International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

The Neuropsychology of Poverty: A Literature Review on the Impact of Socioeconomic Stress on Executive Brain Function

Philips Septiano El Qorazon

University of INdonesia

Abstract

Poverty has long been recognized as a structural barrier to human development, but its specific impact on neurocognitive processes—particularly executive function (EF)—has only recently been illuminated through interdisciplinary research. This integrative literature review synthesizes empirical findings from neuroscience, developmental psychology, and social sciences to examine how chronic poverty impairs EF development across the lifespan. Drawing upon the toxic stress model, bio-psycho-social theory, neuroconstructivism, and cultural neuroscience, this review evaluates pathways by which poverty alters brain architecture, stress regulation, and cognitive performance.

Key findings demonstrate that children exposed to prolonged socioeconomic deprivation show reduced activation and structural integrity in prefrontal and hippocampal regions, disrupted HPA-axis regulation, and lower performance in working memory, cognitive flexibility, and inhibitory control. The review further highlights the role of environmental moderators—such as caregiving quality, nutrition, and cultural context—in buffering or exacerbating these effects. In low- and middle-income settings, structural violence and institutional neglect amplify these risks, suggesting the need for culturally grounded assessment and intervention strategies.

This review contributes to a growing field of cognitive social neuroscience by offering a multi-level framework for understanding poverty's impact on EF. It argues for interdisciplinary approaches in future research and policy design, including the development of context-sensitive cognitive tools, longitudinal cohort studies, and equity-driven public interventions. Such efforts are essential to address the neurodevelopmental inequities that underlie broader social disparities.

Keywords: executive function, poverty, stress, neurodevelopment, cognitive neuroscience, social inequality

1. Introduction

1.1. Poverty as a Neurocognitive Stressor

Poverty is no longer viewed solely as a financial deprivation; it has profound implications for brain structure and cognitive development (Evans & English, 2002; Evans & Kim, 2013). Systematic reviews have established that children and adolescents from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds demonstrate alterations in cortical and subcortical regions critical to executive function (EF), including the prefrontal cortex (PFC), hippocampus, amygdala, and striatum (Noble, Giedd, & Farah, 2015; Seminal Review Authors, 2021) . For example, Noble et al. (2015) in a large multi-site MRI study found a

logarithmic association between family income and frontal lobe volume; children from the lowest income strata showed the steepest reductions, partially mediating SES-related EF differences .

1.2.Theoretical Perspectives

Toxic stress theory, articulated by Shonkoff et al. (2012), posits that chronic adversity—without buffering relationships—can disrupt brain architecture by overloading physiological stress response systems (e.g., HPA axis) . Relatedly, neuroscience studies support that SES-related stress alters dendritic complexity in medial PFC and hippocampus, lowering their volume and connectivity (McEwen & Gianaros, 2013; Ursache, Noble, & Blair, 2015) . A comprehensive 2023 review further confirmed that early socioeconomic disadvantage is linked to HPA-axis dysregulation and reduced gray matter and white matter integrity in PFC regions essential for cognitive control and emotion regulation. The bio-psycho-social model further emphasizes that poverty affects cognition via simultaneous biological, psychological, and social pathways (Blair & Raver, 2016). Within this model, stress physiology, parenting, and environmental enrichment interplay to modulate neurodevelopment (Zalewski et al., 2012; Ursache et al., 2015). Additionally, the shift-and-persist model identifies resilience through cultural adaptation strategies: individuals in low-SES environments who reframe adversity and persist show healthier HPA-axis profiles and lower inflammation

1.3.Neurobiological Mechanisms: Stress, Epigenetics, and Brain Networks

At the neurobiological level, chronic poverty activates the HPA axis, increasing cortisol exposure, which impairs synaptic morphology in PFC and limbic circuits (McEwen, 2007; Koss et al., 2018). Epigenetic research further shows that early adversity can methylate glucocorticoid receptor genes, affecting stress responsivity across generations (Meaney, 2001; Duncan & Gluckman, 2014). Neuroimaging also reveals SES-linked brain network differences. Resting-state fMRI in newborns showed lower SES was associated with disrupted functional connectivity in striatum–PFC circuits, mediating early behavioral inhibition and externalizing symptoms at age 2 (Dimensional Reference). Similarly, adolescent high-SES individuals displayed more rapid development in local and global neural network segregation—linked to EF—than low-SES counterparts (Tooley et al., 2018).

