

Early experience and the life path



Does early social experience predestine a child's future? Ann Clarke and Alan Clarke examine the evidence.

PERHAPS the most pervasive view concerning long-term development has been that early experiences predetermine the individual's future. For Freud, the first five years were regarded as critical; for J.B. Watson it was the experience of the first two years which would make or mar the life path. In contrast to this super-environmentalism, yet with the same predeterministic implications, was the extreme genetic notion of personal constancy espoused by Spearman.

These early 20th century theories, reviving philosophical notions over many centuries, were reinforced by Bowlby's (1951) highly influential monograph. For him good mothering was almost useless if delayed beyond two and a half years; the prolonged deprivation of maternal care might have grave and far-reaching effects on the child's character and thus the whole of his or her future life. Bowlby *et al.*'s (1956) part recantation and courageous indication of having 'over-stated' his case went virtually unnoticed.

In 1951, the same year as Bowlby's publication, we inherited a psychology department in a hospital for what are now termed persons with learning disabilities. They were held legally under the Mental Deficiency Act 1913, and the majority were adolescent or young adult people with mild disabilities. Almost all had been drawn from either very adverse conditions characterised by cruelty or neglect, or at best from 'ordinary' bad homes. To our very great surprise, in the course of routine assessment, we noted IQ increments, sometimes substantial. A pilot study indicated that such changes were common, and we advanced five alternative hypotheses to account for the findings. Only one was supported: a record of early *severe* adversity predicted later improvement, and this was ultimately found to extend to social adaptation. There followed four controlled studies of this adolescent and young adult population, involving some

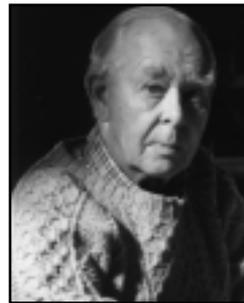
200 persons (Clarke & Clarke, 1954; Clarke *et al.*, 1958). The hypothesis was again confirmed. At the time of the first study (1954), we raised the question of whether these results might generalise to other deprived populations, and if so, whether Bowlby's theory might require modification. Our surprising rule seemed to be that, in our *unusual* groups of people, the worse the background the better the prognosis following minimal intervention. Our data forced us to hypothesise that early psychological damage could scarcely become any worse; it might remain the same, or there might be recovery. It had proved to be the latter. Such processes were later aptly termed 'the self-righting tendency' (Waddington, 1966).

Our initial search for generalization of these findings was at once rewarded by Lewis's (1954) study of the improving status of early deprived children removed from unsatisfactory conditions. From time to time, therefore, we monitored and reviewed the field (e.g. 1968, 1976, 1984, 1992) confirming

the generality of our original hypothesis and highlighting the range of individual differences, depending on both personal and social factors, in the extent of recovery processes. Yet, as Kagan (1992) indicates, there remains an ascendant assumption in developmental work that there is an indefinite preservation of a young child's salient qualities, whether intellectual ability or secure attachment: 'There is an inconsistency between the contemporary commitment to the importance of the local context which changes, and the capacity of early encounters to create immutable structures which will be preserved.' (p.993.)

Research problems — and solutions

There are problems in establishing the predictive roles of particular periods of development when the individual remains within a somewhat unchanging



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context. Hence studies which show some modest link between early and later characteristics can be bedevilled by environmental continuities. Nevertheless, many such longitudinal studies show that, if early experiences were powerfully predictive, some individuals escape their apparent destiny. Thus Kolvin *et al.* (1990) showed that a population of previously deprived children included 13 per cent who were living entirely normally as adults. Tonge *et al.*'s (1983) follow-up of children from multi-problem families indicated that in adulthood, about one third lived normally, one third were marginal and another third remained seriously deprived like their parents. Ferguson *et al.* (1994) believe that with the passage of time young people, having left their original family environments, may be exposed to further life and socialization experiences which can override their earlier social learning. There are other important studies (e.g. Rutter *et al.*, 1990) which indicate the role of individual personal factors, as well as of social supportive ones, in promoting escape from early adversity.

A more crucial research paradigm is desirable, one which, as we have from time to time indicated, involves a *marked* change in the individual's life circumstances. In these cases one asks whether the effects of early experiences are maintained or overcome. Here are two possibilities: 'Good' early experiences followed by adverse conditions — do the former protect against the latter? 'Bad' early experiences followed by fortunate changes — do the latter overcome the former? In practice, the second example is far more often reflected in the literature, hence a brief review of some of this evidence will be offered.

Children rescued from severe adversity

The most stringent test of our thesis is to consider the outcome for children removed from conditions which must almost have threatened their survival. Studies by Davis (1947) were important, but lacked long-term follow-up; the child Anna, a six-year-old rescued from terrible conditions, received no specialist help, made limited progress and died at age 10 and a half. Isabelle, however, the child of a deaf mute mother, both imprisoned in an attic, had severe disabilities on discovery at age six — lacking speech, suffering rickets and seemingly unaware of relationships of any kind. With specialist help she made rapid progress cognitively, scholastically and emotionally. On final follow-up at age 14 she had already passed the educational grades for age 12 and was continuing to improve.

