
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT, ITS CONTEXTS, AND CHILD WELFARE

HENRY MAAS

* This article first appeared in "Social Work Papers" of The School of Social Work, University of Southern California. Permission has been given to publish it in Australian Child & Family Welfare Journal.

Child welfare agencies and workers are often so besieged by pressures from all sides that they may lose sight of their purposes. They may mistake their current programs for their reasons for being. Daily activities in agencies are frequently determined by crises in the lives of societally unintegrated children and youth. They may be called neglected and/or abused, disturbed and/or delinquent. What they tend to have in common, whatever label they are given, is that they are somehow peripheral to their society, undervalued by it, and often victimized. Is it any wonder that children and youth become alienated, feeling unbelonging and depressed? Or that there are high staff turnover, underfunding and organizational emergencies in agencies mandated to provide primarily remedial (after-the-pain) services? Under these circumstances, practitioners have little opportunity to review the assumptions, as well as the effects of their daily work.

Somewhat remote from, but not at all irrelevant to these harassments of child welfare practice are studies of normal child life, the contexts within which it is lived, and the concepts which both orient and derive from research. This essay aims to bridge a few theoretical and practical issues in the two separate arenas of recent developmental and ecological inquiry, on the one side, and planning and action aimed to better the lives of children and youth, on the other. At the very least, I hope my efforts will raise some questions about some current preoccupations – and blinders.

DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES

Social work's long-term concern for children and youth has been coupled over the past half-century with a commitment to a developmental perspective. Key sources of this view in the 1920's were the inception of child guidance clinics and the importing from the old world of psychoanalytic theory. But developmental concepts have themselves developed in so many ways since then, as research has explored every new problem and complicated the questions still to be answered. The basic idea of development as orderly, cumulative, an progressive change through which the organism moves over time barely holds on as studies of old age and young

and middle adulthood call into question the notion of predictable stages (in lifelong psychosocial development). But the importance of the contexts in which development occurs has become apparent in new ways which are very compatible with recent statements of social work's purpose and focus on persons interacting in their environments.¹

What are fundamental development processes in early life, and what difference might these ideas make to child welfare workers? My assumption, elaborated at booklength elsewhere, is that the central purpose of the social services is to foster people's social development and contexts conducive to their optimum growth.²

Unfolding, being shaped, or interacting? To start with, I remind readers of square-one distinctions about human development. For some people, development is conceived as the unfolding of genetically programmed potentials. Developmental sequences are inevitably followed by human organisms from conception on, if others or material deprivation and illness do not interfere. This is the "nature" point of view in the old nature versus nurture controversy. Then, the environmentalists, who cannot deny genetic messages, argue that nevertheless an active milieu does most of the significant shaping of people's behaviour. Finally, the dominant theme today is that children (and other human organisms) are not primarily reactive responders to powerful environments, but rather proactive initiators. They can appreciably modify the behaviour of other people and other components of their surroundings as the latter, in turn, influence the children's development.

Enough research has been done, for example, on newborns in delivery rooms and during the neonatal period to pattern differences in parent-child interaction under various conditions.³ More important than the patterns, however, is the primary residual image. The child is a psychosocially *interacting* being who alters nuclear and extended family relationships or other network linkages. For example, adult children becoming new parents tend to grow closer to their own parents as the young family's need for social supports increases.⁴

Moreover, infants normally bond and attach to parents, as parents normally and reciprocally attach to their infants.⁵ Not only the children removed from "neglectful parents" suffer separation pains; the parents suffer too. Thus, remedial services should not only "save the children"; they

should serve whole families of troubled, deprived and troublesome people. But must child welfare limit itself to rescue operations? Can it not anticipate with developmental services? More on this latter.

In short, development occurs, in current views, not merely as nature unfolding nor as nurture shaping but as both, in interactional processes. In these processes, environmental contexts are themselves reshaped, as they provide, ideally, conducive milieus for developing children and youth – and older people.⁶

Contexts which matter. Social work has traditionally differed from other professions in the human services in that it has long concerned itself with the physical and social-psychological environments remains a vague one. Some years ago I tried to clarify some components of environments which matter to children and child welfare,⁷ but since that paper I believe I have been able to develop the idea of meaningful contexts in more precise and useful ways, as I shall now suggest.

The children and youth involved in child welfare's remedial services tend to be societally unintegrated or peripheral, feeling *unbelonging and alienated*. Their families have a minimum of interaction and articulation with the mainstreams of society; they fail to find opportunities to participate or options appropriate to their capacities and values. Such families are overrepresented among minority groups' – native people or people in transition from one world to another. On a neighbourhood level, they are socially isolated families, exchanging neither greetings nor small services with the people living next door. In fact, they are sometimes highly mobile families, never staying long enough in any community to become a part of it. Poverty may drastically constrain their coping abilities, as well as their social development in general. They are forced to use formal services because they do not feel they have any formal human services which are available, until they are approached by official agents to whom they feel in no way related. What I am briefly describing is a social context and way of life remote from the kinds of social supports and human communication without which most of us could not survive. There is a sizable research literature on the societally unintegrated people who become child welfare clients. Developmental or preventive policies and services might provide a very different scenario, the settings or contexts

for which are all important and described in the following paragraphs.

Normally, newborns arrive in an on-going society and a living place (the latter composed of home and neighborhood) which have in various ways anticipated the neonate's arrival. Though anticipation rarely fits with the complexities of reality, preparation can provide inoculation against overwhelming stressors. On-going society prescribes appropriate delivery-place options and the formal and informal socialization-preparations for parenthood. Anticipatory, also, are family allowances, arrangements for time off from work for employed parents, the availability of and access to appropriate housing and formal infant care services to buttress or substitute for parents' informal resources and incapacities.⁸ Through such provisions, the macrocontexts of a society's economy, political system, and culture into which a newborn is delivered influence a child's early and growing up days. The impact is experienced by the child primarily through the contexts of the all-important living place, a physical and social space to which some child welfare workers may give inadequate attention.