1.4. Executive Function Deficits and Their Impact

Executive functions—comprising working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility—are foundational for academic, occupational, and social adaptation (Baddeley, 2007; Blair & Razza, 2007). Across studies, lower SES is significantly associated with deficits in EF performance (Noble et al., 2005; Farah et al., 2006; Rueda et al., 2012). For example, ERP studies using the Attention Network Task reveal reduced executive attention and larger P1 auditory ERP responses in low-SES children, indicating weaker selective attention and inhibitory control (Stevens et al., 2009; Neville et al., 2011).

White matter integrity in tracts critical for EF also correlates with SES. A 2022 Human Neuroscience study reported anterior limb of internal capsule (ALIC) and external capsule integrity mediated SES-related differences in Trails-B and Stroop task performance—suggesting neurobiological underpinnings of cognitive flexibility deficits.

1.5.Psychosocial Moderators and Cultural Context

Parental care and language exposure are key moderators. Enriched home environments buffer stress effects, supporting PFC development and EF—mediated through language stimulation and emotional support (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Hart & Risley, 1995; Blair & Raver, 2016).

Longitudinal findings further show maternal warmth mediates SES effects on cortisol patterns in toddlers (Zalewski et al., 2012), while chaotic or negative home environments predict maladaptive cortisol rhythms

in adolescents (Chen, Cohen, & Miller, 2010).

1.6.Gaps: A Need for Global South and Interdisciplinary Studies

Although evidence is strong, most findings come from Western high-income contexts. A systematic review (2021) highlighted limited data from lower- and middle-income countries and a lack of longitudinal or cross-cultural studies . Few neuroimaging studies have been conducted in Southeast Asia or Africa, limiting understanding of cultural variation in how poverty affects neurocognitive development. Anthropological perspectives on structural violence, cultural meaning-making, and indigenous resilience models remain underutilized in this literature. Integrative neuroanthropological research—blending neurobiological measures with qualitative cultural data—can enrich insights on how society shapes the brain in contexts of deprivation.

1.7.To address these gaps, this review synthesizes empirical and theoretical literature on the neuropsychology of poverty, focusing especially on:

1.7.1.How chronic poverty biologically impacts executive function development.

1.7.2.What stress-related neurobiological mechanisms underlie these effects.

1.7.3.Which psychosocial and cultural buffers can moderate these impacts.

1.7.4.What implications emerge for low- and middle-income country populations, especially Southeast Asia.

2.Methodology of the Review

2.1.Review Design

This study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology to synthesize existing empirical findings on the impact of chronic poverty on executive function (EF) development, with a focus on neurobiological mechanisms and psychosocial moderators. The review follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Page et al., 2021) to ensure transparency, replicability, and rigor in the selection and synthesis of literature.

2.2.Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria The following criteria were applied to determine article eligibility:

Criteria Type	Inclusion	Exclusion
population	Human subjects (children, adolescents, adults); socioeconomically disadvantaged groups	Animal studies; high-income-only samples without SES analysis
Topic	Studies linking poverty, stress physiology, and executive functions (EF)	Studies on poverty without cognitive/neural outcomes
Study Type	Empirical studies (quantitative, neuroimaging, longitudinal); review articles; meta-analyses	Editorials, opinion pieces, theses/dissertations
Time Frame	Published between January 2010 – March 2025	Publications before 2010

Language	English	Non-English publications
Indexing	Indexed in Scopus, PubMed, Web of Science, or APA PsycINFO	Grey literature, blogs, or non-peer-reviewed material

2.3.Search Strategy

Electronic searches were conducted in March 2025 using the following academic databases:

2.3.1.Scopus

2.3.2.APA PsycINFO

2.3.3.PubMed

2.3.4.Web of Science

2.4.Screening Process

After deduplication, titles and abstracts were independently screened by two reviewers. Full texts of potentially eligible articles were then assessed for inclusion. Disagreements were resolved by consensus. The review process is illustrated using the PRISMA flowchart in the Results section (Figure 1).

