

# Family Practices and the Larger Social Context\*

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The need for theoretical and empirical analyses of the effects of the larger social context on family functioning is discussed. A good deal of progress on our understanding of family interactions has occurred in the last thirty years and effective marital and child-behaviour interventions have been the most prominent result. However, further progress may require that we develop our understanding of how family structure and interaction are affected by factors such as the nature of productive and reproductive activities in industrialized societies. This paper suggests a theoretical framework for such an analysis based on the anthropological theory of Marvin Harris (1979, 1981). According to this view, changes in family structure over the past 100 years stem from the shift from agricultural to urban, industrial modes of production. In this context, smaller and fewer families, women working outside the home, and divorce have, in turn, affected marital relations and parenting practices. Empirically delineating these relationships and developing and evaluating policies and interventions to contend with these influences could be a major source of further progress on efforts of psychologists to contribute to family well-being.

This paper discusses the need for analyses of the larger social context for family interactions. A good deal of progress has been made in our understanding of the ways family members affect each other and the ways clinical interventions can affect the behaviour of family members. However, most of our attention has been focused on relatively proximal influences on family interaction patterns and the limits of our ability to affect family functioning within this framework have begun to be discerned. We could facilitate further progress in our pragmatic understanding of families by developing theoretical and empirical work on the ways family functioning is or could be influenced by the larger social context (Biglan, Glasgow & Singer, 1990). The present paper delineates a number of variables in the larger context that appear worthy of exploration.

## *The Philosophical Framework for This Analysis*

The philosophical framework for this paper has been labeled "functional contextualism"

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(Biglan & Hayes, in preparation). The philosophy is marked by the explicit adoption of the pragmatic goal of the prediction and control of overt, cognitive, and emotional behaviour. Within this framework, the merit of an analysis is evaluated in terms of the degree to which it guides one to variables which can predict behaviour and can, at least in principle, control behaviour. Such variables are necessarily in the context of behaviour (Hayes & Brownstein, 1986). The approach does not ignore cognitive and emotional events, but it strives to identify variables in the context for such events that would allow one to predict and control the events. Behaviour analysis (Skinner, 1945, 1950, 1953, 1957, 1971, 1974) and cultural materialism (Harris, 1979) are theoretical approaches that have many of these features, although they have not explicitly been formulated in these terms.

This framework is in contrast to the more traditional mechanistic philosophy of science which has dominated the behavioural sciences for most of this century. Within the mechanist tradition, the emphasis has been on the development of generalizable models of the interrelationships of overt behaviours, cognitions, and emotions. The approach is open to studying the relationship of behaviour to

environmental events, but it does not demand a focus on behaviour-environment relationships. As a result, the theoretical models that have been developed often provide no guidance regarding how the organismic events under study might be prevented or ameliorated. By explicitly adopting a functional contextual framework, the behavioural sciences might become more effective in contributing to the solution of important societal problems.

The present framework is also in contrast to other versions of contextualism that have been proposed for the behavioural sciences (e.g., Rosnow & Georgoudi, 1986). In their eschewal of mechanism, other versions of contextualism have also eschewed efforts to predict and control behaviour. One can, however, examine acts in context for the purpose of prediction and control without adopting the world view of mechanism.

#### *The Limitations of Current Interventions for Family Problems*

The last 30 years of behaviourally oriented family research has produced substantial progress in our understanding of family interactions and the way one family member's behaviour influences the behaviour of another family member. In particular, it has produced a good deal of information about the ways family interactions can be changed for the better. Treatments of choice have been identified for child behaviour problems (Kazdin, 1987) and for marital discord (Jacobson & Margolin, 1979).

Further advances in our ability to prevent or remediate these problems may require research on the larger social context for families. For example, it has been shown in several studies that parenting skills training is less likely to be effective for families that are living in poverty or experiencing high levels of aversive events (Dumas & Wahler, 1983; Dumas, 1984; Webster-Stratton, 1985).

The need to develop analyses of the larger social context for family problems is also suggested by evidence about adolescent problem behaviour. There is mounting evidence that young people who engage in one problem behaviour, such as antisocial behaviour, are more likely to engage in another, such as substance abuse (Metzler et al, 1991a; Donovan & Jessor, 1985). The immediate social context for these problems includes

influences from a deviant peer group, problematic parenting practices, and schools that fail to remediate social and academic deficits (Metzler et al., 1991-b; Reid & Patterson, 1991). It may be difficult or impossible to affect the prevalence of such problems through interventions that are directed at only one or two of these influences. Comprehensive interventions seem needed. Community-wide interventions that combined school and family interventions with media and the mobilization of community organizations to assist schools and families would appear to have potential for affecting the practices of both parents and schools (Bracht, 1990). A careful theoretical analysis of the larger social context for families and schools should benefit these efforts.

