

Childhood: what do we need to know?

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This article presents a conceptual framework with which to approach issues of child development. It is based on an ecological perspective of human development that emphasizes the interplay of social and biological systems in shaping the experience of the child. In this framework child development is understood as the creation and maintenance of "social maps" that reflect and shape the child's behavior, maturation, personality, and conceptual development. The concepts of social risk and opportunity are critical to this conception as a means of linking developmental issues with issues of social policy, violence, displacement, and poverty.

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Childhood: what do we need to know? We can answer this question best from an ecological perspective, a perspective on childhood that directs our attention simultaneously to two classes of phenomena. The first is the interaction of the child as a biological organism with the immediate social environment as a set of processes, events, and relationships. The second is the interplay of social systems in the environment that shape the experience of the child.

This dual mandate to look both *inward* to the day-to-day interaction of the child in the family, the school, the neighbourhood, and the peer group, and *outward* to the forces that shape these social contexts is both the beauty and the challenge of human ecology. It demands much of us intellectually and ideolo-

gically if it is to be more than merely an academic exercise. Indeed, the agenda for studying childhood *must* derive not just from the personal interests of researchers but from the needs of children, parents, and teachers for information and from questions asked by and of social policy (Garbarino & Bronfenbrenner 1980).

To meet this impressive mandate we need to study the ecology of childhood. Like the biologist who learns about an animal by studying its habitat, sources of food, predators, and social practices, the student of child development must address how children live and grow in their social environment. And, while all students of animal ecology must accommodate to the purposeful actions of the organism, the human

ecologist must go further and seek to incorporate the phenomenological complexity of the organism-environment interaction, the social and psychological maps that define human meaning, the "social geography and climate" (Garbarino et al. 1992a).

Reviewing existing research tells us we have far to go in fulfilling this agenda. Too often, limitations of time, resources, and vision, pre-empt the most significant ecologically-oriented study of childhood in favour of more circumscribed and ecologically invalid investigations.

A science of childhood opportunities and risks

Children face different opportunities and risks for development because of their mental and physical make-up *and* because of the social environment they inhabit. Moreover, social environment affects the very physical make-up of the child, what Pasamanick (1987) calls "social biology." In contrast to sociobiology which emphasizes a genetic origin for social behavior (Wilson 1978), social biology concentrates on the social origins of biological phenomena (e.g., the impact of economic conditions and social policy on brain growth and development).

These effects are often negative (e.g., the impact of poverty and famine on mental retardation and birth weight, or the mutagenic influence of industrial carcinogens). But they may be positive as well (e.g., intrauterine surgery or nutritional therapy for a fetus with a genetic disorder). When these social influences operate in psychological or sociological terms we refer to them as sociocultural opportunities and risks.

Thus, when we refer to "opportunities for development" we mean relationships in which children find material, emotional, and social encouragement compatible with their needs and capacities as they exist at a specific point in their developing lives. For each child, the best fit must be worked out through experience, within some very broad guidelines of basic human needs, and then renegotiated as development proceeds and situations change. And, as Dunst & Trivette's (1992) recent work reveals, understanding developmental opportunities helps to explain the variance in outcomes left unaccounted for in models that simply address "risk."

We need to know more about this complex and im-

portant phenomena. We can start from recent findings regarding the "accumulation of risk." For example, Sameroff and his colleagues (1987) report that average IQ scores of 4-year-old children are related to the number of psychological and social risk factors present in their lives, risk factors that include socioeconomic conditions as well as inter-familial psychosocial factors. But this research reveals that the relationship is not simply additive. Average IQ for children with 0, 1 or 2 of the factors is above 115. With the addition of a third and fourth risk factor the average IQ scores drop precipitously to nearly 85, with relatively little further decrement as there is further accumulation of the fifth through eighth risk factors.

"Windows of opportunity" for intervention appear repeatedly across the life course, and what may be a critical threat at one point may be benign or even developmentally enhancing at another. For example, Elder's classic analyses (1974) of the impact of the economic crisis of the 1930s in the United States reveal that its effects were felt most negatively by young children. In fact, some adolescents (particularly daughters) even benefitted from the fact that paternal unemployment often meant special "opportunities" for enhanced responsibility and status in the family.

