

What are Families for?

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This could very well be a theoretical question or the anguished cry of someone who, in a troubled moment, turned to his family and found—literally or figuratively—that no one was there.

Why is the concept of family and its role and functions an issue today? Why is “dysfunctional family” the buzz word among psychologists? The answers to these questions identify the core of a basic irony existing in today’s society. In pursuing the lofty goal of improving the human condition through economic and technological advancement, the family’s affective and educative functions are subverted. It is the family which initially molds competence and character, educating the child on how it is to be a human being even as it provides the emotional anchor in troubled times. All these require time—repeated, extended and regular interaction. It also presupposes that there is a strong mutual attachment between parent and child—a condition that can come about only through time invested by parents on the infant and the young child.

But how can these take place when social and economic forces compel the nuclear family to have minimal amounts of time together? It is difficult to fulfill these functions when both parents must work to make both ends meet, or live apart to improve their economic condition. It should be pointed out, however, that the problem of not having enough time together exists across social classes. It is the hecticness of everyday living that prevents yesterday’s dining-room socialization from taking place today.

A few generations ago, the dining room was the natural environment for socialization of values and life goals. While “eavesdropping” on adult conversation, the child acquired valuable information on the context of decision-making—why something was done this way and not another way or why someone was considered “good” or “bad” as the case maybe. Political and religious beliefs and attitudes were likewise imbibed in this context. To be sure, not everything learned was positive, but then, there was time to process the information, to clarify issues and integrate cognitive aspects with feelings and emotions. And quite

importantly, the child experienced the security of the nuclear family as an emotional buffer from the stresses of everyday life. Today, however, having mealtimes together is more of a rarity. In fact, it is a growing middle class phenomenon that families clear their calendars so that they could have time together during weekends. In sum, socialization requires time. But time flies with hectic schedules, and without realizing it until it is too late, many families lose touch of each other. The recognition of these situations should send alarm signals for society as a whole.

Psychological Development and Family Life

Psychological research has shown that there are core elements necessary for normal psychological development. All of these exist naturally in a family setting, emphasizing the importance of the family as a basic social institution. It is recognized that today, there are various forms of partnerships and arrangements other than the traditional nuclear family. But the core elements for enhanced psychological development are more likely to be found within nuclear family settings.

Bowlby (1975) and Bronfenbrenner (1982) have identified the first prerequisite of psychological development as consisting of the strong emotional bonding between the child and an adult. This significant adult is usually the mother. The act of breastfeeding provides the warmth, nurturance and eye contact necessary for the bonding to take place. Although the mother's role has a biological basis, theoretically, any committed adult can build the context for emotional bonding. Talcott Parsons refers to the mother's role as expressive while Jungian psychology describes it as the mater-

nal archetype—stable, unchanging, expressive and intuitive. Consistency and sensitivity in responding to the child's needs are critical for bonding and the resulting sense of security. If these are present, every aspect of the child's development is enhanced.

The sense of security that comes with basic bonding allows the child to explore, elaborate, initiate, imagine and manipulate his environment, thus providing the opportunities for maximizing the growth of his cognitive potentials. Developmental psychologists have long pointed out that the best predictor of cognitive growth is the child's early social and emotional behavior. The basic bonding likewise has direct effects on the social and emotional maturity of the child. His ability to initiate and maintain social relationships, to give and receive love, to be nurturant and altruistic all have their roots in successful bonding during infancy and early childhood. The studies of Bettelheim (1977) after the Second World War on orphaned children, as well as present day case studies on abused and neglected children, demonstrate that lack of bonding, nurturance and warmth also lead to stunted physical growth. Bettelheim calls this "marasmus", and today's developmental psychologists refer to this as the "failure to thrive". It appears then that bonding is an imperative, a necessary condition for the full blossoming of physical, social, emotional and cognitive potentials. The infant and the young child need from their adult caregivers total commitment, without conditionalities. As Bronfenbrenner says, the child is in need of someone who is crazy about him or her. Completely involved and immersed in the child's development, these adults not only provide the necessary warmth and nurturance but also the responsiveness

which serves as impetus for the growth of potentials. Even as bonding and responsiveness are necessary they are not by themselves sufficient conditions for adequate development.

