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Young Child Flourishing as an Aim for Society

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This volume aims for an evolutionary-based understanding of how, why and when children flourish. Ashley Montagu, one of the most insightful public intellectuals of the 20th century, wrote frequently about human development. He pointed out the vulnerability of young human beings:

“the young one of human kind is born as: the most dependent, the most educable, and the most cooperative of all the creatures on the face of the earth. To be dependent means to rely upon others for the satisfaction of one’s needs, and to be educable means to be able to grow and develop in one’s capacities for being healthily human, and to be cooperative means that one is endowed with potentialities which given the opportunity for growth and development will enable the individual to realize them in the form in which they have been selected in the evolutionary process, namely, as striving *with* rather than *against* others to achieve desired goals.” (Montagu, 1963, p. 24)

Indeed, as noted in chapter 1, human babies are highly neurologically immature at birth (and, in terms of mobility and bone growth, compared to other animals should be in the womb another 18 months!; Trevathan, 2011). Their neurobiological and psychological systems are highly shapeable and therefore much develops after birth in cooperation with caregivers.

Dismantling Attitudinal Barriers to the Promotion of Young Child Flourishing

As this and related volumes illustrate (Narvaez, Panksepp, Schore & Gleason, 2013; Narvaez, Valentino, McKenna, Fuentes & Gray, 2014), interdisciplinary knowledge about the precursors to young children’s flourishing is increasing. Yet at the same time barriers to the study and promotion of child flourishing are many. We name a few needed

modifications in thinking that may be required for a shift in cultural practices and thinking about flourishing.

Focus on Evolutionary Developmental Systems. One shift needed among scholars is to an emphasis on a whole set of inheritances as described by Development Systems Theory, rather than a continued emphasis on variation between individuals in genetic make up and competition on that genetic level. The emphasis on genes is often accompanied by an ignorance of human plasticity and the role of developmental environments in shaping epigenetic expression of genes in early life. However, in order to optimize development and wellbeing one must pay attention to evolutionary processes and legacies, epigenetics and developmental systems. It requires thoroughly modeling the specific evolutionary processes and selective pressures that shaped hominin evolution, acknowledging and understanding the layered dynamism and large role of epigenetic mechanisms in shaping human developmental trajectories (as in other organisms). After millions of years and thousands of generations undergoing evolutionary processes in response to diverse selective pressures, there are core sets of early experiences that optimally shape human offspring for their social and physical worlds. Further, using relational development systems meta-theory to frame research design and findings will help scholars delineate the importance of relational processes in the co-construction of the child (Overton, 2013).

Many contributions to this volume illuminated essential components of these relational processes within the family. Braungart-Rieker and Planalp (this volume) give us insight into the development of self-regulation through sensitively responsive parental care. Being attentive to infants’ cues and making their own adult actions contingent upon their infants’ initiations helps infants to be more capable of managing emotional challenges, maintain positive affect, and develop secure attachment relationships with their parents. James Swain (this volume) describes how parent brains function in relation to the communications and needs of their infants, illuminating the importance of parental capacities for provisioning a supportive environment. Abramson and colleagues (this volume) and Gleason and colleagues (this volume) show how parent attitudes themselves influence child outcomes. Moving into early childhood, Brophy-Herb and colleagues (this volume) further highlight the fundamental importance of emotion as a context for promoting optimal development, considering the mechanisms of child-oriented and supportive parental responses to children’s emotions. Extending this, Miller and Hastings (this volume) show that parents who engage with their children through an attitude of compassionate love help their children to leverage their physiological self-regulation into prosocial responses towards others. Sparrow (this volume) helps us to extend these

and other insights into childrearing that support young child flourishing into a global perspective, advocating for the incorporation of culturally-developed practices that provide for young children's needs into our understanding of optimal childrearing. McMullen and McCormick (this volume) address early child care settings and Watson (this volume) focuses on early schooling whereas Nelson (this volume) describes the challenges for children sent to institutional care settings. Building capacity for community connectedness, collective efficacy and family resilience further supports parents' abilities to properly care for and nurture their children. These principles of responsive care and support are necessarily accommodated to local conditions.