For example, in infancy a prime developmental process is the growth of reciprocal attachments, as noted earlier. But this is likely to occur between the young and their parents in balanced ways only when the parents themselves have mutual attachments and supports from an extended kinship and/or friendship network which ministers to parental needs. The emotionally and materially unsupported parent can only precariously develop and sustain growth-inducing parent-infant attachments. Single parents are especially at risk; parenting an infant ideally occurs in a relatively equalitarian partnership with shared responsibilities for nurturance. Moreover, infants are able to form many attachments, and the social network in which the family is embedded is the major resource for infants' multiple attachments. Thus, a conducive context for infant development is a many-personed and supportive arena.⁹ Developmental or preventive child welfare workers help to set up parent groups and foster network-linking. They work with those parents individually who for reasons of their social positions or their relationship capacities are not societally integrated. My one-time mentor, Richard Titmuss, proposed that a major and unifying goal of the social services is social integration,¹⁰ and I believe this tenet applies especially to child welfare.

How do adults cope with loss of a significant personal relationship? The responses are many and varied but underlying them all is a feeling of emotional vulnerability and disillusionment. How much worse it must be for a child, particularly one with minority racial characteristics who has it seems attempted to adapt to another cul-

ture and failed. It is no consolation to say that the first family was not able to meet his needs and that another better one will be found, the truth is that he was not wanted thus there must be something wrong with him, he has after all been abandoned twice.

Anger and depression although different in their expression are often very closely related (Bowby, 1960) and reactions to loss include both emotions so that the child needs not only to work through his despair and feelings of hopelessness at his loss but also his anger at being relinquished. This requires recognition and understanding, but the tendency is to place the child in another family as soon as possible to try and compensate for the original catastrophe as our salvation phantasies are set into motion.

In adoption breakdown the child no matter what the circumstances has usually not given up hope of returning to the original adoptive parents and while preparing for a new family still cherishes phantasies of being reclaimed and reunited. It is particularly important then that the child be given the opportunity to come to terms with his anger and depression before being expected to transfer his affections to yet another family. To this end a short period of residential care in a safe and therapeutic environment appears the most appropriate strategy. In such a situation grief work and preparation for the future can be undertaken and the child given time to integrate his past, present and hopes for the future.

To conclude, the adoptive child like any other needs love – but love is not enough. Even greater is his need for recognition, acceptance and understanding since love carries with it the unspoken obligation to return the love and this is often perceived as very threatening. The idea of love being persecutory is not easily accepted by those who have been loved and cherished and are in turn able to love, but to an individual whose life has been filled with losses and who is striving for an identity, love can be a threat. Such a child is isolated and yet wanting to be accepted, afraid to approach for fear that a relationship may at once take away everything, the very little that he has, and threaten his whole existence and yet fulfil his dreams and fill the emptiness of his soul. For these children, Bettelheim (1950) is right – love is not enough.

References

Barnes, M.J. The working through process in dealing with anxiety around adoption. *American Journal Orthopsychiatry*, 1953, 23, 605-620.

Bass, C. Matchmaker-Matchmaker: Older Child adoption Failure. *Child Welfare*, 1975, 54, 505-512.

Bell, V. Special consideration in the adoption of the older child. *Social Casework*, 1959, 40, 327-334.

Bettelheim, B. *Love is not enough*. New York: Free Press, 1950. Avon Paperback, 1971.

Bowlby, J. Grief and mourning in infancy an early childhood. *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 1960, 15, 9-52.

Chema, R., Farley, L., Oakley, F.H., O'Brien, M. Adoptive placement of the older child, *Child Welfare*, 1970, 49, 450-458.

Frailberg, S. A therapeutic approach to reactive ego disturbances in children in placement. *American Journal Orthopsychiatry*, 1962, 32, 18-31.

Harper, J.F., Williams, S. Adopted children admitted to residential psychiatric care. *Australian Journal Social Issues*, 1976, 11, 43-53.

Harvey, I.J. Adoption of Vietnamese Children: An Australian Study, *Australian Journal Social Issues*, 1983, 18, 55-69.

Hoksbergen, R.A.C. (ed) *Adoption of Children from Far Countries* Deventer, 1979.

Humphrey, M., Ounsted, C. Adoptive families referred for psychiatric advice I The Children, *British Journal Psychiatry*, 1963, 109, 599-603.

Jacobus, H. Operation propaganda, *New Statesman*, 11 May 1984.

Kadushin, A. *Adopting Older Children*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1970.

Kadushin, A. & Seidl, W. Adoption failure, A Social Work Postmortem, *Social Work*, 1971, 16, 32-38.

Kim, D.S. Issues in transracial and transcultural adoption, *Social Casework*, 1978, 59, 477-486.

Krugman, D. Working with Separation, *Child Welfare*, 1971, 50, 528-531.

Moss, S.Z. & Moss, M.S., Surrogate Mother-Child Relationships, *American Journal Orthopsychiatry*, 1975, 45, 381-390.

Rickarby, G.A., Lee, M.M., Said, J. & Egan, P. Adoptive families in distress, *Australian Journal Social Issues*, 1981, 16, 32-35.

Sister Herman Joseph. Holy Cross Social Service Agency, New Delhi Personal Communication, 1985.

Sister Margaret Mary, Mother Teresa's Calcutta, Personal Communication, 1985.

Sood, S. Indian Society for Sponsorship and Adoption, Calcutta, Personal Communication, 1985.