In sum, although we have a wealth of knowledge about the factors that influence family functioning, we have yet to translate that into the kind of community-wide programs that seem to be needed to change the prevalence of family problems. A science of the larger social context for families will be needed for this task.

#### *A Theory of the Larger Social Context for Families*

A theoretical framework for considering these issues is provided by behaviour analysis and cultural materialism (Harris, 1977, 1979, 1989). As noted, both of these approaches focus on the way context affects human behaviour. Behaviour analysis provides a set of theoretical principles regarding the contingencies of reinforcement and other contextual variables affecting the behaviour of individuals. Cultural materialism provides an analysis of the factors shaping the cultural practices (defined as the interactive behaviour of two or more people) of groups, that is quite consistent with the analysis of the factors shaping the behaviour of individuals. The present paper concentrates on what cultural materialism has to say about families, since behaviour analysis is better known to psychologists, and cultural materialism addresses the relationship of family functioning to other aspects of the society.

#### *Cultural Materialism*

The key concept of cultural materialism is infrastructural determinism (Harris, 1979). According to this principle, the practices of human groups are shaped by the exigencies

of physical survival, nutrition, and reproduction. Even in our complex, industrial and technological society, the way families are organized and the way family members treat each other is assumed to be probabilistically determined by what it takes for families to achieve food and shelter and to control reproduction. This section delineates the most important ways that families in current industrialized societies appear to be affected by these factors.

*Family structure.* The structure of the typical family in industrialized countries has been undergoing dramatic changes in recent years. In industrialized countries, families are becoming smaller (Levitan, Belous, & Gallo, 1988, U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990). They are more likely to be fatherless, and fewer adults are bothering to be fatherless at all (Harris, 1977, 1981; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990). According to cultural materialism, these trends stem from changes in the modes of food and industrial production. As we have shifted from an agricultural to an urban industrial society the costs and benefits of having children have also shifted. In an agricultural society, children are inexpensive to raise and can contribute to food production at an early age, with little training. In an urban industrial setting, children cannot work until they are older and they are expensive to raise. The development of social security systems for retirees further reduced the incentive for having children. Thus, as the cost/benefit ratio of having children has become less favourable, fewer people have been motivated to have children and those who did were motivated to have fewer children.

As a concomitant, the role of women has changed. As women had fewer children, they were more available for work outside the home. At the same time, service jobs became available which allowed for part-time work (Harris, 1981). Coupled with this was the fact that the earning power of single breadwinner families has not kept up with the cost of living. Finally, the availability of work made it possible for many women to walk away from unsatisfying and frequently abusive husbands (Gelles & Cornell, 1985). As a result of these changes, the proportion of women working outside the home has risen steadily (Harris, 1981) and more women are remaining childless (Hobbs, Dokecki, Hoover-Dempsey, Moroney, Shayne, & Weeks, 1984).

More important for the study of families, the increase in women's gainful employment has meant that those who do have children are more likely to be working outside the home at the same time that they are raising children (Hobbs et al., 1984). By 1981 40% of those who had a child under six were working and 60% of those with a child between six and eighteen were working (Harris, 1981). There has been some hesitation of scholars to discuss this trend, since such discussions might be misinterpreted as a criticism of women who worked outside the home. As discussed below, however, the significance of these trends for women, their children, and their partners is too important to ignore.

Family structure has also been affected by increased mobility. As transportation has become cheaper and more widespread and telecommunications have enabled people to know about more favorable economic conditions in other parts of the world, mobility has increased. As a result nuclear families consisting of father, mother, and children are less likely to be living in close proximity to aunts, uncles, and grandparents. This may have left families more isolated from nongovernmental forms of social and material support in times of crisis. Presumably this effect has been greatest in the United States. Comparisons among countries in mobility patterns and their relationships to family support would be useful.

*The legacy of male dominance.* The practices involved in male dominance are seldom discussed in the literature on family interaction. However, such patterns appear to be a fundamental feature of context for family functioning (Harris, 1976, 1979, 1989). Although definite movement away from this pattern can be detected, an analysis of the role of these patterns in family functioning could lead to more effective ways to reduce marital discord and problematic parenting.

