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**IWS**

# The concept of social epidemiology.

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# Social Epidemiology

Strategies for Public Health Activism



**Julie G. Cwikel**

# *Social epidemiology*

- The term social epidemiology refers to the branch of epidemiology that investigates how social interactions and social conditions impact the public's health
- It proposes to identify societal characteristics that affect the pattern of disease and health distribution in a society and to understand its mechanisms.

- Social epidemiologists study socioeconomic status (at one point in time and across the life course), race, gender, workplace, impact of neighborhood, social networks and support, and a variety of other social factors in an attempt to understand how social conditions affect population health.

- Major areas of epidemiological study include disease etiology, outbreak investigation, disease surveillance and screening, biomonitoring, and comparisons of treatment effects such as in clinical trials.

# *Discussion*

- Concepts used in social epidemiology can make a useful contribution to health services research because the underlying social factors do not only influence health but are also related to health care. Social inequality indicators like education or income have an impact on access to health care as well as on utilization and quality of health care. Social relationships influence adherence to medical treatment, help-seeking behavior, utilization of health services, and outcomes. Social capital in health care organizations is an important factor for the delivery of high-quality coordinated care. Job stress is highly prevalent among health care providers and can not only affect their health but also their performance.

There are several significant *concepts* in the field of *social epidemiology*:

the  
bio-psycho-social  
paradigm

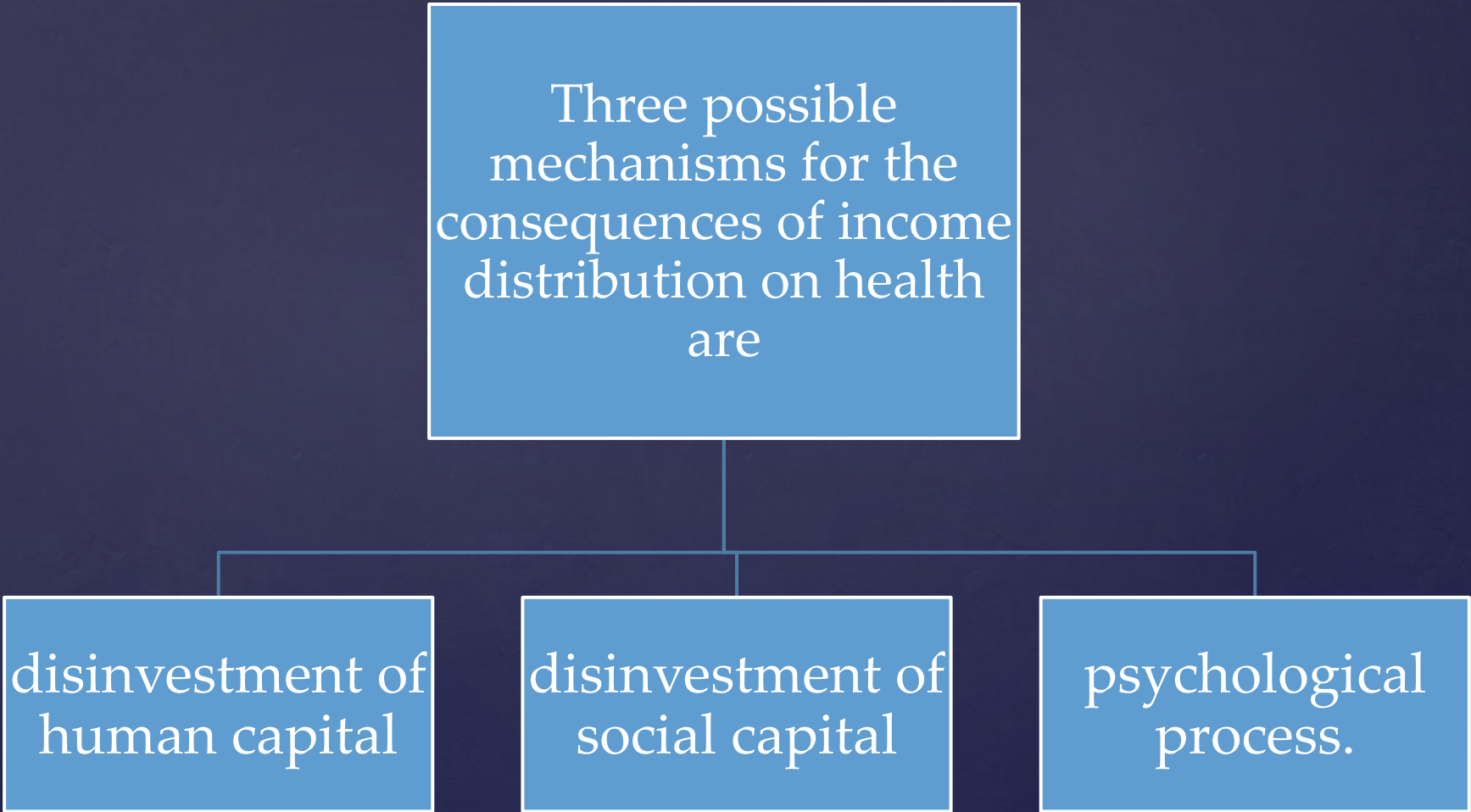
the population  
perspective

use of new  
statistical  
approaches such as  
multilevel analysis

significance of  
theory.