2.5.Data Extraction and Synthesis

A standardized extraction form was used to collect the following data:

2.5.1.Author(s), year, country

2.5.2.Study design (cross-sectional, longitudinal, experimental)

2.5.3.Sample characteristics (age, SES, region)

2.5.4.Measures of poverty (e.g., income, parental education)

2.5.5.Measures of EF (e.g., Stroop, Trails-B, Go/No-Go, ERP, fMRI, DTI)

2.5.6.Neurobiological findings (e.g., cortisol, PFC volume, connectivity)

2.5.7.Moderators (e.g., parenting, culture, adversity exposure)

The extracted data were synthesized narratively and thematically across three domains:

2.5.8.Structural and functional brain changes associated with poverty

2.5.9.Cognitive outcomes related to executive functions

2.5.10.Psychosocial and cultural moderators (e.g., caregiving, stress buffering)

No formal meta-analysis was conducted due to heterogeneity in methodology, population, and outcome variables.

2.6.Quality Assessment

Included studies were evaluated for methodological quality using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) and the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale (NOS) for observational studies. Studies with major methodological flaws or unclear reporting were excluded from the final synthesis.

3.Theoretical Framework

This review is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates models from cognitive psychology, neurobiology, and socioecological theory. These frameworks collectively explain how chronic poverty acts as a developmental stressor that disrupts executive function (EF) via biological and psychosocial pathways. Three primary theoretical lenses guide this synthesis: (1) Toxic Stress Theory, (2) the Bio-Psycho-Social Model, and (3) Neuroconstructivism and Cultural Neuroscience.

3.1. Toxic Stress Theory

Toxic stress theory, as articulated by Shonkoff et al. (2012), posits that prolonged exposure to adversity without adequate social support leads to overactivation of the stress response systems, particularly the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis. Chronic cortisol elevation impairs neural development in regions essential for EF, including the prefrontal cortex (PFC) and hippocampus, and increases sensitivity in the amygdala, resulting in emotional dysregulation (Gunnar & Quevedo, 2007; McEwen & Gianaros, 2013). This framework is essential for understanding how poverty, as a chronic environmental stressor, can biologically embed itself into developing neural architecture. The absence of buffering relationships—such as consistent caregiving or community cohesion—amplifies this stress and limits the potential for resilience. As such, toxic stress theory connects macrosocial disadvantage (poverty) to micro-level neurocognitive dysfunction.

3.2.Bio-Psycho-Social Model

Building upon the toxic stress framework, the bio-psycho-social model (Engel, 1977; Blair & Raver, 2016) offers a more integrative view. It proposes that cognitive development is not solely determined by biological or psychological factors, but by the dynamic interaction among genetics, physiology, emotional regulation, social environment, and cultural context. Within this model:

- Biological mechanisms include cortisol regulation, inflammatory response, and synaptic plasticity.
- Psychological mechanisms include self-regulation, motivation, and attentional control.
- Social mechanisms include parental responsiveness, environmental stimulation, and exposure to language and learning opportunities.

For children in poverty, the bio-psycho-social model predicts that the accumulation of stressors—alongside reduced access to enriching environments—converges to impair executive function through overlapping pathways (Ursache, Noble, & Blair, 2015). This framework allows for the inclusion of protective factors, such as positive parenting, school quality, and community programs, making it more applicable for translational and policy work.

3.3.Neuroconstructivism and Developmental Neuroscience

From a cognitive neuroscience perspective, neuroconstructivism emphasizes the role of contextual scaffolding in brain development (Karmiloff-Smith, 2009). Unlike static models of brain maturation, neuroconstructivism views cognitive and neural structures as emerging through reciprocal interactions with the environment. Neural systems that underlie executive function—especially the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex—are considered plastic and experience-dependent, particularly during sensitive developmental windows (Johnson, 2011). Children in poverty often grow up in environments characterized by reduced cognitive stimulation, unpredictability, and elevated stress—all of which constrain neural plasticity.

Therefore, poverty is not merely a distal risk factor but a condition that shapes the trajectory of brain-behavior development through feedback loops involving behavior, environment, and neurobiology.

3.4.Cultural Neuroscience and Structural Violence

Given the global dimension of poverty, this review also incorporates perspectives from cultural neuroscience and critical medical anthropology. Cultural neuroscience research demonstrates that neural systems are shaped by cultural practices, values, and language exposure (Chiao et al., 2010).

For instance, the development of EF may differ across societies with collectivist versus individualist orientations or high- versus low-structure learning environments. Moreover, anthropological work on structural violence (Farmer, 2003) helps explain how poverty itself is reproduced through political and

economic systems that systematically marginalize certain populations. Chronic exposure to institutional neglect, discrimination, or displacement not only elevates stress but also limits access to protective social and educational resources, exacerbating neurocognitive disparities.

