PARENTING AND SOCIALISATION IN CARIBBEAN FAMILY SYSTEMS

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INTRODUCTION

Families in most Western industrialised countries have often been described as “child-centred” because the benefit of children is at the core of the system and 20th century decline in the average size of families has given parents more time to devote to the welfare of the few children that they do have. Post-war legislation in most developed countries gives first consideration to the well being of children who have generally benefited from the many welfare measures introduced on their behalf. Although there are many who fall between the cracks most families in developed countries are assisted by a host of voluntary and statutory provisions in the acquisition of health and stability and these developments have seen changing cultural attitudes to children.

THE CARIBBEAN SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Lower class families in the Caribbean have been largely unaffected by many of the influences that have informed attitudes to child care in developed countries. While there is a fair degree of family pluralism, a substantial number of children of lower class families are brought up in single parent households that are headed by women. The Jamaica Survey of Living Conditions (1996) reports that roughly 40 percent of all households in Jamaica are headed by women and the social and economic situation of such families is disadvantageous because they are disproportionately poor. Given the kinds of family structures and relationships described earlier (see Vol. 4, No. 1) together with the fact that the primary providers of child care are also the principal or sole breadwinner in most lower class families in the Caribbean, proper parenting practices can and do become problematic.

The strain of coping can take a great toll on family life. There is a large body of empirical evidence which shows that those persons who are able to control the stressful events in their lives are better adjusted than those who cannot. The poor single mother is especially at risk as she is both handicapped by the psychological effects of a diminished social status, and is constantly aware of her powerlessness in relation to the rest of the society. The struggle to balance all the roles assumed together with their limited resource situation means that many encounter great
difficulty in providing good parenting and in transmitting relationship skills to their offspring. Single parenthood, especially when the parent is a poor mother, has been singled out in a number of studies as a very important factor in the repression and abuse of children. In this paper, youngsters aged 8 to 20 tell of their experiences within the family as parents try to cope with economic pressures of life in the inner-city of Kingston, Jamaica and Bridgetown, Barbados. Children in the study recognized the huge sacrifices that their mothers were making in balancing domestic and employment commitments but the level of stress which this created often meant that the type of interaction between mother and child was not as positive as the youngsters wished and placed a number of them at considerable risk.

**THE ENVIRONMENTAL INCIVILITIES OF THE INNER CITY**

Individuals with parental responsibilities have to compete in the market place with those who have no child care responsibilities, as if there was no economic or social disadvantage associated with child care (Fonagy 1996).

The parenting practices are also molded and influenced by the “environmental incivilities” and the criminal culture that are especially pervasive in the inner-cities. First, and particularly in the case of Jamaica, the inner-cities are strongly associated with crime and violence, and some of the more dramatic forms of urban violence occur there. Crime is higher in urban than in rural areas and, within urban areas, the rate declines outwards from the inner-city. The fact that the outward decline is interrupted by pockets in suburban areas which share characteristics that are very similar to those found in the inner-city has led to a debate about a possible causal relationship between crime and a number of other territorial social indicators, such as poor housing and sanitation, overcrowding, economic deprivation and social disorganization. In recent years, much of the criminal activity in these areas of multiple deprivation has been related to gang violence and rivalry.

Given the indifference of the employment market, parental concern has come to almost invariably and inevitably revolve around the possible participation of youngsters in gang-related activities. Such activities can also mean violent interaction and/or confrontation with the police. In addition, there is the likelihood of their children becoming victims of the very frequent, unfocussed, random, retaliatory encounters which could take the form of both physical and sexual violence.

Another “incivility” revolved around questions of race, colour and class. Although this concern was consciously and specifically articulated only in Barbados, respondents spoke of the larger structure of social relations in the society and the manner in which these presented further challenges to parents. As will be seen later the deficits of the parenting process were felt to be all the more critical in this context.

Money and colour are important...like you go to...Cave Sheperd, Louis Bailey - stuff like that...you don’t see people my complexion working you know. You see high brown people and the white people...It’s just that they have the colour, and Barbados is a very backward
society... very backward because they
does be stamping on their own... just
pushing you aside to make room for
whites...

Third, there is the perceived need to
protect girls from early pregnancy and the
predatory male. To a large extent these fears
are intricately intertwined with gender role
expectations, the character of gender
distinctions and identities, and the behaviours
promoted and inculcated during the
socialisation process. It is important to recall
the outdoor/domestic roles ascribed to males
and females, the very restricted nature of
gender identities [women menstruate and have
babies, males are strong], male "privileging",
and the high values given to male “toughness”
(see pp. 12 - 15). The parenting practices and
the gender role identities and relations
subscribed to, then come to have a cause-and-
effect relationship with each other.