If we shift our focus away from genetic competition and toward our commonalities and shared inheritances, we understand a different picture of humans and life generally, one of deep cooperation and conservation. Most of the characteristics found in one generation are passed to the next generation (i.e., they are conserved). Indeed, in a deep evolutionary sense humans are related to all living entities, sharing genes and isomorphisms (homologous characteristics) in our cells and bodies. Humans share properties billions of years old, for example, with nonvertebrates, incorporating bacteria into their cells (i.e., mitochondria), and would not be alive without trillions of bacteria, fungi and viruses; our bodies are symbionts, with up to 99% of the genetic material each of us carry being *nonhuman*, housed in the cells of other organisms (Dunn, 2011). We are built into the tree of life as one of many species evolving from others. Cooperation is built into every system and every inheritance (e.g., extra-genetic inheritances like cells, self-organizing developmental processes, ontological niches). Cooperation, then, becomes a central component of any evolutionary narrative, rather than a singular focus on competition.

Include Evolutionary Baselines for Promoting Flourishing. Another shift that needs to be taken by scholars, policy makers and lay people alike is the baseline used for making judgments of flourishing. As argued by Beckes and Coan (2011), the “baseline” condition for human functioning is in the context of our relational partners, not when we are alone. Humans have not evolved away from being social mammals of a needy type, reliant on an early environment populated by sensitive, attentive caregivers and diverse (consequent) social stimuli. In chapter 1, we proposed using the Evolved Developmental Niche as a baseline for promoting child flourishing. Many of its characteristics (e.g., breastfeeding, touch) evolved to fixation over 30 million years ago (Konner, 2005, 2010) and were intensified further through human evolution (with allomothering, including sibling care, as noted by Fouts and Bader, this volume). The early niche is a cooperative venture—caregivers must cooperate with the built-in needs of the baby for the child to

grow well. The anthropological evidence shows that young child development is a process reliant on “indulgent” parenting—giving all that baby requests—by parents and alloparents (Konner, 2005, 2010). Montagu describes young children's need for love:

“Children are even less capable than adults of living by bread alone. We have learned that the most important of all their needs is the need for love. We have learned that if children are not adequately loved during any period of their first half dozen years they are likely to suffer more or less severely, depending upon the severity of the privation of love which they have undergone, the duration, the age, and the constitution of the child.

What we have learned from the study of the young of human kind is that they are born with every expectation of having their needs for love satisfied, and that when those needs are satisfied they develop in optimal health in every respect; but that when those needs are not adequately satisfied they develop, if they develop at all, in an unhealthy manner. Furthermore, that one of the primary defects of development which they exhibit is in their own ability to love.” (Montagu, 1963, p. 25)

The intensive parenting practices of the evolved developmental niche (EDN) can be understood as “love in action.” Babies expect frequent and lengthy breastfeeding, constant touch, playful interaction, a set of responsive caregivers and positive support. Without these, there may be gaps in their neurobiological development and subsequent wellbeing, sociality and happiness. Violate the requisite stimulation as determined through evolution and it becomes difficult if not impossible to grow the neural networks scheduled to be developed through optimal caregiving, resulting in a less self-regulated and more socially inept individual. Ignoring aspects of the EDN may be like saying, “what can we leave out of the bread dough or the car engine?”

Thus, it is mistaken to think that early life experience evolved to vary as widely as it does today, where children may be viewed as having to establish relative self-sufficiency early in development (e.g., being able to spend extended time away from caregivers as a baby, early cessation of breastfeeding). In 99% of humanity's existence, a child would have died without extensive breastmilk, positive touch and responsiveness and would have been misdeveloped for social life without play and positive support from multiple alloparents. Although extensive variability in early life may be evident *now*, we argue that the core components of the EDN would have been common for 99% of human genus history in small-band hunter-gatherer societies. Although industrialization has changed the conditions under which

infants can survive, it has not changed the needs of infants that must be met in order for them to thrive. Many cultural changes have led parents away from tending their children in a species-typical manner (e.g., infant formula usage, separate sleeping rooms, extensive work away from children), with nurturing progressively worsening over generations. Several chapters in this volume, specifically, Bergman Warmuth and colleagues (this volume), Holden and colleagues (this volume), and Miller Graff (this volume), describe the effects of positive but also negative home climates. Misedeveloped individuals would not have been likely to survive in our evolutionary past, but in the recent 1% of human life, social and technological changes have served to reduce the mortality rates of undersocialized individuals, such that they have been able to perpetuate their learned, suboptimal approaches to childcare in the subsequent generation.

