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PREVIEW

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INSTITUTIONALIZED CHILDREN AS PARENTS

The University of Nebraska - Lincoln

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PREVIEW

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INSTITUTIONALIZED CHILDREN AS PARENTS

by

Patricia A. Street

A DISSERTATION

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The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Interdepartmental Area of Community and Human Resources

Under the Supervision of Professors
Steven Eggland and John D. DeFrain

Lincoln, Nebraska

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TITLE

Institutionalized Children As Parents

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PREVIEW

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

STATEMENT AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM

We all begin life as children, and most of us later become parents, who, in turn, help determine the lives of the next generation. Combined with peers, schools and other institutions, parents have a high impact on the mental health and the emotional development of each new generation of children.

Every facet of our personality, every adventure we embark upon, adds to our knowledge and abilities as workers, friends, lovers, and parents.

The impact of a parent's abilities, capabilities, interests and involvement in her¹ child's life has a marked effect on that child, her children and grandchildren, her peers, neighbors, and other important people in her life.

Parenting produces a ripple through life as does the proverbial stone tossed into a pool of water. The effects of one parent upon her child can move a nation. Values, communication patterns, and levels of caring are passed on, for some to a greater degree, for others less, like red hair and crooked teeth.

The preceding paragraphs contained assumptions based on current understanding of parenting in our society. The purpose of this research is to look for the roots of parenting skills.

¹I have chosen to use the pronoun "her", and otherwise use the feminine gender, throughout this paper, arbitrarily, and without intended prejudice towards mothers or fathers.

Establishing the impact of a child's primary caretaker was the first step in my search to discover how one learns to parent.

How does a first time parent know what to do? Does she rely solely on a textbook, does she try to do everything her own parents did, does she take formal classes which tell her everything she ever wanted to know about every possible parenting situation?

When a child is first placed in her parent's arms, and she looks at a mass of red, fuming and fussing baby, she may wonder, "What have I done?"

The first, often false assumption, that the baby will be beautiful, and even worse, that the parents will feel a deep and overwhelming love for the child, love at first sight, may be the stimulus for the realization that they know very little about parenting. In fact, such experiences may produce self-deprecating feelings, anxiety, and insecurity for the parents. They feel something is wrong with them, that their feelings are wrong.

As discussed by LeMasters in Parents in Modern America, (1977) Americans have grown up with myths surrounding parenting, such as children improve marriage, or children are sweet and cute, either of which may or may not be true.

Modeling is the primary method which has been suggested by parenting authorities (Spock, 1974; Salk, 1979; LeMasters, 1977; etc.) to explain how we learn to be parents.

The negative impact of modeling behaviors from one generation to the next is exemplified by studies of child abusers, (Kempe, 1974) which suggest that a high number of abusers are imitating their own parent's style, having been abused themselves as children.

Changes in roles and expectations have been moving at a rapid pace. Women who refused to enter childbirth without knowledge or participation skills, and who encouraged the inclusion of the father in the birthing process, set a pattern for participation and involvement in child rearing.

Fathers who were included in the birth of the child found it natural to change diapers, play with, and be an active parent.

In 1982 one cannot assume that a mother's primary role is to take care of the children, while the father works outside of the home. Many households are participating in "co-parenting", and, to a lesser degree, job sharing and househusbanding are demonstrating the evolution in traditional father-mother roles.

Along with this evolution in parenting roles, is the apparently increasing interest in parent education. At the core of this evolution are the process questions, what makes a good parent? What should a parent do to have a happy, healthy child? The question in the past might have been, "What makes a good mother?" Some parents are requesting assistance, searching for experts.

The La Leche League was developed to assist women in nursing their children, recognizing that this phenomenon, as natural

as it may seem, required information and skill to be done properly. As nursing is infrequently observed in our society, most new mothers know very little about it.

As families experiment with new ways of living, traditionally accepted, one-way patterns, are being tested.

The suggestion that the perfect family has a mother and father, two to three children, is active in the P.T.A., Cub Scouts, or the Future Farmers of America, holds true for fewer and fewer families.

Like most other professionals involved in working with parents and their children, this researcher works from a philosophical base which has come from school, teachers, her own experiences both personal and professional, her experience as a parent's child, and her experience as a parent.

