

CHILD REARING AND PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

A. Introduction

It is gratifying - it is encouraging to note the interest and concern given by churches and other social organisations to African family life in Southern Africa. Recently the All Africa Conference of Churches conducted a seminar in Zambia on "The African Family in an age of Urbanisation and Technology". Today we are gathered here to consider and discuss the same topic though with different sponsors.

The importance of this conference cannot be over-emphasised because of the relation of the family to the society. It is the family that introduces the child to the culture of the society thereby shaping the basic character structure of society and forming the child's personality. In short, the family as an institution is an integral part of society and no change can take place in one without affecting the other.

In general the processes which take place in the family are of primary importance and increasing attention is being devoted to research into the dynamics of the family and especially into interaction within the family. Different approaches by different people have been adopted in the study of family interaction and here one thinks of those studies which deal with the relationships existing between the various members of the family e.g. husband-wife relationship, son-father relationship, daughter-father relationship, son-mother relationship, mother-daughter relationship, son-son relationship (brother-brother), daughter-daughter relationship (sister-sister), and brother-sister relationship.

My assignment this morning is to deal with some of these relationships such as parent-child relationships - family interaction between parents and children - and child-rearing, as we see them in Soweto.

B. The Family

Murdock defines the family as "a social group characterised by a common residence, economic co-operation and reproduction. It includes adults of both sexes at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, with one or more children, own or adopted, of the sexually co-habiting adults"(1).

According to MacIver, "The family is a group defined by sex relationship sufficiently precise and enduring to provide for the procreation and upbringing of children. It may include collateral or subsidiary relationships, but it is constituted by the living together of mates, forming with their offspring a distinctive unity ... "(2).

From these two definitions we note that, among other things, reproduction and child-rearing are some of the important functions of the family. If a society cannot reproduce itself it cannot continue to exist, it would come to an end. Regarding the task of child-rearing, it is important because it caters for the biological and social development of the child. For a child to develop biologically into an adult, what is needed is adequate nutrition, adequate shelter and medical care. As for mental and personality development, it is worth noting that these do not develop according to a plan already present in the germ cells, that is, they are not inherited, but they develop according to the child's social experience, his interaction with people around him. These social experiences, for good or bad, influence his personal and social development - how he handles his body, how he thinks and talks, how he expresses his emotions, how he relates to other people. All these are learned behaviour and are learned as a result of social interaction. The important matter at this point is a clear understanding of the fact that the child lives and develops within the framework of associations with members of the family and that his personality has no meaning outside this framework.

C. Child-Rearing

1. Various kinds of home conditions and child-rearing practices

It is worth repeating that the child is reared within a social setting - a setting which varies from place to place, from culture to culture and from time to time.

For instance, in the old tribal, rural setting the task of child-rearing - upbringing and nurturing of children - was comparatively simple. Both parents were brought up in a rather simple, harmonious culture, as were also the grandparents, members of the extended family and neighbours. The result was a steady and harmonious pressure upon the child which formed his personality without difficulty and with a minimum of conflicts. Furthermore, in the tribal, rural society, more of the choices of life were settled beforehand by ascription, the possibilities being fewer and the responsibilities of choice and competition less urgent. In such a setting parent-child conflict was less and child-rearing was more uniform and stable.

The same cannot be said of modern complex urban society in which you and I live - a society marked by rapid social change and technological developments - a society where persons in charge of the training and upbringing of children cannot be consistent. Parents are in conflict with each other because they have been brought up in different environments and are of different faiths. They are in conflict with grandparents and teachers and social agencies because of differing viewpoints and standards held by each group. While, for instance, the social worker sees contemporary society as the background against which the child's problem has to be seen, parents use the past as their point of reference. To be sure, these inconsistencies and conflicts affect the degree of respect and obedience which parents can exact from children, and generally, the degree to which children can be controlled.

2. Social conditions existing in Soweto

I have already suggested, by way of introduction, that the family as an institution is an integral part of society and that no change can take place in one without affecting the other. Change in the family, for good or bad, is not an isolated process but goes hand in hand with changes in society.

