

# 'Mothercraft not learnt by instinct'

## An investigation of the infant welfare movement in Australia 1919-1939

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*Drawing from the work of Norbert Elias, this paper examines the infant welfare movement in Australia in the inter-war years. Elias maintains that during the course of what he describes as the 'civilising process', the psychological and behavioural distance between adults and children has increased. As a result of this growing distance, the period of childhood has become longer and the process of the transition to adulthood more complex. In this way, parenthood is experienced as an increasingly difficult task, and one that does not come naturally but requires education and training. It is the contention of this paper that the infant welfare movement, with its emphasis on parental education, can be understood as part of the civilising process: as an unintended consequence of the growing distance between children and adults.*

The human infant has a longer period of infancy and immaturity than the young of any other species and the human mother is less guided by instinct than any of the lower animals. This lack of instinctive knowledge should be met by her capacity to learn by experience and to profit by collective knowledge.

(Mayo, in Brown et al. 1938:3)

In the introduction to the *Australian Mothercraft Book*, published in 1938, Dr Helen Mayo, a leading figure in the Australian infant welfare movement at that time, identifies what she believes to be an intractable fact of the human condition – that human beings have a longer period of infancy and immaturity than any other species. It is for this reason that she believes mothers are less guided by instinct, and so require education in order to be able to negotiate the difficult and complex task of rearing human young.

Norbert Elias (1939, 2000) makes a similar observation about the extended period of human infancy, although he interprets it as a social fact – as an unintended consequence

of a long-term social process – rather than as a biological fact. Elias maintains that during the course of what he describes as the 'civilising process', the psychological and behavioural distance between adults and children has increased. As a result of this growing distance, the period of childhood has become longer and the process of the transition to adulthood more complex. In this way, parenthood is experienced as an increasingly difficult task, and one that does not come naturally but requires education and training.

It is the contention of this paper that Mayo and her contemporaries can be treated as an example of the process that Elias describes (1939, 2000). I argue that the infant welfare movement, particularly as it developed during the inter-war years, is part of the civilising process – an attempt to facilitate the 'civilising' of children through the education of parents.

Several investigations of the infant welfare movement have been undertaken. For example, Katherine Arnup (1990, 1994) and Jane Lewis (1980) provide an analysis of this movement in Canada and Britain respectively, while Desley Deacon (1985) and Kerreen Reiger (1985) examine developments in Australia. These investigations employ structural approaches, where the infant welfare movement is interpreted as an attempt, orchestrated by the state or a particular class, to impose a certain order upon family relationships. Arnup, for example, argues that the 'major impetus' driving the movement was 'provided by the rapidly developing public health bureaucracy' (Arnup 1990:191),

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'Mothercraft not learnt by instinct', from the title of an article (author unknown) published in *The Housewife*, January 1939.

and highlights the way in which 'officials at all levels of government sought to teach women the skills of 'mothercraft'' (Arnup 1990:193). Reiger and Deacon emphasise the role played by middle class professionals in shaping family life. Deacon, for instance, describes the infant welfare movement as 'a mass movement controlled by doctors' (Deacon 1985:165) who were concerned to undermine the skills of women in order to secure a place for themselves in the labour market. While Reiger acknowledges the contradictory effects of this movement in that the rationalisation of the family resulted in the debunking of some of the myths of motherhood, an emphasis is placed on the 'process of social structuring' and the way in which 'class and gender relationships' are linked to 'issues of domination and control' (Reiger 1985:17).

While these investigations provide important insights into the infant welfare movement, perhaps these interpretations go slightly too far in emphasising the way in which family life is deliberately shaped by outside forces. In this way, Elias (1939, 2000) provides an alternative framework for investigating this movement, highlighting the contingent nature of social and historical change. I argue that as part of the civilising process, the infant welfare movement can be more usefully understood as an unintended consequence of the growing distance between adults and children. It is to such a consideration that I now turn.