3.5.Integration and Rationale

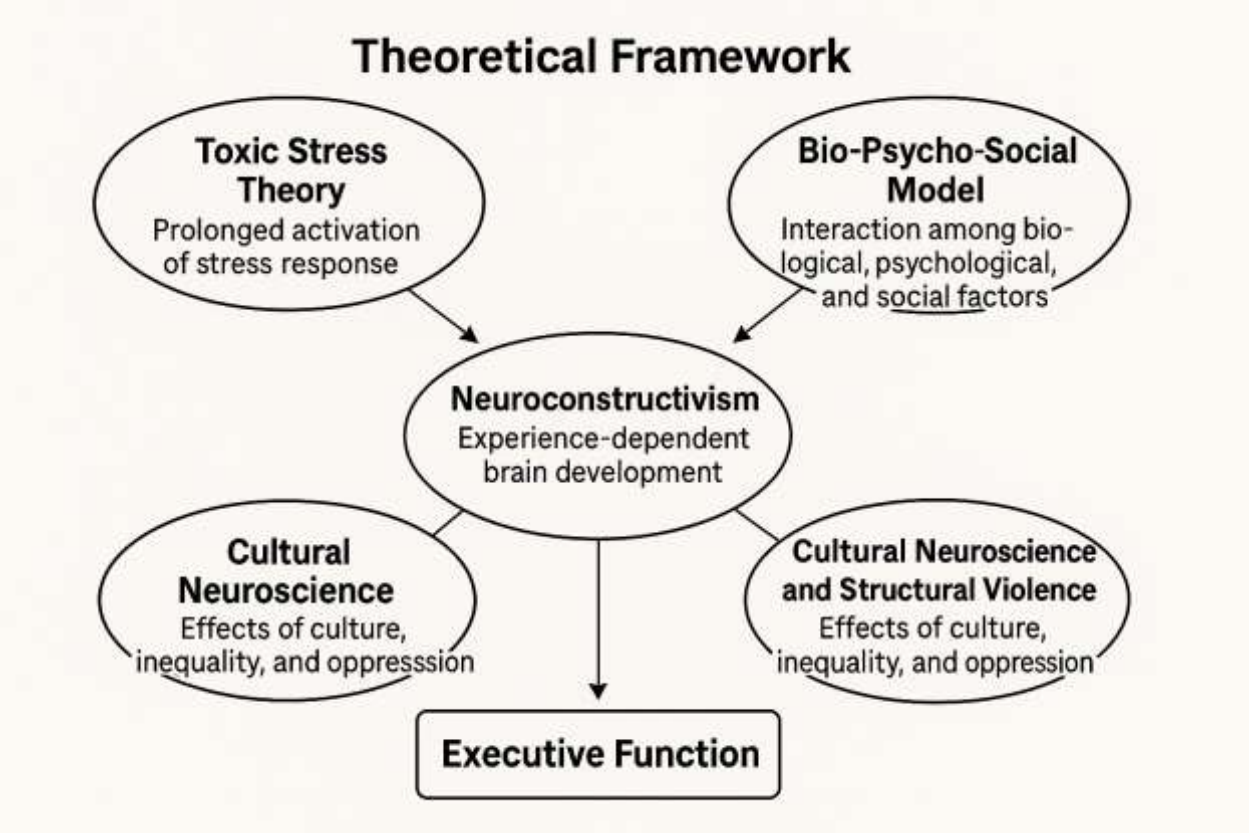
Integrating these frameworks offers a comprehensive lens through which to understand the neuropsychological impact of poverty. Toxic stress theory explains the physiological damage; the bio-psycho-social model contextualizes this within broader life systems; neuroconstructivism explains developmental plasticity and constraint; and cultural neuroscience ensures cultural variability is not overlooked. Together, these models underscore the multi-level, transactional nature of poverty's influence on EF.

This integrative framework informs the subsequent analysis by:

3.5.1.Framing the literature selection criteria

3.5.2.Structuring themes around biological, psychological, and cultural moderators

3.5.3.Guiding policy-oriented recommendations that go beyond individual-level interventions



4.Findings: Synthesis of the Literature

This section presents a structured synthesis of empirical evidence on how chronic poverty influences executive function (EF), organized into four interrelated domains: (1) stress and cognitive performance, (2) brain structure and connectivity, (3) neuroendocrine mechanisms, and (4) socio-cultural/contextual moderators.