The best known, most detailed and



lengthiest study is by Koluchova (1972, 1976, 1991), and since we had the privilege of bringing these findings to the notice of the English-speaking world, we have had the advantage of further information from the author. In its barest outline the facts are as follows.

Identical twin boys, born in 1960, lost their mother shortly after birth, were cared for by a social agency for a year and then fostered by a maternal aunt for a further six months. Their development was normal. Their father, who may have had intellectual limitations, remarried, but his new wife proved to be excessively cruel to the twins, banishing them to the cellar for the next five and a half years and beating them from time to time. Neighbours were frightened of this woman, and were aware that all was not well. On discovery at the age of seven the twins were dwarfed in stature, lacking speech, suffering from rickets and failing to understand the meaning of pictures. The doctors who examined them confidently predicted permanent physical and mental handicap. Legally removed from their parents, they first underwent a programme of physical remediation, and initially entered a school for children with severe learning disabilities. After some time, the boys were legally adopted by exceptionally dedicated women. Scholastically, from a state of profound disability they caught up with age peers and achieved emotional and intellectual normality. After basic education they went on to technical school, training as typewriter mechanics, but later undertook further education, specialising in electronics. Both were drafted for national service, and later married and had children. They are said to be entirely stable, lacking abnormalities and enjoying warm relationships. One is a computer technician and the other a technical training instructor.

Skuse (1984) has reviewed cases like these, concluding that 'in the absence of genetic or congenital anomalies ... victims of such deprivation have an excellent prognosis', provided of course that appropriate and long-term remedial action is undertaken. Note that Skuse's firm prediction is precisely the opposite of that of the original Bowlby model. As implied, where there is the likelihood of an organic problem super-added to gross deprivation, as in the sad case of Genie

(Curtiss, 1977), the prognosis is poor. Later studies of psychologically damaged and also malnourished children confirm Skuse's view (e.g. Thompson, 1986). However, long-term, enduring gains are often obtained at heavy cost to those undertaking initial intervention during the period while earlier damage fades. The view that congenital and later organic problems diminish the child's potential responsiveness to change cannot be overemphasised, as many researchers indicate (e.g. Skuse *et al.*, 1994). Hence, although sometimes correlated, one must distinguish between the effects of biological as opposed to social early experience.

Of course, one should never rely solely on a few case histories. Those children who made startling recoveries might be exceptionally resilient. To check the generality of recovery processes one needs to see what happens when less severely deprived children are removed to better conditions. If the 'rule' is correct, then one would expect to find less dramatic changes but of similar direction. This is, in fact, what researchers have shown.

Children rescued from less severe adversity

In earlier publications we have reviewed studies of groups of children removed from various depriving circumstances. Here, for reasons of space, we will consider just one research area, late adopted children, for whom the prognosis should have been poor if early experience were prepotent. This is another demanding test of our thesis. Before adoption such children have mostly lived sad lives, and in decades when there has been a shortage of young adoptable babies, one is bound to ask why adoption was delayed. Apart from mother's consent withheld, there are also reports of adverse family histories, developmental retardation and difficult behaviour.

The Skeels (1966) prospective study is a classic, originating in an accidental discovery that two infants with learning disabilities, transferred from a very inadequate orphanage to a 'colony' for people with learning disabilities, made rapid gains. As the only youngsters there, they received immense interest and stimulation so that at age three and a half they were adopted. As a repetition of this discovery, 11 further children were transferred and nine were ultimately adopted. Twenty-five years after the last contact they were followed up and found to be very ordinary citizens, unmarked by their early austere experiences (see also Clarke & Clarke, 1976, pp.214-223).

The Kadushin (1970) study of chil-

dren adopted late (average seven years), having been legally removed from adversity at an average of three and a half, followed by placement in an average of more than two foster homes, made a considerable impact on adoption practices. Followed up at an average of almost 14 years, between 82 and 87 per cent of adoptive parents expressed satisfaction about the outcome. This large group showed a greater degree of mental health and stability than might have been expected from their background and early developmental histories (cf. Lewis, 1954).

A well-known adoption study by Barbara Tizard (1977) concerned children taken into care early in life and remaining in the institution for between two and seven years, until some were restored to their natural mothers and some were adopted. They were followed up at ages four and a half and eight, after a baseline assessment at age two. Data are presented on the adoptees' intellectual and social progress; at age four and a half they were doing well, with the majority of parents indicating their children's deep attachment to them. They were, however, overfriendly with strangers. An even better picture emerged at age eight, but the children's concentration was reported by teachers to be poor; they were restless and inclined to be unpopular with other children. They remained strongly attached to their parents.