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## ELIAS'S FRAMEWORK

In *The Civilising Process*, first published in German in 1939, Elias investigates the relationship between 'specific changes in the structure of human relations' or human figurations, and 'corresponding changes' in personality structure or 'psychic habitus' (Elias 1939, 2000:367). He uses the term 'figuration' to refer to the various types of social formations that individuals create for themselves as they interact with each other – for example, 'groups or societies of different kinds' (Elias 1939, 2000:482). In his historical analysis of changing figuration patterns in the West, Elias shows how the 'personality structures of human beings ... change in conjunction with ... figuration changes' (Elias 1939, 2000:483).

In this regard, Elias describes the way in which, over the course of many generations, feudal configurations characterised by the existence of relatively small, independent, competing social units slowly developed into

centralised states. This process, in association with the rise of the bourgeoisie and the spread of industrial and commercial activity, gradually transformed social life. Social functions became increasingly differentiated and gave rise to the formation of complex chains of inter-dependencies. As Elias maintains:

From the earliest period of the history of the Occident to the present, social functions have become more and more differentiated under the pressure of competition. The more differentiated they become, the larger grows the number of functions and thus of people on whom the individual constantly depends in all his actions ... (Elias 1939, 2000:367)

This type of social configuration places certain demands upon individuals. As individuals find themselves immersed in ever more complex networks of interdependencies, they become increasingly reliant upon each other in order to fulfil basic needs. In this way, individuals increasingly feel the need to 'attune their conduct to that of others' or are 'compelled to regulate their conduct in an increasingly differentiated, more even and more stable manner' (Elias 1939, 2000:367). In other words, individuals must learn to 'civilise' their behaviour or to exercise a very high degree of self-control or self-restraint in their relations with others.

It is important to note that this 'civilised' mode of conduct has not been cultivated with deliberate intent, or forced upon individuals from the outside. As Elias maintains:

Nothing in history indicates that this change was brought about 'rationally', through any purposive education of individual people or groups (Elias 1939, 2000:365).

Rather, the figuration changes and associated changes in personality structure and behaviour which Elias describes have occurred as a result of the aforementioned unintended consequences of intended action. As Elias explains:

Out of the interweaving of innumerable individual interests and intentions – be they compatible, or opposed and inimical – something eventually emerges which, as it turns out, has neither been planned nor intended by any single individual. And yet it has been brought about by the intentions and actions of many individuals (Elias, cited by Mennell 1977:101).

In this sense, another key feature of a 'figuration' becomes apparent – its 'interweaving' character. Although social figurations are not created by specific individuals with deliberate intent, they nevertheless emerge from the actions of individuals. In this, Elias provides an alternative to notions of social 'structure' or 'system', where society is conceptualised as a reified formation that exists outside or independently of individuals. Figurations can be described as particular patterns of social 'interweaving' formed 'by the actions of interdependent people' (Elias, cited by van Krieken 1998:57). Elias uses the metaphor of a 'dance' to explain this further:

One can certainly speak of 'dance' in general, but no one will imagine a dance as a structure outside the individual or as a mere abstraction ... Like every other social figuration, a dance figuration is relatively independent of the specific individuals forming it here and now, but not of individuals as such (Elias 1939, 2000:482).

In this way, individuals create the social world that provides the context for their actions, and as such are not civilised from the outside through the imposition of a particular mode of conduct, but rather, individuals civilise each other.

One important consequence of this unintended 'civilising process' relates to changing conceptions of childhood. Elias maintains that during the past four hundred years, the psychological and behavioural distance between adults and children has increased. He writes:

The standard which is emerging in our phase of the civilising process [the twentieth century] is characterised by a profound distance between the behaviour of so-called 'adults' and children (Elias 1939, 2000:119).

This has occurred primarily because of changing figurational patterns. As modern life is characterised by highly differentiated social functions and complex networks of interdependencies,

... it is necessary to have a very high degree of foresight [and] restraint of momentary impulses ... It requires ... a degree of restraint which corresponds to the length and complexity of the chains of interdependence which, as an individual, one forms with other people (Elias 1998:201-202).