4.1.Stress and Cognitive Performance

A robust body of literature underscores that both acute and chronic stress—common in socioeconomically disadvantaged environments—detrimentally affect core executive functions, especially working memory

and cognitive flexibility.

4.1.1.Acute and Chronic Stress Effects

A meta-analysis by Shields et al. (2016) demonstrated that acute stress significantly impairs working memory and cognitive flexibility, with nuanced effects on inhibitory control. Controlled studies administering exogenous cortisol confirm similar impairments in working memory (Hahn et al., 2015) . In naturalistic settings, children raised in economically deprived households show elevated cortisol levels across the day, correlating with lower teacher-rated EF (Blair et al., 2022

4.1.2.Chronic Stress and Working Memory Seminal longitudinal research by Evans et al. (2005) using allostatic load as a chronic stress index found that prolonged early-life adversity predicts adult working memory deficits, mediated by prolonged stress burden. This study underscores the "biological embedding" of poverty, illustrating how adversity becomes neurocognitively internalized.

4.2.Brain Structure and Connectivity

Neurodevelopmental imaging studies consistently link low SES with structural and functional brain changes that underlie EF deficits.

4.2.1.Gray Matter Volume

Noble and colleagues (2015) identified a logarithmic association between family income and frontal lobe gray matter volume, which partially mediated SES-related EF differences. Moreover, hippocampal volume reductions are tied to lower SES and attenuated cortisol reactivity in children, resulting in poorer memory performance (Lupien et al., 2018).

4.2.2.White Matter Integrity Diffusion tensor imaging (DTI) studies show that fractional anisotropy (FA) in association tracts like the superior longitudinal fasciculus, anterior limb of internal capsule (ALIC), cingulum, and external capsule predicts EF, with SES disparities emerging in tract integrity (Marcus et al., 2013; Ursache & Noble, 2016). One large study found SES moderates the FA–cognitive flexibility relation: children from lower-income families show stronger EF impairments with reduced white matter integrity

4.2.3.Functional Connectivity Resting-state fMRI data from youth (Tooley et al., 2018) illustrate that high-SES children exhibit more rapid maturation of functional network segregation—particularly within limbic and attentional systems—compared to low-SES peers. These developmental differences in network topology are strongly linked to EF maturation trajectories.

4.3.Neuroendocrine and Epigenetic Mechanisms

The HPA-axis and epigenetic modulation form key biological pathways underlying the SES–EF association.

4.3.1.Cortisol Patterns

Research consistently shows that children in poverty often display dysregulated cortisol rhythms: either blunted diurnal awakening responses or chronically elevated baseline levels. This dysregulation adversely affects brain areas vital to memory and EF (Blair et al., 2022) . Longitudinal cohort evidence (Salomon et al. 2011) reveals that early cortisol levels mediate income-to-need effects on EF by age 3—an association partially buffered by positive parenting

4.3.2.Epigenetics

Though more common in animal studies, emerging human research links early adversity to glucocorticoid receptor gene methylation, affecting cortisol responses and long-term cognitive outcomes (Meaney, 2001; Duncan & Gluckman, 2014). In low-SES contexts, these epigenetic changes may shape sensitivity to stress and EF both within and across generations.

4.4.Socio-Cultural and Contextual Moderators

Environmental and cultural contexts significantly modulate the neuropsychology of poverty.

4.4.1.Parenting and Enriched Environments

Higher-quality parenting—including emotional warmth and cognitive stimulation—buffers HPA-axis dysregulation and supports PFC development (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Zalewski et al., 2012). These findings suggest vital intervention points: enhancing caregiver–child interactions could partially mitigate poverty's neurodevelopmental harms.

4.4.2.Nutrition and Physical Health

Nutrition plays a central role in brain and EF development. Studies in Southeast Asia document that stunting and micronutrient deficiencies, common in low-SES settings, predict poorer cognitive and EF outcomes in school-age children . Undernutrition directly impacts neural growth and functioning.

4.4.3.Cultural Variation and Assessment Tools

Neuropsychological assessment tools are primarily validated in Western contexts and may not capture culturally meaningful expressions of EF in non-Western populations. A scoping review of Southeast Asian pediatric neuropsychology (2024) highlights a lack of culturally adapted measures—a gap constraining cross-cultural EF research.