While working with and learning from parents, she assumes most of the following, most of the time:

1. Parents want to do a good job
2. Parents know a lot about parenting
3. Parents know very little about parenting
4. Parents often imitate others they have observed parenting, most often, their own parents
5. Parents often expect a great deal from the experience
6. Parents want a lot for their children, especially happiness and success in their lives
7. Parents want their children to adopt their (the parents) set of values

8. Parents and children develop communication systems which seem engraved in stone, but in fact, are subject to modification and change.

An interesting way to approach the question, "How do parents learn their job (why do some do better than others?), is to look at parents who grew up in institutions under conditions of maternal and paternal deprivation, with few constant parent role models, and find out what kind of parents they self reportedly have become.

Parents who grow up in an institution with the above described conditions are the subjects of this paper. If the author could learn something from them, she might discover clues to the "How do parents learn their job?" puzzle.

Development of Research Questions

Research Questions

1. How many children did the alumni have?
2. How close are they with their children?
3. What are the alumni's parenting styles? Their spouse's styles?
4. What values did they most want to impart to their children, and how successful were they?
5. Why did they choose to have children?
6. How would they predict their children would rate the alums as parents?
7. How would they rate themselves as parents? Their spouses?
8. What did they consider to be the most important ingredient in being a good parent?
9. How prepared were they to become parents?

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

Population. The population involved in the study was comprised of alumni from the Knights of Pythias Home for Children in Springfield, Ohio, who having left the Home, had become parents. Those returning for a reunion in July of 1980 were asked to participate in the study. Participants were therefore volunteers.

Behavior. Behavior studied in this research constituted that of alumni of a children's institution, and their success as parents. Their attitudes and values concerning parenting were examined through self-report.

Research Design. A questionnaire interview design was used.

Significance of the Study

The purpose of the study was to determine whether a group of adults, who were institutionalized as children, grew up to be "good" parents (by self-report), and if so, to postulate why?

From the literature, should it have been appropriate to formalize hypotheses, one would look for a negative self report from the parents, whom, it was known beforehand, grew up in neglectful situations.

The research findings provide insight into the possible effects of institutionalization of children as adults, on the impact of adult employees in institutions on the children they supervise.

Additionally, this study provided participants with the opportunity to discuss and review their childhood with someone who was interested and concerned. It made them, the researcher felt, feel important.

PREVIEW

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH AND RELATED LITERATURE

A search of the literature of several interrelated problems was necessary to begin the investigation of the research question.

Once again, the question: How did children, who had never experienced one-to-one parenting, do as parents themselves when they grew up and had children? For those who saw themselves as particularly successful parents, what factors in their lives were different from others growing up in the same institution? Did they develop a special rapport with an adult for an extended period of time? Did they have siblings also at the home or institution? Did they enter the institution much later than those who did not see themselves as good parents? Was maternal and paternal deprivation a part of each child's background, and in what ways did it effect their abilities to provide warmth and affection to their own children? Did a high percentage of these institutionalized children marry relatively early? Did a high percentage remain childless? Why?

The potential questions go on and on. The research was narrowed to the alumni's feelings about growing up in institutions, their feelings about themselves as parents, and how they felt their early institutionalization affected their later parenthood?

MATERNAL DEPRIVATION

Maternal deprivation and its effect has been studied by a number of researchers. Although there has been little attention

to the general outcome of maternally deprived children, no studies thus far have looked at the effects of this phenomenon on the children in the role of parents.

Two investigators are of particular interest for their work on the institutionalized child. Howard Skeel and Marie Skodak, working together and independently, were among the first to research the effects of institutionalization on children, beginning with some of Skeels work with Fillmore (1937). These original investigations concerned the influence of environment on intelligence. Further work by Skeels (1940) demonstrated that children became retarded if they remained for long periods of time in an institution designed for normal children.

Skeels later did follow-up research in Iowa concerning the adult status of children with differing growing up experiences (Skeels, 1966). This research is of particular significance to the question, as it attempted to look at institutionalized children as grown-ups, and compared them to other institutionalized children. (The population samples came from his earlier work.) In this project, the experimental group as adults "did better" in later life than did the contrast group who had stayed in the original institution without one-to-one contact or the ensuing adoption.

Skodak's study (1938) of children in foster homes suggested that the I.Q. of a foster child during the preschool years is most related to the quality of the home environment, versus the common belief at that time that heredity was the sole determiner

of I.Q. The question remains, what effect did the early deprivation have upon the children as adults?