It can be argued that the combined
effects of varied economic and socio-cultural
influences go a far way in explaining the
dominant role of physical violence, and the
large volume of disciplinary communication
about negative possible selves and dire con-
sequences. The stress of single parenthood is
compounded by an aversive physical and
social environment.

When the environment is aversive and the re-
sources for coping few, stress is experienced as
chronic and unremitting. This constant,
unabating stress, rather than episodic stressful
events is most associated with depression in
persons who are poor and, by extension, with
abusive neglectful parents (Dove 1993).

PHYSICAL ABUSE

Strategies to control the activities and
behaviour of children often resort to a great
deal of physical punishment. Physical
punishment is a technique that is indeed seen
as natural in efforts to keep children on the
straight and narrow, and warranted in cases
where repeated warnings do not succeed.
Even the young participants saw whipping as
a necessary element in the breaking in
process, as this story, told by a Barbadian
youngster illustrates:

I had an aunt ... she believed in not
hitting the child ... she used to tell my
mother ... when my mother used to
beat me, she say, the psychologist say
you do not hit a child. When her son
got arrested for rape, the psychologist
say, you don't hit a child ... now she
children, one of them ... run off ... she
don't know where she is, the other
went away for a couple of weeks ...
she ent get back yet. But the
psychologist say ...

Given the “macho” version of a tough
strong masculinity, boys require a regime of
discipline which includes “nuff licks”; and in
the absence of fathers in many households
mothers felt that it fell to them to administer
the bruising physical punishment necessary to
"manage" their boy children. Ideally, boys
need to be disciplined by their fathers, because
at some point, more physical treatment and
more psychological terror than could be
delivered by women would be called for in
the socialisation of boys.

The socialisation of young boys required a
greater resort to violence and physical pun-
ishment than was deemed necessary for girls;
but there were instances in which girls were
subjected to extreme brutality.
There are instances in which girls too, are subjected to the severest forms of physical abuse. A teenager described the reaction of her mother on her arrival home:

"... me come from school late the night. My mother say school over (i.e. was finished since) 12 o'clock you know; and she say "don't mek 12.30 pass and me no reach" ... When I reach home now, I say, goodnight, and she just hawk and spit straight inna mi face ... she come ketch me and start beat me, she gi me some lick and buss mi head right over yah, over mi eye so ... She disadvantage me had man. As school over me have to reach home and she no like when me keep friends."

When such force fails to bring about adherence to the required code of conduct adult males may be brought in to use terror to bring about compliance. Respondents provided examples:

"... and she go tell me brother ... after him thump me on me forehead: one thump and buss it ... him come in with one big table foot like that ... me say, me get some lick ... me go doctor. Dem say piece a hone inna me back chip ... Him say him try to bruk (i.e. discipline) me good! [Bu] him bruk me worse!

I see a man beat him daughter, beat her like somebody fighting, kicking her on the ground, thumping her, box her down.

... I see a man beating him child – all with electric wire, hose, fan belt. Child abuse that. They should lock them up still. Anything them ketch them beat. Them overdo it, you know.

These harsh and authoritarian practices put children at risk especially in fragmented urban communities where the absence of social support systems often preclude the possibility of protective adult intervention. The state provides little child care support of any kind, and proactive state-directed or sponsored interventions in parenting practices are more or less nonexistent.

COMMUNICATING WITH CHILDREN

The resort to physical violence is an alternative to productive communication by parents, and reports from the respondents revealed that communication skills were generally poor and sparse. The general communication deficits that seemed to characterise all household relationships were described earlier (see pp. 5-6). With specific reference to the parent-child relationship, participants reported that they did learn a lot in the family setting but more by indirect rather than by direct methods and the sharing of confidences and the rationalities for doing one thing or another. Participants emphasized the importance of communication between parents and children but were uniformly unhappy about the quality and the content of this communication process. They felt that communication should involve love and respect and that these should be employed despite the pressures of life and the cultural styles that were prevalent.

THE ROLE OF SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE

The exercise of what might be called symbolic violence is a frequent mode of
communication. It is a form of verbal violence where individuals are publicly shamed and embarrassed, and where insult, negativism, denunciation come to be the main forms of reprimand and tutelage. Jamaican participants, were offended by their parents' tendency to be insulting:

"...when you tell a young child a bad word it makes him feel that he is not loved... nobody likes him."