Another essential element is the participation of a third person as partner and supporter of the principal caregiver. Assistant, morale booster, shock-absorber, all-around friend and co-investor, this person provides care, affection and acceptance especially for the primary caregiver. Usually this is the father but theoretically again this person can be anyone with a significant relationship with the primary caregiver as well as the child. Given this condition, together with the first two mentioned earlier—child-adult bonding and the responsiveness of the adult caregiver—it can be assumed that the right environment is present for normal psychological development to take place. Without basic bonding, the child becomes emotionally crippled, thus affecting his subsequent relationships with others. The absence of responsiveness and sensitivity on the part of caregivers leads to a generally low level of development and the absence of a morale booster who shares in the execution of a nurturing role has negative effects on both the caregiver and the child. Given this psychological framework for normal development, how do Filipino families fare? What is happening at the micro level to children and spouses of overseas contract workers or those who belong to broken homes? Or for families where both parents have to work and have less interaction with their children?

The Problem of Father Absence

Without meaning to make fathers scapegoats in a situation created by forces of a

modernizing society, we are led to discuss the problem as one of father absence. For one, there are more female-headed than male-headed single parent homes and secondly, most of the research literature focus on the effects of father-absence.

From the moment of conception, biology provides the basis for the mother to have deep involvement with her offspring. A father, however, has to show more determination to be involved both with the mother and the child. It is tragic, but not surprising, that many fathers enter their children's consciousness only through their absence.

Father absence can be thought of more broadly in two ways. One is in terms of actual physical absence (the bulk of research efforts has been done in this area). The other way is symbolized by a father who is physically present but psychologically and energetically distant. The truly present father is willing to be involved, surrendering himself to child-related activities both in an active and reactive sense. In this capacity, he fulfills the third requirement for the appropriate context for normal psychological development. The effect on the father of being separated from his family has hardly received attention from researchers because his absence from the home has been rationalized through his instrumental role as breadwinner. At times, his absence is likewise justified as forcing the development of children's autonomy. Moreover, the father is seen as having more opportunity to initiate and maintain relationships outside the home which may fulfill his needs and therefore is the least affected by familial separations.

The consequences of the father's physical absence on the child's development are seen in the areas of gender identity, social and cognitive skills, self-esteem and attitude towards achievement. Gender consciousness comes about through the father-child relationship. How a girl experiences and affirms her femininity can be traced to the way the father relates to her as well as to her mother's femininity. The meaning of maleness for the son results from his identification with the role played by the father. If the father shows a comfortable embracing of domestic roles and chores, respect and appreciation of the mother's role, the son can be expected to similarly actualize his role as a man. Sons from father-absent homes are known to have problems with regard to impulse control—they are more aggressive than those belonging to intact families and are likewise more dependent and less responsible. Girls from father-absent homes, on the other hand, show less competence in relating to males during adolescence.

Another area of concern arising from father absence is discipline. The problem is a complex one in that the mother's emotional state and cognition about their situation affects her child-rearing style. If father absence is due to marital separation or dissolution and the mother has unresolved guilt feelings about the situation, she may tend to overlook misbehavior and become more lenient towards her children. This in turn affects the child's ability to delay gratification. Among the families of overseas contract workers for instance, there have been many cases of compensating for father absence with the purchase of clothes or other goods desired by the children. This encourages "spoiling", and has indirect effects on the chil-

dren's level of aspiration and the development of a consumerist attitude. The value of hardwork then escapes the consciousness of the child.

Academic performance is also affected by father absence. The correlations obtained are consistent—children from single-parent homes as a group have lower grades. Cognitive development and moral judgment are likewise negatively affected. Again, lack of meaningful interaction with an adult male partly explains these findings. It can also be seen here that the solo mother is burdened with more responsibilities and tasks than her counterpart in an intact family. This situation robs her of the precious time spent in responsive interaction with her children.

Another correlate of father absence among adolescent children is the higher incidence of health risk behaviors such as smoking and drinking alcohol. Psychologists view these in two ways. Some adolescents indulge in these behaviors to compensate for a lack of self-esteem, a condition brought about by the generally more emotionally insecure atmosphere of single-parent homes. The alternative explanation is the single mother's lack of control over the home environment because she has to deal with her own feelings and reactions to the burden of carrying on and sustaining the family alone.

The Problem of Solo Motherhood

The framework suggested at the beginning of this paper shows a need to re-interpret research findings by looking at the effects of solo parenting on the mother. The above cited consequences on the children are mediated by the mother's response to solo parenting.

There are typologies of response styles to the absence of the third party. One can be labeled emotional flooding—the mother dwells alternately on feelings of anger, resentment, self-pity, frustration, loneliness and despair. When she repeatedly verbalizes these feelings to her children and interprets her world in the context of these emotions, she ironically becomes the object of her children's resentment. All things considered, it is a no-win situation for everyone. Another is the mother who suppresses all feelings, and having convinced herself that she can do everything on her own, shows everyone, especially the father of her children, that she needs no one. Most solo mothers, however, vacillate between these two extremes. Conscious of their responsibility to provide a sound psychological environment for their children, they walk the tightrope of self-denial and emotional instability.