Maternal deprivation as an inhibiting factor to a child's development has more recently been defined as a lack of one-on-one relationship between an infant and an adult, a lack of tactile stimulation (Montagu, 1971), (Frank, 1957), lack of perceptual stimulation in the infant's immediate environment (Schaffer, 1968), or confinement to a limited environment.

Flint in New Hope For Deprived Children (1978), described an intervention program developed by herself and some colleagues, for a group of institutionalized, maternally deprived children in Canada in the 1950's. While developing the Flint Security Scale at this institution, she discovered that the children were losing points on the scale rapidly, the longer they were at this institution. While attempting to teach children how to play, she observed, "it seems clear that some children had a much greater capacity than others to maintain some personal integrity despite environmental discouragement." (1978, p. 37) But, to what degree was this maintained as the children matured?

In another longitudinal study, Dennis (1973) followed up on children previously observed and now adults, and suggested that recovery from earlier institutionally instilled deprivation was possible (as measured by Binet scales) for those children who were adopted by the age of two, and whose development was followed by everyday normal cognitive experiences. He also found that children brought into the creche (institution) between

the ages of one and five (having experienced a non-institutional setting prior to that time) had achieved Binet scores doubled those of children immediately placed in the creche.

Maas (1968) investigated the adult lives of children who were placed in government nurseries during World War II in England. Although most were reunited with their families, and so were not long term placements as were the children in the Knights of Pythias Home in this study, he found that personal relationships were impaired for those evacuated at four years or less, and those placed at one year of age or less were the most impaired.

Early entry into care is later associated with maladjustment in adult life as suggested by Lewis (1954). Lewis also suggests that breaking into a foster family was more difficult for children placed early into prolonged residential care.

Would the children of the K.P. Home who entered at the earliest ages demonstrate poorer adjustment to adult life, specifically as parents, than did those coming in later?

The history of institutions for the purpose of providing substitute care for children has been well documented.

A recently re-published work by an English lawyer, originally published in 1839, documented the public concerns for the welfare of pauper children. (Kay, 1970)

A more recent work, by Patten (1968) described the development of children's institutions of the 1930's and 1940's in the U.S.A. As explained by Patten, almshouses were established for homeless children as early as 1729. From the almshouses, a custodial

system, came the indentured servant system, which although providing for job training to the parentless child, left the child vulnerable to abuse and neglect from her sponsor.

"The evidence is strong...that although nurseries have improved dramatically since the time of orphanages and foundling homes, they cannot be a desirable long-term environment for small children." (Dinnage and Pringle, 1967, p. 12).

The K.P. Home appeared to have been a commonly run institution, following the average prescription of the day for foundling homes, as described by Dinnage and Pringle:

"The scientific theories of childcare favored early in this century had an emphasis on cleanliness and hygiene and routine, which arose in reaction to 19th Century standards of hygiene...Also, the most effective way to care for the needy appeared to be to separate them into groups." (1967, p. 6)

The stated goals and purposes of the K.P. Home match the preceding paragraph well.

LEARNING THEORY AND PARENTING

The questions, how parents parent, and why they parent the way they do has been little researched, but often discussed.

The popular literature has had a great deal to say, with a variety of "experts" suggesting how to be successful, great, or even just parents who survive.

What distinguishes good parents from bad? Can bad parents learn to be good? Is parenting a modified activity?

There had been general agreement that the activity of parenting is a learned activity. The researcher found little to support

the notion that it is inherited biologically, although there is some information from child abuse research to suggest that parenting patterns are passed from generation to generation, and Flint (19) suggested finding some children with "inherent" abilities to overcome their surroundings.

Common sense and our own experiences as parents tell us that we imitate, especially when we have been offered no alternatives, or have not incorporated alternatives into our field of possible behaviors.

Rather typical of the popular literature and one of the most widely read books for parents, by Ginott (1965), begins with "how-tos" and continues with concrete solutions to everyday problems. He discusses such problems for parents as "Avoiding Self-Defeating Patterns", and "Responsibility and Independence". Although the advice is probably acceptable:

"...Parents who are in the midst of an undeclared war with their children over chores and responsibilities should recognize the fact that this war cannot be won. Children have more time and energy to resist us than we have to coerce them." (p. 72)

He tells us little about how and why we parent the way we do.

Ginott does make some general statements concerning the goals of good parenting, such as, "A good parent, like a good teacher, is one who makes himself increasingly dispensable to children." (p. 89)

Ginott comes near the researcher's topic when he discusses a letter he received from a parent. He had told her, "...no