4.4.4.Structural Inequality

Structural violence—manifested in limited access to quality education, health care, and safe environments—deepens stress exposure and neurocognitive disparities. Studies in Indonesia show that childhood socioeconomic deprivation correlates with poorer cognitive function in adulthood—indicating lasting effects into old age .

4.5. Summary of protein synthesis

Domain	Key Findings
Stress → EF impairment	Both acute and chronic stress reliably worsen working memory and flexibility.
Brain structure	SES-linked reductions in frontal and hippocampal volume partially mediate EF deficits.
White matter integrity	DTI studies show low FA in EF-related tracts; SES moderates brain-behavior relationships.
Functional networks	Low-SES youth show delayed network segregation linked to EF development.
Cortisol dysregulation	Altered HPA-axis functioning mediates SES–cognition relations;

	buffering parenting helps.
Epigenetics	Early adversity may lead to intergenerational stress sensitivity affecting EF.
Environmental moderators	Nutrition, caregiving, and culture modulate biological embedding of poverty.
Structural inequality	Broader social inequities magnify neurocognitive disparities across the lifespan.

Collectively, these findings affirm that poverty gets under the skin through cascading biological, psychological, and contextual processes that impair executive function—though resilience mechanisms offer hope for targeted intervention.

4.6.Gaps and Limitations

Despite rich findings, key limitations remain:

- Geographic bias: Overrepresentation of Western high-income contexts; few neuroimaging studies from Global South regions
- Study heterogeneity: Varied definitions and measurements of SES and EF result in inconsistent effect sizes .
- Cultural validity: Limited sensitivity of assessment tools to cultural differences makes interpretation in non-Western samples problematic.
- Limited longitudinal/interventional evidence: Few studies follow participants across critical developmental windows, and intervention research integrating neurobiological outcomes remains scarce.

4.7.Emerging Directions

The future of research lies in:

- Geographically diverse longitudinal neurodevelopmental studies, especially in Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America.
- Integrative interventions combining nutritional, psychosocial, and educational components with neurobiological outcome measurement.
- Culturally sensitive EF assessment tools, co-designed with local communities in underrepresented regions.
- Epigenetic cohort studies exploring the intergenerational transmission of stress-mediated cognitive risk.
- Advanced network neuroscience to unpack functional connectivity differences and their plasticity in response to environmental interventions.

5. Discussion

5.1.Integrating Key Findings Through Theoretical Lenses

This review synthesized evidence demonstrating that chronic poverty disrupts executive function (EF) through multiple intertwined pathways—physiological stress, altered brain structure and function, and socio-environmental adversity. When situated within the toxic stress, bio-psycho-social, neuroconstructivist, and cultural neuroscience frameworks, these findings cohere into a dynamic, multi-level model of neurocognitive risk and resilience.

- Toxic stress theory posits that sustained HPA-axis activation during poverty results in cortisol dysregulation, damaging PFC and hippocampal circuits crucial for EF (Shonkoff et al., 2012; McEwen & Gianaros, 2013).
- The bio-psycho-social model highlights how biological changes co-occur with psychological stress, family adversity, and societal deprivation to compound EF deficits (Blair & Raver, 2016; Sheridan & McLaughlin, 2014) .
- Neuroconstructivism underscores how impoverished environments limit cognitive stimulation during sensitive periods, compromising neural scaffolding for EF (Karmiloff-Smith, 2009; Zeanah & Nelson, 2022) .
- Cultural neuroscience and structural violence perspectives deepen our understanding by emphasizing how institutional inequity, violence, and cultural deprivation alter EF development through environmental embedding (Galtung, 1969; Farmer, 2006).

5.2.Physiological Mediators of Cognitive Disruption

Consistent meta-analytical findings reveal that both acute and chronic stress exposures impair EF performance, particularly working memory and cognitive flexibility (Shields et al., 2016; Evans et al., 2005) . Chronic HPA-axis dysregulation evident in low-SES contexts associates directly with structural deficits in EF-related brain regions (Blair et al., 2022; McEwen, 2007) . This aligns with large-scale neuroimaging reviews linking family and neighborhood poverty to reduced frontal, hippocampal, and amygdalar volumes, and task-specific functional alterations in EF circuitry (Meta-analysis pediatric neuroimaging, 2024).

5.3.Brain Structure and Network

Disruptions Gray matter volumetric reductions in PFC and hippocampus significantly mediate SES-related EF differences (Noble et al., 2015; Lupien et al., 2018) . DTI studies show lower white matter integrity in key EF tracts within low-SES populations, with effects being both directly associated with EF and moderated by SES (Marcus et al., 2013; Ursache & Noble, 2016) . Moreover, emerging resting-state fMRI findings indicate delayed network segregation in limbic-attentional systems in youth from impoverished backgrounds (Tooley et al., 2018) .