Analysing research by Rutter and others, Bronfenbrenner (1986) confirmed that the stress of urban life associated with "family adversity" (Rutter's term), is most negative and potent for young children (while it even stimulates some adolescents). High on our agenda for future study is a more complete elaboration of this hypothesis in answer to the question, "under what circumstances and conditions are the challenges of adversity 'growth-inducing'?"

It would seem that risks to development can come both from direct threats and from the absence of normal, expectable opportunities. Besides such obvious biological risks as malnutrition or injury, there are sociocultural risks that impoverish the developing individual's world of essential experiences and relationships and thereby threaten development. For example, abandoned children may suffer from their lack of the family ties and diverse role models that enrich those who live in large close-knit families.

We are scholars concerned with the meaning of childhood. As such, we need to pursue this interest in developmental risks and opportunities within a better

understanding of a systems approach to childhood experience. Such an approach will help to clarify the complexity we face in attempting to understand the interplay of biological, psychological, social, and cultural forces in early developmental risks and their amelioration.

A systems approach may help us discover the connections among what might at first seem to be unrelated events. It also can help us see that what often seems like an obvious solution may actually only make the problem worse. Forrester (1969) concludes that because systems are linked, and therefore influence each other ("feedback"), many of the most effective solutions to social problems are not readily apparent, and may even be "counter intuitive." According to Hardin (1966) the first law of ecology is that "You can never do just one thing." Intersystem feedback ensures that any single action may reverberate and produce unintended consequences. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, American parents reported in surveys that their motivation in purchasing televisions was "to bring the family together" (Garbarino 1974). The irony of what television has meant for family interaction is apparent.

Individuals and environments negotiate their relationships over time through a process of reciprocity. Neither is constant; *each* depends on the other. When asked, "Does X cause Y?" the answer is always, "It depends." We cannot predict reliably the future of one system without knowing something about the other systems with which it is linked. And even then it may be very difficult.

We see this when we ask "does early day care enhance or harm development?" We answer, "It depends on the child's age, quality of parent-child attachment, the day care provider's relationship to the child's parents, and the day care provider's motivations and training, as well as the more obvious question of what *exactly* constitutes the experience of day care. In short, it depends" (Belsky 1986).

As our research implements this approach we can see the reality of contextual influences in all aspects of development. Thus, for example, the link between early developmental delay and later IQ deficit appears to differ across social class groupings in the kind of social system present in most United States communities. In one classic study, 13% of the lower social class children who were developmentally delayed at

eight months showed an IQ of 79 or less at four years of age. In contrast, only 7% of the middle class children who were delayed at eight months of age were retarded at four years of age. For the upper class children the figure was only 2% (Willerman et al. 1970).

Does developmental delay predict IQ deficit? It would seem that it depends upon the family and community environment in which one is growing up. We might hypothesize that the social class effect linked to family status would be exaggerated in some communities while it might also be diminished in others. Indeed, this hypothesis is supported by existing research (Bronfenbrenner 1986, Garbarino & Kostelny 1992).

Is IQ influenced more by genetics or by environment, by nature or by nurture? It depends. For example, a reanalysis of twin study data reveals that when identical twins were separated at birth and reared in *similar* communities the correlation between their adult IQs was strong (86). When identical twins were reared in *dissimilar* communities the correlation between their adult IQs was weak (26) (Bronfenbrenner 1975). Which is more important, nature or nurture? It depends.

We see the individual's experiences as sub-systems within systems within larger systems, "as a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls" (Bronfenbrenner 1979). In asking and answering questions about development, we can and should always be ready to look at the next level of systems "beyond" and "within" to find the questions and the answers (Garbarino et al. 1992a).

Consider the case of child abuse. We need to look to the community that establishes laws and policies about child abuse, as well as to the families that offer a powerful definition of reality for the next generation. And, we also should look to the culture that defines physical force as an appropriate form of discipline in early childhood.