Income distribution and health is a relatively new field within social epidemiology.

Three possible mechanisms for the consequences of income distribution on health are



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graph TD; A[Three possible mechanisms for the consequences of income distribution on health are] --- B[disinvestment of human capital]; A --- C[disinvestment of social capital]; A --- D[psychological process.];
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disinvestment of human capital

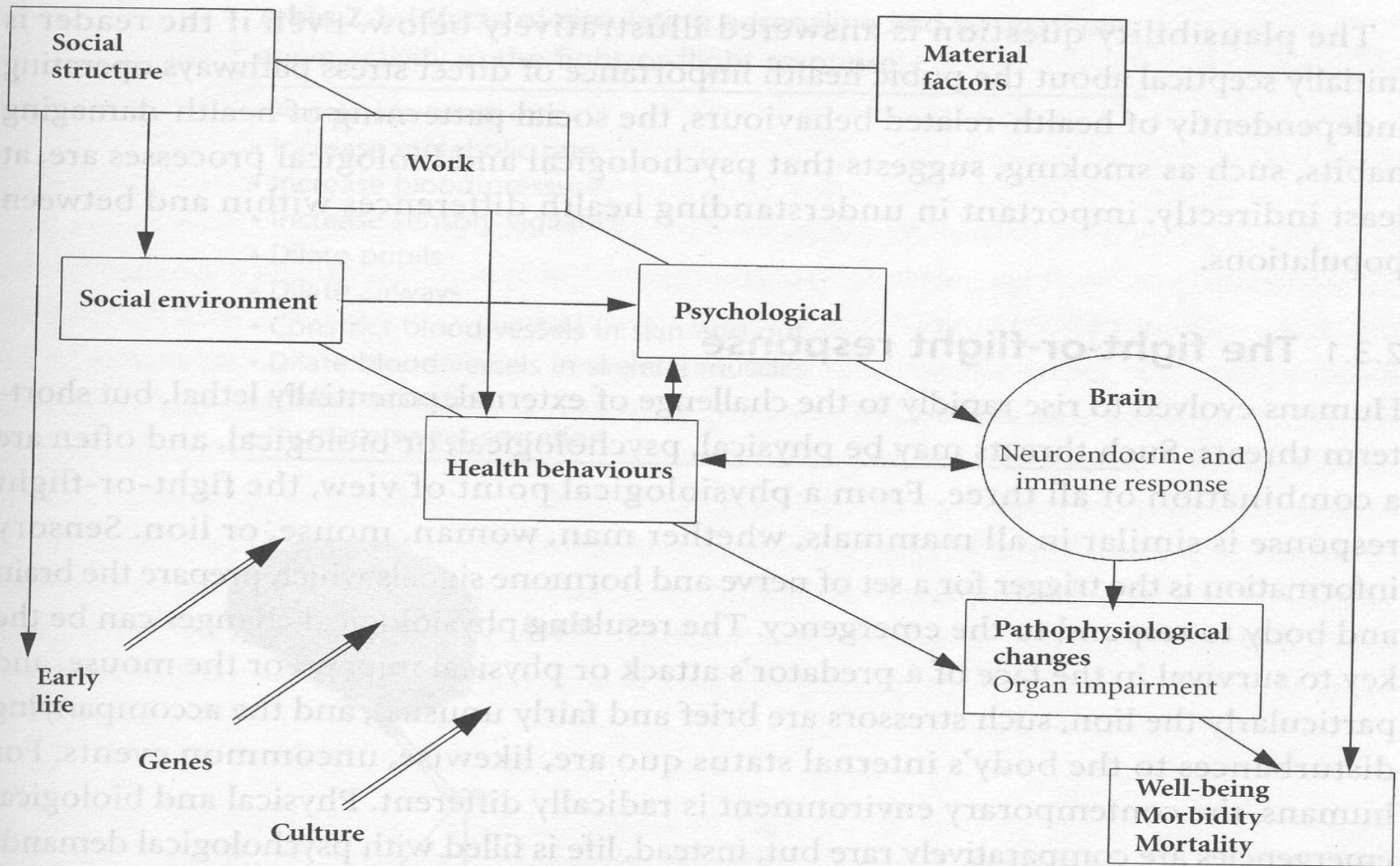
disinvestment of social capital

psychological process.



# Summary

- The theoretical considerations behind factors like *social inequalities*, *social relationships*, *social capital* and *work stress* can enrich health services research because theory helps to specify the research question, to clarify methodological issues, to understand how social factors are related to health care, and to develop and implement interventions.



**Fig. 2.2** Social determinants of health. The model links social structure to health and disease via material, psychosocial, and behavioural pathways. Genetic, early life, and cultural factors are further important influences on population health.