The Evolved Developmental Niche may include necessary ingredients for optimal development and flourishing in human adulthood (Narvaez, Panksepp, Schore & Gleason, 2013; Narvaez, Valentino, Fuentes, McKenna & Gray, 2014). The EDN may provide a buffer against the effects of any one allele variant that might constrain prosociality or contribute to poor mental health. This is suggestive in the pattern of findings, for example, showing that the experience of child abuse activates the expression of the MAOA allele linked to aggression (Kim-Cohen et al., 2006). Although admittedly not entirely absent, child abuse was likely not as common a characteristic of our ancestral environments (small-band hunter gatherer societies) as it is today. Functioning would be impaired, resulting in multiple problems in the individual and his or her relations (species atypical). Lack of support for EDN-consistent caregiving, misguided childrearing, the loss of allomothering in small and stable communities, as well as heritable epigenetics (through social-behavioral pathways or, possibly, transgenerationally via the germ line) may contribute to patterns of poor mental health and aggression that are common and taken as normal in many contemporary societies.

Admit Some Cultural Practices are Detrimental. The United Nations Declaration for the Rights of the Child describes several child rights to which most nations have subscribed (except for Somalia and the USA), leading to shifts in longstanding cultural practices, for example, from forced child labor to providing educational opportunities. However, among psychologists, widely different parenting practices are considered normal and integrated into research frameworks. For example, ethnopediatrics is an approach to child wellbeing that emphasizes the unique integration of “the social practices, values, and conditions concerning child well-being, and the biological variation that arises through these different social ecologies” (Worthman, 1995, p. 10). However, as can happen in misapplications of Life

History Theory and similar theories, researchers collapse together species-typical and species-atypical developmental niches, as if the differences do not really matter. For example, some suggest that practices that lead to insecure attachment are to be respected as cultural differences (Levine & Norman, 2001), although extensive international research has shown the lasting adverse effects of insecure attachment on social capacities across the lifespan (Cassidy & Shaver, 2010). Similarly, many scholars of child development do not want to take positions against certain parenting practices, such as corporal punishment (Baumrind, 1997; Baumrind, Larzelere, & Owens, 2010), even though these too can be construed as violations of human rights (Narvaez, 2013) and have solidly documented adverse effects on well-being from infancy throughout childhood (MacKenzie et al., 2014). Again, it is important not to forget what humans are: social mammals born very immature at birth whose brains and wellbeing are co-constructed by caregivers and caregiving environments. Through continuity in early social and physical environments, epigenetically-shaped human developmental outcomes can be passed on generation to generation by adults who perpetuate their own experience in cultures of care. In effect, violating baby rights extends harm into the next generation and beyond.

Modern Societies Undermine Flourishing. Extensive early stress is toxic to developing systems, leading them towards enhanced survival systems which promote self-focus (e.g., stress reactivity; Lupien, McEwen, Gunnar & Heim, 2009) instead of towards the development of the deep sociality that is common among many small-band hunter-gatherer societies (Ingold, 2011). Modern societies increase a child’s toxic stress load, decreasing longterm health because neurobiological development is undercared for (e.g., less breastfeeding, less positive and more negative touch, less responsiveness, less play, fewer responsive caregivers, more strangers who don't know them, etc.). For example, when babies are isolated and left to cry, it imposes toxic stress (Shonkoff et al., 2012), and most births in the USA are relatively traumatic now (e.g., induced labor, painful procedures at birth; Wagner, 2006). These practices are common in Western and Westernized societies, and they are linked to high stress-reactivity, skewing children’s dispositions and orientations toward primitive survival systems. Based on animal models and a growing number of longitudinal human studies, it is reasonable to propose that undercare may increase over generations as poor parenting leads to worse parenting in the next generation, undermining developmental programs through epigenetic factors for a focus on social harm and threat (Meaney, 2010). The effects go ‘all the way up’ from early childhood, stretching into formative pre-teen and teen years, and extending into early adulthood. For example, secure attachment and empathy are decreasing

among college students (Konrath, Chopik, Hsing & O'Brien, 2014; Konrath, O'Brien, & Hsing, 2011). In a communal sense, these outcomes are not optimal. Insecure attachment and stress reactivity mean that one is likely to harm self and/or others relatively easily. Such individuals would not have been supported in the ancestral context, small-band hunter-gatherers (Fry, 2006).