But we must also look within the individual, as a psychological system affected by conscious and changing roles, unconscious needs, and motives, to know why and how each adjusts in ways that generate conflict. In addition, we must also look "across" to see how the several systems involved (family, social services, social network, and economy) adjust to new conditions.

Interaction among these social forces is the key to

an ecological analysis of child development. They exist as linked social systems, implying that intervention can take place at each system level *and* that intervention at one level may well spill over to others. Our primary research agenda in expanding our understanding of childhood is to explore – systematically and empirically – the paths and consequences of these linkages.

This system approach examines the environment at four levels beyond the individual organism – from the “micro” to the “macro.” These systems have been catalogued in detail elsewhere (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1986, Garbarino et al. 1992). The goal here is to introduce them briefly in order to provide a framework for outlining what we need to know about childhood.

Microsystems are the immediate settings in which individuals develop. The shared experiences that occur in each setting provide a record of the microsystem and offer some clues to its future. Microsystems evolve and develop much as do individuals themselves from forces generated both within and without. It has become common to emphasize the need for longitudinal research, but it is a valid concern nonetheless; we must understand the biographies of the child’s microsystems.

The quality of a microsystem depends upon its ability to sustain and enhance development, and to provide a context that is emotionally validating and developmentally challenging. This in turn depends upon its capacity to operate in what Vygotsky (1934) called “the zone of proximal development,” i.e., the distance between what the child can accomplish alone (the level of actual development) and what the child can do when helped (the level of potential development). Too little research focuses on this crucial teaching process; child development is a partnership.

How do we proceed to measure the social richness of an individual’s life by assessing the changing availability of enduring, reciprocal, multifaceted relationships that emphasize playing, working, and loving? Risk on the other hand, lies in patterns of abuse, neglect, resource deficiency, and stress that insult the child and thwart development (Garbarino et al. 1986).

It is important to remember that our definition speaks of the microsystem as a pattern *experienced* by the developing person. Individuals influence their microsystems and those microsystems influence them in turn. Each participant acts on the basis of an

emergent social map – a phenomenological record and projection. We have only begun to study the formation of the child’s maps – from an appropriately ecological perspective, and from the child’s point of view (Garbarino 1989).

Mesosystems are relationships *between* microsystems in which the individual experiences reality. These links themselves form a system. We need research to explore the hypothesis that we can measure the richness of a mesosystem in the number and quality of its connections.

To complete this mission we need a better understanding of the dynamics of the “linkages” that create and sustain mesosystems. For example, we need to know more about the importance of mesosystems in intervention programs. Research suggests that the strength of the mesosystem linking the setting in which an intervention is implemented with the setting in which the individual spends the most significant time is crucial to the long-term effectiveness of the intervention, and to the maintenance of its effects (Whittaker 1983).

Exosystems are settings that have a bearing on the development of children, but in which those children do not play a direct role. For most children, the key exosystems include the workplace of their parents (for most children, since they are not participants there) and those centres of power such as school boards, church councils, and planning commissions that make decisions affecting their day-to-day life.

Note that the concept of an exosystem illustrates the projective nature of the ecological perspective, for the same setting that is an exosystem for a child may be a microsystem for the parent, and vice versa. Thus, one form of knowledge needed concerns strategies and tactics for intervention aimed at transforming exosystems into microsystems, such as by initiating greater participation in important institutions for isolated, disenfranchised, and powerless clients, e.g., by getting parents to visit the family day care home or creating on-site day care at the workplace.

A second area of needed mesosystem research is power. Albee (1980) has gone so far as to identify powerlessness as the primary factor leading to impaired development and mental disability. It certainly plays a large role in determining the fate of groups of individuals via public policy and may even be very important when considering individual cases – such as

whether or not parents have the influence needed to enroll a medically vulnerable child in a special treatment program.

In many cases, risk and opportunity at the ecosystem level are essentially political matters. And this demands that our knowledge base include a fine appreciation of the politics of childhood as well as its biology, psychology, sociology, and anthropology.