According to Harris (1974), male dominance developed as a concomitant of the evolution of prestate societies. In his view it was part of a pattern in which warriors were raised who could contribute to the group's efforts to defend and seize territory that was needed for hunting and farming. Women were subjugated in the process of controlling population and controlling young warriors' access to them. Harris (1977) argues that female infanticide was a major method of controlling populations that

had become too large to feed. Such a practice required that women not have the power to oppose it. Similarly, making women chattel made it possible to make them rewards for brave and successful warriors. In this view, valuing males' aggressiveness went hand in hand with devaluing women.

The preceding is hardly a description of the exigencies for families of industrialized societies. However, the basic pattern of women being socialized to be subservient to men remains. Cultural materialist theory would suggest that this is because such a pattern has continued to play a role in the productive processes of industrialized societies. For example, one source of resistance to women working has probably been the fact that increasing women's participation in the labor force would decrease the amount of money that men could command. Other factors probably have included the increased demand for men to work at home and the threat to men's control of the family that are likely to accompany the woman working outside the home (Gelles & Cornell, 1985).

There is little question that male dominance is receding. However, few would argue that it is no longer a feature of most cultures. Understanding its sources and the effects of its demise on families would contribute to our understanding of the forces impinging on families and the kinds of interventions that may be necessary to assist families in the present era.

The point here is not to lay out a detailed theory of the role of male dominance or the implications of its demise. Rather it is to point out that an important influence on families is being overlooked because current theorizing about families seldom looks beyond the influence of quite proximal variables on individual families.

#### *The Impact of Family Structure on Family Interactions*

These changes in families may be contributing to certain types of problematic interaction patterns. For example, marital discord and spousal abuse may be more likely when women violate traditional role expectations by working outside the home. Gelles and Cornell (1985) cite evidence that the rate of husband's abuse of wives is higher when the woman makes more money than the man. This is presumably more

likely when the man has been socialized into traditional role expectations. At the same time, increased work opportunities for women have enabled them to walk away from aversive marital relationships.

Single mothering is one of the most frequently discussed structural aspects of the changing family. As many as 40% of children in the United States will live with a single mother at some point in their growing up (Harris, 1981). Living with a single mother is associated with greater poverty (Rodgers, 1982). When the single mothering is the result of a teenage pregnancy, it is likely to be associated with poverty for the family and poorer school performance for the child (Schinke, Gilchrist, & Blythe, 1980). Understanding the effects of single parenting on the mother's day to day interactions with her children could contribute to more effective interventions for such families. Understanding the factors in the larger social system that influence the formation of single parent families could point to policies and programs that might prevent such families from being formed. (Encouraging women to stay in problematic marriages would not be among them.)

From the standpoint of understanding the development of problematic behaviour of children, the various features of family structure may all affect children through a single common pathway, namely, parental monitoring of their children's behaviour. The degree to which parents monitor what their children are doing in school and with their peers has been shown to be a powerful predictor of diverse problem behaviours of youth (Metzler et al. 1991-a; Reid & Patterson, 1991). To a great extent, monitoring appears to be a question of whether parents have the time to interact with their children. Single parenting families and families in which both parents are working are disadvantaged. Richardson et al (1990) found that children who spent more time at home alone after school were more likely to begin substance abuse. This was true even when socioeconomic status and race were controlled for. Monitoring is also affected by the degree of coercive interaction that occurs in the family (Reid & Patterson, 1991); families that are characterized by more coercive interactions are less likely to have parents who monitor what their children do. Coercive interactions appear to be more likely when

families are poor and disorganized, (Wahler & Dumas, 1987) and these features are more likely in single parent families (Rodgers, 1982; Reid & Patterson, 1991).

Behavioural scientists have been disinclined to discuss these issues lest they seem to be attacking women for working or for leaving problematic marriages. However, failure to delineate the obstacle that women face in working and coping with the remnants of male dominance is hardly a service to them. What is needed is a clearer understanding of the relationships between the larger social system and family structure and between family structure and family interaction. Only when these relationships have been delineated will we be able to move toward policies and programs that prevent or ameliorate the problems that women (and their children) are facing.