In this way, the behaviour required of adults differs greatly from that of children, and many years of training are needed for children to attain the advanced level of self-control expected of adults (Elias 1939, 2000:119). This contrasts with life in earlier epochs, in which:

The degree of restraint and control over drives expected by adults of each other was not much greater than that imposed on children,

and where:

... the distance between adults and children, measured by that of today, was slight (Elias 1939, 2000:120).

Elias is not alone in observing this growing distance between children and adults. Historians of childhood, such as Philippe Ariès (1962) and Lloyd de Mause (1974), were to later make this same point. De Mause describes this phenomenon as the 'evolution' of childhood, while Ariès refers to it as the 'discovery' of childhood and makes the claim 'that it was not until the late seventeenth century that the 'concept of childhood' began to emerge' (Archard 1993:15). While these works have received much criticism, particularly with regards to the evidential basis used by Ariès to substantiate his claim, and the normative approach

adopted by both authors (see, for example, Pollock 1983; Archard 1993; Elias 1998), these works have done much to further our understanding of the way in which notions of childhood are historically constituted.

David Archard (1993) provides a useful way of thinking about this issue. He maintains that the benefit of Ariès' work is that it brings to light the fact that there have been historical changes in the way in which childhood has been understood. He criticises Ariès, however, in that he conflates the notion of a 'concept' of childhood with that of a 'conception' of childhood. To have a '*concept* of childhood', writes Archard, 'requires that children be distinguishable from adults in respect of some unspecified set of attributes', while '[a] *conception* of childhood is a specification of those attributes' (Archard 1993:22). He maintains that:

[although] there are good reasons for thinking that all societies at all times have had the concept of childhood ... there have been different conceptions of childhood (Archard 1993:23-24).

In this way, Archard disputes Ariès' claim that it is only modern society which has a concept of childhood, but concedes that:

he may be right to believe that there is a distinctively modern conception of the 'particular nature of the child' (Archard 1993:29).

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Archard provides a description of what he considers to be the modern conception of childhood. He agrees with Ariès that the 'most important feature of the way in which the modern age conceives of children is as meriting separation from the world of adults' (Archard 1993: 29). He writes:

The particular nature of children is separate; it clearly and distinctly sets them apart from adults. Children neither work nor play alongside adults; they do not participate in the adult world of law and politics. Their world is innocent where the adult one is knowing; and so on. We now insist upon a sharp distinction between the behaviour demanded of children and that expected of adults; what is thought appropriate treatment of children is distinct from that of adults. There is a marked division of roles and responsibilities (Archard 1993:29).

This idea of 'separateness' is similar to what Elias means when he talks about the growing distance between adults and children. Of particular significance, in relation to the

civilising process, is the separateness or growing distance in standards of behaviour.

These historical changes in the adult-child relationship have important implications in terms of the role and function of the family. As the behavioural and psychological distance between adults and children increases, so does the length and complexity of the individual social civilising process. As Elias maintains:

... the more complex and differentiated adult society becomes, the longer it takes, the more complex is the process of the civilizational transformation of the individual (Elias 1998:202).

In this way, the family has become an important medium for the regulation or civilising of children (Elias 1939, 2000:116-117), for which parents take on prime responsibility. 'From the earliest youth', maintains Elias, 'individuals are trained in the constant restraint and foresight that they need for adult function', and parents, 'partly automatically, [and] partly quite consciously through their own conduct and habits' (Elias 1939, 2000:374) are the 'primary agents of conditioning' (Elias 1939, 2000:119).

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Other writers have noted similar trends in relation to the modern transformation of the family. Edward Shorter (1975) and Lawrence Stone (1979), for instance, argue that a new emphasis was placed on the significance of childrearing after the seventeenth century (Reiger 1985:12), and Ronald Fletcher (1966) maintains that, compared with the past, modern parents are preoccupied with their children's health and wellbeing (van Krieken, et al. 2000:330). Max Horkheimer (1982) argues that the modern family performs a socialising function where human beings are endowed with a 'specific authority oriented conduct on which the existence of the bourgeois order largely depends' (1982:98), while Jacques Donzelot (1980) describes the family as a site of normalisation where expert knowledges are deployed and mobilised. Despite their theoretical differences, these writers identify the way in which the family has become increasingly specialised with regard to its socialising function. It is within this context of the changing significance of the family that the infant welfare movement, particularly with its emphasis on parental education, can be examined.