Consistent with Eisler's (this volume) observations about societies with a partnership system versus a domination system of relationships, the cultural characteristic of meeting the EDN cuts across such typical dichotomies as individualistic-collectivistic, or secular-religious. Yet, it is particularly true that in the last 1% of human history, humanity's cultural innovations have increasingly led to the creation of environments that do not match up with children's needs. When poor early care is experienced, a child's genes will be differentially expressed and the developmental trajectory becomes less than optimal, with many children developing social orientations and mental health predispositions that will prevent them from meeting their potential (and likely contributing to a social niche that similarly inhibits others' potential).¹

Contemporary Human Nature May Not Be Reflective of Evolved Human Nature. Reorienting our understanding of human nature and how it is developed may be required. It is highly malleable. From all signs, when the EDN is violated a different human nature ensues. The EDN in early life appears to provide a common grounding for human nature, as adults in societies around the world that provide the EDN share characteristics of being calm, open, generous, and content (Ingold, 1999). This is not often the presented view of human nature, as members of human societies, both ancient and modern, have frequently been characterized as selfish, aggressive and in need of institutional controls (Pinker, 2011). Truth be told, all humans have multiple motivations, and prosocial drives often surpass selfish ones (Eisenberg, Van Schyndel, & Spinrad, in press; Davidov, Vaish, Knafo, & Hastings, in press). Whether one is more or less agreeable, empathic,

¹ In the same way that genes do not determine a human's fate, a person's epigenome that emerges with high quality, EDN-consistent care early in life will not definitively enable flourishing, as cultural institutions and local community dynamics shape the avenues of personality and behavioral expression for each of us (Bronfenbrenner, 2009). Thus, a species-typical developmental niche is not enough for flourishing, rather, supportive social experiences are required throughout life. Again we must emphasize that humans are dynamic systems throughout life and so though it matters what happens early for later trajectories, it matters what happens throughout life. Just because the early niche is appropriate doesn't mean that nothing detrimental can happen later.

prosocial, open, or conscientious, is significantly affected by responsive care (Kochanska, 2002; Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2008). Adult wellbeing and morality are influenced by whether or not childhoods were consistent with the EDN. Those who report less EDN-consistent care have worse mental health, personal distress and an orientation to self-protective morality whereas those with more EDN-consistent care have better mental health, greater perspective taking and a greater orientation to compassionate morality (Narvaez, Wang & Cheng, 2015).

The misunderstanding of the plasticity of human personality is often accompanied by an assumption that Westerners who are being studied (and doing the studies and creating the theories) are representative of what is "normal" for all of humanity-- physiologically, attitudinally, and behaviorally. Far from it. Western, civilized societies and peoples are very unusual in the history of humanity (Sahlins, 2008). Much of current "knowledge" about the causes, development, and consequences of modern human behavior is based on samples that have been labeled WEIRD: Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic, comprised of individuals who "grow up in, and adapt to, a rather atypical environment vis-à-vis that of most of human history" (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010, pp. 79-80). It turns out that *non-foraging* communities, like modern societies, are the unusual communities in the history of the human genus and in terms of child treatment, and should not be taken as representative of human behavior. Nor should their children be assumed to be species typical specimens in light of evolutionary systems. Many theories, like those mentioned in chapter 1, that link early experience of children to adult outcomes assume that children are growing up in "normal" environments for the species. Yet, the infant socialization practices of WEIRD cultures even affect the basics of early motor development; there are marked global differences in such presumably fundamental matters as whether infants crawl before they walk (Karasik, Adolf, Tamis-LeMonda, & Bornstein, 2010). Thus, when studying child development, it is important to distinguish between studies of societies who practice the EDN to greater versus lesser extents, because the latter reduce support to babies and young children in so many ways. Measuring and using as a baseline misdeveloped individuals results in skewed and unreliable data, making for misleading generalizations about human nature and evolution.

Yet, industrialization is a global phenomenon, and western cultural practices of childcare are increasingly being exported to societies in the developing nations (Sparrow, this volume). On the one hand, this carries the risk of the loss of local cultural knowledge about the effective conveyance of the EDN. On the other hand, there are hopeful signs that some western societies, such