A further follow-up of this group was carried out by Hodges and Tizard (1989) by which time the children had reached the age of 16. In general terms, things had gone well for 23 out of 25 adoptees; family relations for most were satisfactory, differing only a little from a carefully selected comparison group of adolescents who had never been in care. But their relationships with those outside the family, especially with peers, were less satisfactory than in the comparison group, this finding being concordant with all other adoption studies.

The most striking finding lay in the differences between adopted and restored children; on all measures, intellectual, scholastic and emotional, the latter were disadvantaged compared with the adoptees. They and their parents were less often attached to each other, and where there were siblings, these were preferred to the restored child. It seems clear that the adoptive families strongly encouraged the development of attachments while those of the restored children hindered them. The children as adolescents reflected in both groups their long-term family ecological settings.

A further example has been provided by Triseliotis and Russell (1984) in a retrospective study of 44 adults who had been adopted late. They had at first expe-

rienced several placements and had been considered as dubious candidates for adoption because of adverse family backgrounds and emotional disturbance. The book contains a wealth of detail about their lives, including educational histories and personal and social status. The authors comment on their good adult adjustment, and their escape from the effects of severe deprivation in the context of a new, caring environment.

Discussion

It is difficult to assess the long-term effects of early experience within ordinary, ongoing contexts, but when sharp and continuing environmental change occurs one can be more certain whether or not early effects persist. Longitudinal studies of children rescued from adversity meet this criterion. See also Sroufe *et al.* (1990).

Some researchers, including ourselves, have suggested that different processes may show different degrees of vulnerability to adversity, with cognitive the best buffered and emotional the least. However, in some of the studies reviewed, both aspects had been overwhelmed by the severity of problems yet both showed ultimate recovery.

We have never argued that early experience is unimportant; we (1992) have regarded development as a series of linkages in which characteristics in each period have a probability of linking with those in another period. But probabilities are not certainties, and deflections of the life path, for good or ill, are possible, although always within the powerful limits imposed by genetic, constitutional and social trajectories. So for the majority of people the effects of early life experience represent no more than an initial step in an ongoing life path. Depending on biosocial interactions and transactions, such a path may be straight or winding, incremental or decremental, or merely fluctuant.

In one of a number of notable contributions, Rutter (1989) points out that 'chain' effects during development are common. 'Life transitions have to be considered both as end products of past processes and as instigators of future ones ... as both independent and dependent variables' (p.46). Details of some personal and social factors operative in vulnerability and resilience have been reviewed by several researchers (e.g. Rutter, 1989; Clarke & Clarke, 1992); space precludes their elaboration here.

The fact that children rescued from adversity progress on average to normal-

ity has considerable implications. For example, some (perhaps many) of the children languishing in Eastern European orphanages have the potential for normality, a potential most unlikely to be realised for a variety of political and economic reasons, so for them a doom-laden life path is to be envisaged. The few who are adopted will have a far better outcome.

Powerful support for this argument has just been provided by Rutter *et al.* (1998) in a very important study of 111 Romanian children adopted in the UK before the age of two years. From severe developmental impairment on arrival (about half being below the 3rd percentile for height, weight, head circumference and general cognitive level), by four years their physical and cognitive catch-up is described as dramatic and, in some cases, spectacular.

It is of interest that Bowlby (1988) in what may have been his last paper, responded to research findings of which we have offered only a small sample. He wrote that: 'The central task ... is to study the endless interactions of internal and external (factors), and how the one is influencing the other, not only during



childhood but during adolescence and adult life as well ... present knowledge requires that a theory of developmental pathways should replace theories that a person is fixated or to which he may regress.' (p.1.2.) Schaffer (1992) takes a similar view: 'The idea that specific experiences, occurring at specific points of time ... can in themselves have long-term consequences must be rejected in favour of a much more complicated, multi-determined and continuing process.' (p.51.)

Experience which has anything greater than transitory effects must involve learning in its broadest sense. While we have indicated that early learning effects can fade and disappear, there remains a possibility (to which we alluded in our 1968 paper) that under later stress such effects might be reactivated. In other words, there might remain a greater than

usual vulnerability in such persons. Only careful longitudinal studies could answer this question. Apart from this problem, the research findings are clear.

In summary, for most children 'good' early experiences tend to be reinforced during development, and 'bad' likewise. Especially where a sharp and continuing break occurs, one can estimate the consequences, or lack of them, of the earlier period. This also applies to those cases where early educational intervention sets off a sequence of positive, enduring parental and other effects. The evidence is firm; while there is a range of outcomes, early social experience *by itself* does not predestine the future.

There are two reasons for a wider acceptance of this view. First, models of development which ascribe disproportionate long-term effects to the early years are clearly erroneous. Second, an acceptance of the early years as critical can carry with it subtle lowered expectancies for psychologically damaged children and hence less than desirable interventions.

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