant leap: Scotland has a genius for making its underclass feel uniquely useless

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If I'm honest, on first reading this, I could sense a series of defensive routines engaging in myself. "Typical bloody anti-western generalisation," I thought: "What about the caste system? Where's the joy on the face of the boy being mutilated to be a better beggar?"

And yet, there is something in the analysis. "Slums are a hub of economic activity; of people making, breaking, re-making things of necessity to others including the wealthy. Few on the street are idle. This contrasts with the West where large numbers of men and women are unemployed and unemployable. The centralised, privatised, highly structured economy in the West simply has no place where their talents might be nurtured. The Indian economy, on the other hand, is more like a sprawling Third World metropolis in which large corporations coexist with businesses run from pavements and street corners. There is room for everyone to play some part; to make a contribution to society. There is, in short, hope - to a far greater degree than found among the urban poor of the West."

This does make sense to me. "There in the West," she continues, "the ideology of individual effort, personal responsibility and a hyperbolic individualism converge in making it seem as though one's success is entirely a function of one's enterprising nature and innate intelligence. This means that those unable to succeed in the extremely narrow material way in which success is defined feel a deep sense of shame. They tend to see themselves as society represents them - as failures. This view brings together elements of a distorted form of Christian thought with a dry secularism that leaves one with little hope or alternative redemptive viewpoint."

There is something in this that feels hurtfully accurate. We have a genius for making our underclass feel uniquely useless - "chavs", "neds", "scroungers", "chancers", "junkies", "alkies". What we're actually saying, which they understand at a deep level only

too well, is we the mainstream, the real people, would be better off without them - that's the subtext.

So we might conclude that there is some unspoken element in our culture which beats a deeper drum than our equal opportunities posturing, whether we are willing to admit it or not. What it tells us is that dignity is not inherent in the human individual independent of his or her life circumstances. It is a quality to be achieved. And, as night follows day, the attainment of material well-being becomes a crucial measure of worth. "It is within this cultural frame," Lata Mani concludes, "that material disadvantage spells indignity, shame, self-judgement, dispiritedness and a paralysing pessimism of the will."

Which brings us back to Harry Burns. A paralysing pessimism of the will is precisely what the biological mechanisms, triggered by the chronic stress which our species of poverty induces, conspire to produce.

This not irreversible, we must note. When he was at university, he says, he was taught that when a brain cell died, it died. The brain could not develop after it was fully formed.

But more recent research indicates that this is not true and groups as varied as Buddhist meditators and London taxi drivers who have mastered "The Knowledge" demonstrate the brain's extraordinary ability to re-engineer or regrow itself. There is therefore everything to play for.

We've always been a small, poor country. And yet we were the crucible of the Enlightenment. We went through a peculiarly intense Industrial Revolution. We produced a particularly brutalised, demoralised poor in our cities.

We are a maze of contradictions. The way we organise our society, spiritually and practically, makes a substantial slice of our fellow citizens feel useless and then conveniently, feeling useless, they kill themselves off through the inexorable workings of the biology we've inherited as a species.

This is not good. It's a kind of tragedy. We could do a lot better. We have a track record of innovative and humane ways of dealing with difficulties. The children's hearings system was a genuinely revolutionary approach to deal with troubled children, for example. It really doesn't have to be this way.

What could be a bigger and more fitting challenge for social work in Scotland, using the research which continues to unfold in the most fascinating way, than to devise ways to help the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in our society to take back control of their lives and rediscover purpose and hope for the future?

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