as the Scandinavian nations, are beginning to recognize the essential developmental needs of infants and young children, and are instituting structural, educational and policy changes that are responsive to those needs (Eisler, this volume; Trevarthen & Bjørkvold, this volume). To the extent that modern societies can respect and respond to ancient wisdom and its echoes in existing traditional knowledge, there is potential for the EDN to be re-established.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Parents have been making “trade-offs” between cultural preferences and biological needs for millennia, especially since intensive agriculture evolved, taking parents away from their babies in order to work in the fields, which was exacerbated with the industrial revolution when work moved even further away from home. We know much more about how important EDN practices are for biosocial development, making it appropriate to reshape social structures in ways that optimize young children’s development instead of undermining it. What first steps might be taken in order to create a society that promotes young child flourishing? We outline a series of processes and recommendations below, which would require a shift in our political landscape. In part, that shift would need to begin with the critical acknowledgement that the environmental, social, and economic contexts we describe below, consistent with an EDN-oriented approach to child flourishing, are presently *least* available to impoverished families, particularly in the USA. As we have highlighted throughout this chapter, unhealthy psychosocial and physical environments can find expression in all corners of contemporary societies, but with increasing income equality and regressive political and economic policies, these toxic effects are disproportionately imposed on the developing bodies of our most vulnerable, needy infants and children, stacking the deck against them (Duncan and Brooks-Gunn, 1999; Yoshikawa, Aber, & Beardslee, 2012). Here are several suggestions,

Ideally, the society is reorganized around the needs of children and families. For example, neighborhoods are organized so that minimal commuting and minimal parent-child separation occurs: parents live near work, workplaces allow babies and provide child care, children play and go to small schools near home and near other connected adults (Brown, Dixon & Gillham, 2014; Farr, 2007).

In the ideal society, parents receive extensive support. For example, all parents are supported with paid parental leave for at least a year if not three (shared by the parents) and families are able to earn one living wage so that

one parent can stay at home during the early lives of their children. Among advanced nations, only the USA lacks paid parental leave. Further, policies should make it easy for extended families to live with their relatives with children (e.g., zoning laws should allow multi-generational families in one household, as is done in other countries).

The whole society should be educated about the needs of young children, from adults to children, policymakers to educators. Public service announcements that provide images of responsive parenting, curricula like the empirically-supported *Roots of Empathy* program (Gordon, 2005) are examples of what can be scaled up.

Even before pregnancy or birth, mothers are provided pre-partum therapy where there is psychological preparation for birth. Positive social support is assumed necessary for successful pregnancy and accommodations are made at workplaces.

For the birth experience, medical practice offers a soothing perinatal experience with little interference in natural processes except in emergencies. Baby-friendly hospitals (UNICEF, 1990), which the US government began to advocate in 2011 (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2011) are an initial step in this direction. Policies about infant circumcision and other painful procedures should be reexamined with ethical treatment of babies in mind.

Ideally, all members of society are trained in responsive care to encourage intergenerational calming instead of increased anxiety: Skin-to-skin carrying to develop sensitivity and infant regulatory capacities; learning to recognize early signs of distress to avoid crying in babies. Touch and breastfeeding and *safe* co-sleeping are expected.

Readers might think that we are arguing that if we just raise well-fed, emotionally secure children, everything will work out because better individuals will mean a society in which people are able to solve difficult problems together. Reinhold Niebuhr (1932/2002) pointed out the fallacy in believing that correctly educating individuals leads to good societies, an idea dating from Plato. Niebuhr noted that those in charge always overestimate themselves as more deserving and worthy, and thus pursue their own interests relative to others. This is obvious from looking at the activities of the British Empire, notorious for imposing their culture on countries they conquered, but also for misraising their children to be domineering of nature and peoples of the earth (Turnbull, 1984). In advocating the Evolved

Developmental Niche we are not talking about an education into an imperialist worldview but an acceptance of human developmental needs.

It may be helpful here to note what else develops with species-typical care, which we can observe among small-band hunter-gatherer societies. It's not just health and wellbeing but a sense of communalism with the natural world. Among these societies, the EDN includes immersion in the local natural world and a deep connection to it (Ingold, 1999). Western civilization in recent centuries notoriously set itself up against Nature (Turner, 1994), which may start with the care of babies. Not providing the EDN sets babies up against their own natural urges for close connection. Denied love, they deny it back.

Conclusion

Flourishing within a generation or particular cultural space is a narrow type of flourishing and may not represent Flourishing with a capital F. Determining flourishing may be like measuring genetic fitness—you cannot do it from a close-up view but only with a wide lens. Because of epigenetic processes (and diverse pathways of inheritance thereof) and other factors, we may not be able to gauge flourishing within one generation but only when we see it across generations. To use the EDN as a baseline for human becoming is not a romantic dream. In effect, evolution did the experimentation, so to speak, for us and we ignore the results at our peril.

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