Now the question arises, under what sort of socio-economic conditions are children brought up in Soweto?

By Soweto I mean the twenty-two African townships situated south-west of Johannesburg falling under the jurisdiction of the Non-European Affairs Department of the Johannesburg City Council. A little less than half a million Africans of diverse ethnic groups and cultures, comprising primarily the less privileged working class, inhabit these twenty-two townships and the adjoining townships of Meadowlands and Diepkloof which fall under the control of the Department of Bantu Administration.

In such an unstable, heterogeneous population characterised by diverse religious institutions, norms and values, social classes and educational standards, and by such social evils as heavy drinking, sexual promiscuity, delinquency and crime, people often do not know how they are expected to act because they find themselves in new and untried situations without definite norms or rules to guide them.

In the absence of any definite norms and rules confusion, tension, and conflict cannot be avoided. As a result social control measures are weakened and as such cannot be very effective. This means that group relationships are disintegrated and broken. As already pointed out, no change in society can take place without affecting the family. Furthermore, the influence of the family on the individual will depend, in great measure, on the effectiveness of that family as a functioning unit. It follows that in a malfunctioning family the biological

and social development of the child will suffer.

3. Heavy drinking

I have mentioned heavy drinking as one of the social evils for which Soweto is notorious. It is to be expected that where one or both of the parents drink excessively the socialisation of the child suffers and he is neglected. A neglected child fails to experience the warmth of parental love and sympathy which is so basic in human development. Such a child is likely to become a behaviour problem. Experience shows that where these legitimate satisfactions are not met in the family, the child is prematurely driven to the streets or seeks other means of escape such as day dreaming, lying, stealing etc.

Secondly, where parents drink excessively, most of their income goes to buying liquor. This means that the family has to be content with poor diet which in turn results in poor health which adversely affects the biological development of the child.

4. Social roles and social change in the African family

A great deal of the man's behaviour in the role of father, or of the woman's behaviour in the role of mother, or of the child's behaviour in the role of son or daughter is the result, not of biological factors, but of cultural factors. In spite of the changed and continually changing cultural patterns in African society, particularly in urban areas, it would appear that the social role of the husband with regard to child-rearing remains unchanged. Of course, among educated Africans, some notable changes have taken place.

In traditional society the task of child-rearing was mainly in the hands of women. By and large, the same practice still prevails. The father is less involved in the everyday details of child-

rearing and child-disciplining than the mother. It is only when the child becomes more and more unmanageable that the father's assistance is sought. This indifference towards the bringing up of children on the part of the African male may be due to his occupational role which removes him from the home for a considerable part of the time. Furthermore, the uncertain and irregular jobs and the low economic status of the African male make the wife the dominant figure in the family.

Be that as it may, the psychological influence of the father on the child cannot be overemphasised. The father is a strong identification figure ("A child gives its emotional allegiance to one of its parents and attempts to duplicate in its own life the ideals, attitudes, and behaviour of the parent with whom it is identifying." Page 394 Seidman J. The Adolescent.) and his influence in the formation of the child's personality is not to be measured by the actual number of hours he spends in the home but by the quality of those hours. Initially children of both sexes identify with their mothers. However, later on, the father is likely to become the chief source of reward for the boys. Usually the father associates more with the male child and allows him to join in more activities. At the same time society demands that the boy adopt the proper sex role. As a result the boy shifts from identification with the mother to identification with his father. Thus attitudes and behaviour of fathers play an important role in the personality development of the male child.

5. Attitudes towards children

I have already pointed out that the majority of people in Soweto come from the illiterate, less privileged working class. Usually among this class of people children are considered, as Havighurst and Neugarten observe, "a sort of inevitable price that fate exacts in payment for sex relations".

Some accept children as a gift of God, while others look at them as an investment for old age.