The ecological perspective forces us to consider the concept of risk beyond the narrow confines of individual personality and family dynamics. In the ecological approach, both are "causes" of the child's developmental patterns and "reflections" of broader sociocultural forces. Mark Twain wrote: "If the only tool you have is a hammer you tend to treat every problem as if it were a nail." Inflexible loyalty to a specific focus (e.g., the parents) is often a stumbling block to effective intervention. However, the obverse must also be considered: "If you define every problem as a nail, the only tool you will seek is a hammer."

Viewing children only in terms of organismic and interpersonal dynamics precludes an understanding of the many other avenues of influence that might be open to us as helpers, or that might be topics of study for us as scientists. This message provides a crucial guide to research on intervention and program evaluation, and reflects the operation of macrosystems of culture and ideology.

Macrosystems are the context within which micro-, meso-, and exosystems are set, the broad ideological, demographic, and institutional patterns of a particular culture or subculture. These macrosystems serve as the master "blueprints" for the ecology of human development. These blueprints reflect a people's shared assumptions about how things should be done, as well as the institutions that represent those assumptions. Macrosystems are ideology incarnate.

Thus, we contrast societal blueprints that rest upon fundamental institutional expressions, such as a "collective versus individual orientation." Religion provides a classic example of the macrosystem concept because it involves both a definition of the world and a set of institutions reflecting that definition – both a theology and a set of roles, rules, buildings, and programs.

Macrosystem refers to the general organization of the world as it is and as it might be. Historical change demonstrates that the "might be" is quite real, and

occurs through either evolution (many individual actions guided by a common reality) or through revolution (dramatic change introduced by a small cadre of decision makers).

When all is said and done, an ecological perspective has much to contribute to the process of understanding childhood. It gives us a kind of social map for navigating a path through the complexities of research. It aids us in seeing the full range of alternative conceptualizations of problems affecting children and points us in the direction of multiple strategies for intervention.

It provides a kind of checklist to use in thinking about what is happening, and what to do about it when faced with developmental problems and social pathologies that afflict children. It does this by asking us always to consider the micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-system dimensions of developmental phenomena and interventions. It constantly suggests the possibility that context is shaping causal relationships. It always tells us "it depends" and stimulates an attempt to find out "on what."

Working within this framework, we may construct our scientific agenda in the coming years. Among the many important issues on that agenda are the following three: the economics of childhood, the meaning of "home" in the life of the child, and the impact of trauma on development.

Economics of childhood

No study of childhood can be complete without an appreciation of economic issues. As noted by Bronfenbrenner (1986), correlations between measures of income or socioeconomic status and basic child outcomes are often higher in some societies than others. For example, low income is a better predictor of developmental deficits in the United States than in other "modern" societies, presumably because American social policies tend to exaggerate rather than minimize the impact of family income on access to preventive and rehabilitative services (Bronfenbrenner 1986). The human significance of poverty for children has both "objective" and "subjective" dimensions. Among the objective dimensions are implications for morbidity and mortality (which are substantially – but differentially – correlated with poverty in most societies). Among the important subjective concerns is the experience of deprivation, and its concomitant, shame

and negative identity (both of which appear to be associated with violence and aggression).

Beyond this concern with the developmental impact of poverty, is a broader concern with the economic context of children and childhood. The economic “miracles” of the four decades in nations around the world have raised expectations, and have led to more and more of daily life becoming part of the monetarized economy, i.e., having a dollar price (Giarini 1980). This can have important implications for children and families; without the transition to a “sustainable society” children will be ever more vulnerable to the vagaries of the modern economic order (Garbarino 1992c). Children cost too much when their “caregivers” cannot generate enough income to meet popular expectations for participating in the monetarized economy of day-to-day life.

Thus, children are increasingly an economic burden, directly because of what it costs to raise them and indirectly because of what they “cost” in lost parental income. Conventional economists tell us to assume that these costs are accounted for automatically in the market place and result in the general good. Sustainable economics challenges this glib assumption. We must study it in detail across a variety of cultural and political contexts to have a full appreciation for the economics of childhood.