## THE INFANT WELFARE MOVEMENT IN AUSTRALIA IN THE INTER-WAR YEARS: AN ELIASIAN READING

Following similar trends in Europe and the United States, the infant welfare movement in Australia emerged as a public health campaign during the late nineteenth century to combat high infant mortality rates. This involved the introduction of 'legislative measures directly or indirectly concerned with child health; [such as] health acts, pure food acts and acts concerned with the provision of sanitation and water supplies' and pure milk supplies (Gandevia 1978:122). By the early twentieth century, however, the emphasis shifted from public health towards a focus on parental education, and in particular on influencing childrearing practices. As Phillipa Mein Smith maintains:

The history of the public health movement shows a shift in critical focus from water and sewerage in the late nineteenth century to cleaner milk supplies, adulteration and food legislation around 1900, and then the concern to improve mothers' practices (Smith 1991:25).

This was reflected in an article published in *The Lone Hand* in 1909, where an anonymous author complained that public health measures were inadequate. There was 'too much of the milk depot, the crèche, and the female inspector; too little of the development of the maternal spirit and of an instructed intelligence to guide it' (cited by Gandevia 1978:124). This was to be the new direction of the movement.

By the 1920s, infant health associations emerged in most states in Australia, facilitating the establishment of child health clinics. For example, in 1918 the Royal Society for the Welfare of Mothers and Babies was founded in Sydney, with the Baby Clinics Board becoming a committee of this society (Gandevia 1978:125). A School for Mothers was established in Adelaide in 1907, which became the Mothers and Babies Health Association in 1927. The first baby health centre was established in Victoria in 1917, and in Queensland four baby clinic centres were opened in 1918 (Gandevia 1978:126). The Infant Health Association of Western Australia was established in 1922.

The main focus of these newly established, non-government associations was to 'keep the babies healthy' through parental education. For example, the objectives of the Infant Health Association of Western Australia were:

- to emphasise the responsibilities of parenthood and the duty of every mother to fit herself for the fulfilment of motherhood;
- to collect and disseminate knowledge on matters affecting the health of women and children;
- to employ specially qualified nurses whose duty it shall be to give sound and reliable advice ... ; and

- to endeavour to educate and help parents and others in a practical way in domestic hygiene in general.  
(Infant Health Association of Western Australia 1927)

In this way, the clinics facilitated the dissemination of knowledge relating to child health and development. This was achieved through the production of written material in the form of pamphlets and manuals, and through the education of mothers by trained health professionals.

Typically, the literature produced by these associations focused on aspects of physical care such as feeding, hygiene, clothing, bathing, temperature regulation, exercise, toileting and sleeping. An emphasis was placed on regularity in relation to attending to these basic health requirements. For example, regularity in feeding was stressed with mothers being encouraged to develop a routine. Opinion was divided as to the appropriate interval between feeds, but as Dr Margaret Harper, author of *The Parent's Book* (1926), maintains, 'Whichever interval is selected, *the feeding must be regular*' [original emphasis] (1926:28). She goes on to say that regularity is of such importance that 'No baby should be fed simply because he cries' (1926:28), and that '*During the first few weeks of life the baby may have to be awakened for his meal*' [original emphasis] (1926:29). Harper also devotes a whole chapter to 'The Formation of Habits' where she emphasises the importance of regularity in relation to 'bowel and bladder action' as well as 'sleep'. 'Regularity in all the events of the day should be maintained from birth', she insists, and 'the mother should have a timetable for her baby and should adhere to it as strictly as possible' (1926:68).