Whether father absence is physical or psychological, the path for normal psychological development is severely obstructed. Lacking a support system, the mother's coping responses reach a threshold dangerously bordering on instability. In the context of our culture, it takes time for a wife to admit to herself and to anyone for that matter that she has been abandoned or that her marriage has failed. She is caught in a neurotic bind of self-blame or misplaced loyalty to her husband, fear of harming her children's psyche and face-saving for herself. Most women postpone the confrontation of the problem little realizing that physical and psychological debilitation have insidiously set in. Events that she could otherwise have tolerated suddenly trigger emotional outbursts. Her personal and professional life can easily plunge into a pit of disarray and disorganization. Just as easily, she can attribute everything to

burn-out and thus avoid confronting loneliness and despair. In the meantime, one or more of the children bear the brunt of the dysfunctions within the family and becomes then the presenting problem for everyone. Carandang (1989) has documented this in her book on *Filipino Children in Crisis*. No matter how the mother perceives her capability to withstand stress, as long as there is no one else who can serve as a sounding board, providing counterpoints when necessary, affirming love and trust, respecting difficult decisions, or simply providing contact comfort, it is humanly impossible for the mother to carry out her role at her maximum possible best. This conclusion derived from the present framework is confirmed by evolutionary psychology, the approach of which is discussed more fully below.

An independent approach to the importance of bonding and interactions among human beings is provided by the new field of evolutionary psychology. According to evolutionary psychologists, human beings are programmed to thrive in caring, nurturing and trusting relationships. They argue that interdependence and cooperation increase chances for survival and through natural selection the genetic framework for reciprocal altruism is established. The extended family and immediate neighborhood of rural societies are responsive to the growth of relationships supportive of trust and caring. When the demands of modern society erode these structures, feelings of isolation, despair and depression set in. According to evolutionary psychologists, the increase in cases of depression among women and suicide among adolescents can be traced to the mismatch between what we were naturally programmed for and the social and psychological environment of present-day

society. The Philippines continues to have its increasing share of single parents due to marital separation, marriage dissolution, overseas employment and widowhood. Whatever the reason, the negative consequences of solo parenting sans the intimacy and trust of the nuclear and extended family or the immediate neighborhood accrue on the single parent and the children.

At this point it should be noted that although more of the studies on solo-parenting have been done on solo-mothers, there are also mother-absent homes which leave fathers to become the solo-parent to their children and in their homes. Today, solo-fatherhood is not occasioned only by widowhood or separation but by the increasing employment of mothers away from home. A substantial 36 percent of the country's female overseas contract workers, for example, are currently married women (NSO, 1993) many of whom leave children and families behind to avail of employment opportunities outside of the country. In some of the author's field trips to the provinces, it was observed that most of the women in one barangay of San Juan, La Union work as overseas domestic helpers. Some studies indicate that women overseas contract workers leave their children in the care of other mother-surrogates or female relatives, but almost no systematic research has been done to note the specific problems faced by the fathers and children left behind and how they cope with the absence of mothers. Little is also known about the specific consequences of mother absence on children and how different these are from those of father absence. Finally, there is a need to know more about the viewpoints and feelings of fathers of

their own roles in the family and in the care and rearing of children.

Conclusions

Following evidence from psychological research as well as the logic of evolutionary psychology, there appear to be clear present and future dangers for the family and its individual members (most especially the solo mother and her children). It takes little imagination to follow the implied grim scenario that follows the absence of one or more core elements for normal psychological development. To stem the tide, social scientists have to influence policy affecting the family. Given that overseas employment, marriage dissolution and other forms of separation are unavoidable conditions, government has to invest in measures which will provide care and nurturance for both the parents and children. Many work organizations have provided nurseries and day care centers for the children of their workers. The potential psychological and social benefits of such arrangements will certainly outweigh the necessary financial outlay. Community and neighborhood cooperative day care centers have also been tried in some localities but were short-lived for lack of resources and popular support. It should be recognized that concrete approaches to the problem cannot succeed without educating parents and communities regarding the significance of the core elements in the framework of individual development. Aside from parent education and marriage encounter seminars being sponsored by the church and a few private groups, schools and communities have to be involved in inculcating the importance of parental roles starting as early as elementary school. Only policy and advocacy can address more generally and

systematically the prevention of negative consequences arising from the lack of one or more of the core elements in the paradigm. Unless the genetic make-up of man

drastically changes or new social institutions are invented, measures have to be found to strengthen the educative and affective functions of the family.

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