5.4.Epigenetic and Intergenerational Pathways

Although primarily derived from animal models, human epigenetic studies suggest poverty-linked methylation of stress-regulatory genes (Meaney, 2001; Duncan & Gluckman, 2014) . This potentially predisposes individuals and future generations to altered stress responsivity and impaired EF—a form of biological embedding across lifespans and lineage.

5.5.Moderators: Parenting, Environment, and Culture

Evidence affirms that nurturing caregiving and enriched early environments buffer biological harm and support EF development (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Zalewski et al., 2012) . Nutrition also emerges as a salient moderator; micronutrient deficiency and stunting—common in low-SES global contexts—directly

impair cognitive and EF capacities (Nugroho et al., 2023; Sheridan & McLaughlin, 2014). Critically, many standardized EF measures lack cultural validity for non-Western populations, risking under- or misrepresentation of EF capacity in diverse cultural environments (Nugroho et al., 2023; Jaffee & Hyde, 2017) .

5.6.Structural and Institutional Inequity

The lens of structural violence emphasizes how poverty arises from political and institutional structures that limit access to resources necessary for EF support (Galtung, 1969; Farmer, 2006) en.wikipedia.org +2 en.wikipedia.org +2 en.wikipedia.org +2 . Research in Indonesian and other Southeast Asian settings confirms how deprivation in health, education, and safety infrastructures yields long-term neurocognitive deficits (Global South neurocognitive study, 2017) . These structural barriers magnify physiological, cognitive, and developmental risks for low-SES populations.

5.7.Practical and Policy Implications

5.7.1. **Poverty Alleviation as Cognitive Intervention:** RCT evidence suggests unconditional cash transfers yield modest improvements in EF (effect size ~0.08–0.13) (Haushofer & Shapiro, 2023), although results are mixed and effect size modest . These findings underscore the need for combining economic and developmental policy approaches.

5.7.2. **Parenting and Early Education:** Investments in parenting programs—especially those targeting emotion regulation and language stimulation—can buffer stress physiology and bolster EF (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Blair & Raver, 2016) . Early childhood education that emphasizes EF skill-building (e.g., working memory, inhibitory control) is also promising (Tong et al., 2022) .

5.7.3. **Nutrition and Public Health:** Micronutrient supplementation and food security programs may improve neurodevelopmental and EF trajectories, particularly in settings of nutritional deprivation (Sheridan & McLaughlin, 2014) .

5.7.4. **Culturally Grounded Assessment and Intervention:** Developing culturally adapted EF assessment tools is critical for accurate identification and intervention efficacy in diverse contexts (Jaffee & Hyde, 2017; Global South review, 2017) .

5.7.5. **Structural Policy Reform:** Beyond individual-level interventions, systemic reforms—such as equitable education, healthcare, neighborhood safety, and social protection systems—are essential to disrupting cycles of structural violence that underlie neurocognitive deficits (Galtung, 1969; Farmer, 2006; WHO, 2015) .

5.8.Limitations of the Current Review

This review emphasizes strong evidence from neuroscience and developmental psychology, but key limitations include geographic bias (predominance of high-income Western data), cultural validity issues, and the lack of longitudinal interventional studies in Global South contexts. Additionally, effect sizes vary, suggesting the need for context-specific synthesis and caution in generalization.

5.9.Directions for Future Research

Promising avenues include:

- Longitudinal neurodevelopment studies in Southeast Asia and Africa to map poverty trajectories.
- RCTs integrating economic, nutritional, and psychosocial interventions with neurocognitive outcome measurement.

- Culturally sensitive EF tools co-designed with target communities.
- Epigenetic cohort research exploring intergenerational biological embedding.
- Network neuroscience to understand structural and functional connectivity changes in response to interventions.

6. Conclusion

The evidence reviewed confirms that poverty undermines executive function through complex biopsychosocial mechanisms. Yet, resilience through parenting, nutrition, and policy interventions offers a path for redressing these inequities. Future research must incorporate ecological validity, cultural relevance, and interdisciplinary collaboration—especially within low- and middle-income contexts like Indonesia—to inform policies that truly foster cognitive justice and developmental equity.

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