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Reasons given for this emphasis in regularity relate to the baby's health needs as well as the needs of the mother. For example, Harper maintains that the 'reasons for preferring the four-hourly interval are, that the mother has more time for attending her household duties and recreation' but also because the 'baby's stomach has a period of rest between feedings' (Harper 1926:27). This focus on regularity was also seen to have implications in terms of behaviour and the development of character. For example, Dr Gertrude Dunlop maintains that:

No words can over-estimate the importance of training a baby to good regular habits from the very first day of his life. It means so much to him in health as well as in moral welfare (Dunlop 1928:63).

And Sister Maude Primrose maintains that:

In the observance of strict regularity in baby's daily routine, we are regulating and controlling his conduct. He is in this way gradually being taught habits of obedience and self-control (Primrose 1938:30).

The issue of self-control is another theme that emerges strongly in the literature. For example, Dunlop maintains that:

Self-control should be taught in childhood. As the child becomes old enough to reason, the mother can explain to him the importance of being master of himself (Dunlop 1928:79-80).

Similarly, the authors of the *Australian Mothercraft Book* emphasise self-control and how this can be developed through play:

Children should be given the opportunity to play together. The only child learns to give of his toys to his playmates, he learns self-control, and to take his place as a member of the community (Brown, Finlayson & Mayo 1938:47).

This importance placed on self-control is not only applied to children, but also to mothers. This is emphasised with regard to the regulation of emotions. For example, Sister Purcell insists that, 'One should never lose one's temper with baby' (Purcell 1928:62), and Sister Peck maintains that the mother 'must try and avoid any undue excitement, fits of temper, etc. In fact, if she wants to nurse her baby, she simply must learn self-control' (Peck 1927:19). The authors of the *Australian Mothercraft Book* also insist that the mother should do her best to keep an even temperament when dealing with children, even to the extent of sublimating her own emotions. They maintain that:

The placid mother who is not upset easily by the child's behaviour, who is friendly, patient and un-emotional in her dealings with him, does much to further his natural development from one phase to the next (Brown, et al. 1938:94).

In the above quotation, Brown et al. reveal why this is important. The mother who can regulate her emotions will do much to further her child's development. In this regard, the conduct of the mother is emphasised in relation to the consequences for the child. This point is also stressed by Dunlop. She maintains that in exercising self-control, the mother will be teaching the child through her own example. She writes:

Many an accident occurs, many a vexatious thing happens, but the wise mother philosophically regards all as part of the day's

life-work, teaching self-control by her own example, constantly curbing her own desires and emotions (Dunlop 1928:11).

Mothers are encouraged to restrain their emotions and to remain placid and calm in the face of the impulsive and unrestrained behaviour of children. It is hoped that in exercising self-control, mothers will foster the development of this capacity in their children.

These initiatives to instil this particular patterning of affect regulation in parents and children are part of the civilising process. Mothers must learn to 'curb' their emotions and to exercise self-control in their relations with children. The 'civilised' mother acts as a model and as a means of education to 'impose a high degree of self-constraint on children' (Elias 1998:209). As such, the civilising of children is achieved through the civilising of parents.

## CONCLUSION

It is important to note that these attempts to engender a particular mode of behaviour must be placed within the context of the 'long-term unplanned processes of development within which they take place' (van Krieken 2002:267). The infant welfare movement, with its emphasis on parental education, can be understood as an unintended consequence of the historical transformation of childhood. As Elias (1939, 2000) maintains, it is within the context of the growing distance between children and adults, which itself has occurred as a result of an unplanned or blind social process, that the family has become the primary site for the regulation of children, and parents the primary agents of conditioning. As children must learn in the space of a few years to attain the advanced level of self-control expected of adults, and as the individual social civilising process becomes longer and more complex, so does the task of parenting. It is in this regard that, during the course of the twentieth century, we have seen the emergence of various institutions and programs providing instruction and advice to parents. 'Only now', wrote Elias in 1939, 'in the age that has been called the "century of the child" is the realisation that ... children cannot behave like adults slowly penetrating the family circle with appropriate educational advice and instructions' (Elias, cited by van Krieken 1998:155). □

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