Barbadian participants were especially eloquent in their discussion of the role of communication in the building of positive self-regard and esteem. But here again, they themselves noted that in addition to physical violence, an important feature of the general culture seemed to be an addiction to symbolic violence. Many saw it as a form of emotional abuse and while the respondents accepted the need for discipline, they felt that in far too many cases interactions were negative and that much more needed to be done to foster in children, self-esteem and self-respect.

"A parent have to communicate in terms of setting down and talking to the person and not shouting so the next door neighbour can hear what going on... With discipline there must be communication. If they are not related and you try to discipline the child then it could cause a hatred for the mother... I think they try, but the way they put over themselves, it does make you feel worse."

"Parents need to develop respect in their sons and daughters for them to become respectable citizens."

The importance of colour and class in the minds of Barbadians was mentioned earlier. These youngsters nevertheless felt that they could achieve respectable status and move beyond the limits of the restrictive environment. Yet the perceived reality was one of having to live with parents with high ambitions and aspirations but who were not empowering them emotionally to achieve success and fulfil those aspirations:

"In the household too often beatings, [and] physical violence replace constructive interpersonal [communication]."

"They would try to put over... something positive... but, in truth and in fact, ... you hearing something negative. They would tell you to go to school and learn and then when you are adults, don't be no wild body and don't do that... you see, put all the negative things behind the positive things and you only hear the negative things."

"I remember the morning I was going to set the exam, my father look at me and tell me straight: "If you pass that exam, I eat my shoes"... I was eleven... I was crying my poor li'l eyes out...."

So, everywhere, the communication in the socialisation process presents a serious challenge to parents in the circumstances of lower-class life. The pervasive effects of the limited economic resources brought by parents to parenting are compounded by the socio-cultural features and family relations which are themselves a product of the uncivil environment.

"From the narratives of the participants it is clear that while appreciating the..."
constraints under which their parents operated and accepting physical punishment as a credible means of maintaining control within the family they nevertheless felt severely disadvantaged. Families in urban areas would seem to be at greatest risk as they are separated from the wider kinship network; they live in fractured, atomised and sharply demarcated communities to which there is little sense of commitment or attachment so that they tend to withdraw from community life. The wider kinship network does not have the means and the wider society does not have the right to intervene in family life and therefore family problems cannot be shared. While the treatment of children in the countries studied reflect a general cultural attitude to child rearing and a belief in the efficacy of chastising as a means of training, the problem is exacerbated in poor and inner city conditions.

THE CHALLENGE

Children of poor families, therefore, are at the greatest risk. To be sure there are many poor parents in these countries who do not abuse their children. The challenge must then be to seek to find ways to disentangle and tackle that combination of factors that help to generate the various forms of child abuse. There is increasing evidence that experience with physical abuse as a child and later involvement in violent interpersonal relationships are closely and significantly related. The high levels of vulnerability need to be recognised, as well as the related reality that these are not the occasional aberrations of psychopathic family situations or structures. There is a great deal of research evidence that social support has a mediating role for parents at risk and for child abuse.

Needs go beyond the stress-buffering effects of emotional support. Greater efforts are needed to identify appropriate and socio-culturally acceptable mechanisms that can provide the supports needed.

More attention needs to be given to parenting practices and domestic conflict-resolution strategies.

Governments in the region currently make very little economic allowance for the child-care responsibilities of families. The only recognised alternative child-care services to which poor families have access are the day care facilities subsidized by the government or provided by volunteer organisations. However, most of these facilities do not provide an acceptable level of care (UNICEF/POJ 1991). Children are not occupied during most of the time spent in care and there is little time devoted to organised play, and while attention has been given to the importance of early childhood stimulation, very little (outside of seeking to reduce fertility rates) has been focussed on the family-based or family-derived difficulties. In any case, recognised day-care services are available only to a very small percentage of the 0-4 years cohort and children of the poorest families are less likely to be enrolled in such facilities than those of the families in better economic circumstances (SLC 1990-96). Some of the needs of these families are met by family, home-based day care, managed by care-givers who have little child management skills. Moreover, the high turnover rate of these facilities is itself a source of stress for parents and young children. These facilities need to be strengthened and regulated.
Considerably more effort needs to be devoted to the transmission of improved parenting skills. Parents and child-care providers need to be more exposed to short-term programmes in child care skills and interpersonal communication. Efforts have so far been sporadic and too limited. These issues are of critical concern because of their impact on children's current well-being as well as on their future functioning. There is a great deal of evidence for a relationship between parenting and early social relationships and health. The presence of family social support increases resilience against illness (Fonagy 1996).

End Note

'Further details on the methodology of data collection are provided in the Foreword to this volume.'
References