Concept of family homelessness

What does it mean to be homeless? In particular, what does it mean for a *child* to be without a home? We deliberately use the word “mean” here, with recognition of its dual meaning. We are interested in understanding the meaning of homelessness for children in *two* senses. *First*, there is the need to explore how children understand “homelessness” (i.e., its phenomenological sense).

Second, we want to know how being homeless affects the lives of children (its developmental significance). We recognize that the phenomenology of homelessness is potentially an important issue in its own right (documenting and understanding the child’s world view), because it can influence multiple domains of development.

Children create narrative accounts of their lives, accounts that are represented as a world view, as social maps of the world. The child’s social maps are both a product and a cause of behavior and develop-

ment. These social maps reflect the child’s experience and competence, *and* serve to motivate and guide the child in ways that influence the course of the child’s development (Garbarino et.al 1992a).

These experiences in turn re-enforce and/or redirect the child’s social maps. Of special concern is the role of traumatic experiences (such as the loss of one’s parents or home) in shaping the processes of memory and “narrative accounting” that provide the raw materials for the child’s social maps. Central to the process of social mapping for a child is locating the concept of “home.”

“Home” implies permanence, a lack of contingency. You have a home when you have a place to go, no matter what. You have a home when there is a place with which you are connected permanently, that endures and represents *you*. Or, as a young homeless child wrote, “A home is where you can grow flowers if you want” (Daly 1990).

We might note here that it is only a small step from this concept of “home” to the analogous political concept of “homeland” as a sense that one is part of a nation, that one belongs somewhere in the political sense. We need to study the hypothesis that both home and homeland may be important resources in identity formation, and a childhood lack of either or both may lead to problems of alienation, rootlessness, and depression in adolescence.

For children, the concept of home is closely allied with the concept of family. In fact, and particularly for very young children, it is hard to think of the two independently: “my home is where my family lives.” Like turtles, young children carry their homes around with them, as they are carried along by their families. Exploring this hypothesis is an important research issue in its own right.

As a scientific community, we know very little about how young children perceive, understand, and respond to whatever social stigma attaches to being homeless. But we do know that once children leave the period of infancy and early childhood, their well being may come to depend more and more upon social realities beyond the immediate family. This development is linked in part to their emergent ability to think about ever more abstract realities, realities like “home” as being distinct from “family.”

What is more, their experiences extend in wider circles beyond the home into the neighbourhood and the

community. Their appreciation of being "home" may grow in parallel fashion. Perhaps it is then that the child comes to appreciate being "home" as distinct from being "with family," "housed" as opposed to "homeless," and having a homeland as opposed to being an "alien."

Given the life course and political status of many displaced families in the world today, the act of faith involved in accepting new locations as "homes" may be one of the missing ingredients associated with unresolved identity issues and other developmental problems. And it may help sort out the psychological impact and character of experiences that appear similar on the surface, e.g., being an "immigrant" and a "refugee," or having "moved" and being "displaced." With millions of children worldwide experiencing ("suffering") "homelessness," this is a crucial issue for further study (Garbarino et al 1991)

Impact of trauma on development

Trauma, the overwhelming arousal and cognitive dislocation that results from experiencing horrible events, is an important field of study for those who seek to understand childhood. The potentially traumatic impact of televised violence, the increasing vulnerability of children to community violence and war, and the growing numbers of economic refugees all point to the need to develop a better understanding of the impact of trauma on childhood (Garbarino et al 1992b).

Children may be suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as a consequence of their experiences. It appears that when children are traumatized, they can have memory problems and distort information (Terr 1990). This increases the importance of improving our ability to help children tell their stories. In seeking information from children we must be sensitive to their need to construct a narrative account of self and family that meets emotional needs in a way that is consistent with their cognitive resources (Garbarino et al 1989).

Conclusion

What do we need to know about childhood? It depends. It depends upon what we want to do. If we want to improve the quality of life for children we have no choice but to accept the moral, political, and

intellectual challenges of an ecological perspective to guide our research. It can ground our efforts in what the world offers us: the reality of complexity.

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