#### *Media Influences on Family Functioning*

Mass media are another aspect of the larger social context for families. Behaviourally oriented family researchers have paid little or no attention to the influences that media may have on family functioning. (Though see Winett, 1986.) The presence of a small box before which children will sit for hours has made parental monitoring easier. However, it is reasonably well established that television viewing has deleterious impacts on children (Winett, 1987) and there is some evidence that decreasing tv viewing can increase children's reading (Biglan & Biglan, 1989). Meyrowitz (1986) has pointed out that television has also brought children into contact with information about adult life that they seldom had access to prior to its advent. Finally, there is evidence that watching television violence increases the probability of aggressive behaviour (Bandura, 1973). It may well be that aggression in the family is directly stimulated by its depiction on tv that evening, however such fine grained studies have yet to be done.

There may be more subtle effects of television and other mass media. For example, to what extent is the culture of consumption stimulated by media that advertise and otherwise depict the importance of having consumer goods? This might not seem germane to concerns about family interactions. Recall however, that we began with the thesis that women went to work

to keep up with a standard of living that had become difficult to maintain on one salary. However, in none of the industrialized countries was this a matter of families lacking basic subsistence. Rather, it was a matter of new consumer goods such as microwave ovens and VCR's becoming available. Mass media may well be the context that has made it important for families to have these objects.

One could imagine a world in which media played a greater role in modelling and advocating a more pastoral and pacific lifestyle. Families who lived in a world in which consumer goods were less important than the quality of interpersonal relationships might feel less pressure to send both parents out to work full time. (Women need not be the ones to stay at home.) However, such media depictions are not in the immediate interests of any economic enterprises (Harris, 1990). Unless or until media come to be seen as having a civic responsibility, they will probably tend to promote consumption.

All of this is quite speculative. However, countries do differ in the extent to which media promote consumption. It would be worthwhile exploring whether variation in the media promotion of consumption and other aspects of family practice are associated with inter-country differences in family practices.

Even in the present world, the potential for media to influence families beneficially should not be overlooked. There is evidence that parenting skills can be improved through video modelling (Webster-Stratton, 1984; Webster-Stratton, Kolpacoff, & Hollingsworth, 1988). It is not too soon to begin to experiment with trying to influence the *prevalence* of good parenting through the mass media.

#### *Implications*

Empirical studies of the relationships between family structure and family interaction are scarce. Studies that trace the impact of the larger social context through family structure to family interactions are even more rare. Empirical research that clarified these relationships could have several benefits.

Such research would delineate the ways public policy might benefit families. For example, in general terms it is obvious that the absence of adequate child care puts a strain on modern families in which both partners

work. However, the specific ways this shortage affects the interactions of parents and children has received little attention. Empirical evidence could form one basis of support for policies that developed more and higher quality child care. Similarly, clarification of the relationships between the characteristics of work life and the structure and interactions of families could contribute to public policies that make it easier for family members to fulfill both family and work roles effectively.

Research might also clarify how media could be used to temper the influences of developing changes in families. For example, if it becomes well-established that marital discord is more likely when traditional role expectations are violated by women moving into the work force, media might be used to reframe these changes in ways that are less distressing to men. (For example, ads about professional athletes who like the fact that their wives have high status jobs could be created.) The media currently do little to encourage men to adopt more egalitarian attitudes toward women. Yet, men, too, suffer when marital discord results from differing expectations regarding women's roles.

Those who would oppose study of these issues because it might seem to undermine the right of women to work outside the home do a disservice to women. Women are unlikely to be driven back into the home merely by criticism when their working is essential to their economic well-being. They are however, likely to suffer a good deal of hardship if our societies do not grapple with the effects of their working on family relationships. Research on these issues can be a source of creative initiatives for the prevention and amelioration of the problematic family interactions that arise, not from women working, but from the basic economic and social forces that constitute the current era.

### *Community Interventions*

The present perspective also implies the need to go beyond interventions that are focused on single families. Not all of the problems that families confront can be dealt with through clinical means. Clinicians who are interested in the well-being of families would do well to examine how community interventions could be used to affect family functioning. Such interventions would involve organizing opinion

leaders in the community to work on the most important problems that families experience. Such efforts would certainly include attempts to improve the quality, availability, and consumption of clinical interventions for marital and parenting skills. They would also involve efforts to improve how schools are dealing with children who are likely to fail academically or socially. Organizing at a community level would make possible to use the media and to mobilize and coordinate the efforts of community organizations that have not traditionally played a role in supporting families.

One might argue that it is not the role of psychologists to conduct community interventions. However, psychologists who have been studying family interactions may be in the best position (a) to identify the targets through which community interventions could assist families, (b) to specify the ways that targeted family processes might be affected, and (c) to evaluate empirically the effects of such interventions.

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