As a result their families are often very, very large. In view of the fact that children are not planned for, after a certain point the appearance of each additional child may become something of an economic crisis.

Admittedly, there is no evidence that lower class families love their children less than do higher status families, nor that they are less concerned about the child's welfare. Yet, while the lower class family may strive to do its best for the child, it is usually less able, for economic and social reasons, to provide good physical, social and intellectual conditions. There is less leisure time and less knowledge available for careful rearing. Again, these large families, because of poor and inadequate housing, become overcrowded. Under such circumstances decent housekeeping is difficult. Not enough privacy for the child by day or night is provided for; health and morals deteriorate; the biological and social development of the child is hampered.

6. Authority

Most of the families in Soweto are patrilineal, that is, they are organised primarily around the male. The wife and children take the husband's name, he is the legal custodian over wife and children. What often disturbs me is that, though the whole African culture is based on respect for elders, for the most part, children are taught to fear authority rather than respect it. No doubt, this is a negative way of making children, or for that matter, anybody conform to the norms and values of family and society. If conformity is motivated solely by an external object of terror, there would be no reason to conform if that object or symbol of terror is not there; or if you come to realise that after all it can bark but cannot bite.

7. Discipline

In an attempt to change behaviour which they

do not consider respectable, parents often threaten children with beating and at times use physical punishment. Punishment, especially excessive punishment, is dangerous because not only does it "harden the heart" but as we well know, escape from the home is easy. After several futile beatings of her son, a woman is reported to have remarked: "I can't understand why he is so bad. I lick him all the time". And another one, "He went out when I told him not to. I tried to choke his neck off when I got him". In other words, these parents do not place the highest value on internal standards and controls. They look at the mistake committed by the child and not at the child - his motives and feelings. To be sure, external punishment does not always help one to internalise the norms of society. According to Bredencier and Stephenson, "conformity is much more certain if the parent's criteria of evaluation can be put inside the socializee - the child".

8. Family-school relations

In passing, one may mention the relations between the family and the school because both institutions share responsibility for educating the child.

To begin with, the school teaches the child his culture in both formal and informal ways. It provides the child with intellectual tools, e.g. reading, writing, arithmetic. It teaches the history of society, the scientific and cultural achievements of the past and the opportunities of the future.

Secondly, in a host of subtle and indirect ways, it trains the child in the ways of society, cultural and moral values, goals and aspirations, patterns of co-operative and competitive behaviour. However, to my dismay, some parents have shifted some of their responsibilities to the day school teacher. It is the teacher who has to discipline the child for misbehaving at home. It is the teacher who has to insist on punctuality while the parent could not care less whether the child is late or not. As if all

this is not enough, it is the teacher who has to see to it that the child is clean and tidy at school. In my estimation, the school exists to supplement and not to substitute the family. Moreover, it has been shown that there is a relatively high correlation, .55 between moral judgments of children and their parents, contrasting with .03 between child and teacher and .002 between child and Sunday School teacher. Hence the responsibility of cleanliness, punctuality and discipline of the child rests squarely on the shoulders of the parents.

D. Youth-adult relationships

As already noted the population of Soweto is not a tribally homogeneous collection of people, but a heterogeneous group, representing all the language groups of the South Eastern Africans. That relationships are less intimate and more impersonal in such a society cannot be gainsaid. It is likely that these impersonal relationships do not encourage consistent behaviour, stability nor the integrity of the individual but, instead, weaken the control exercised by parents.

1. Differential cultural content by each successive generation

Many of the parents living in this heterogeneous society I have referred to still have their roots in the reserves. They are dedicated, confessed traditionalists, while on the other hand, their children are born and bred in urban areas. For the most part children live in a different world of interest and experience than that of their parents. The two can scarcely understand each other, still less appreciate each other's feelings. What is worse the conflict of the rural parental culture with the modern urban youth culture may convince the child of the inferiority of his parents. To be sure, lack of confidence in parents results in disobedience, for obedience presupposes confidence. In the end each individual member comes to be bound by his personal codes of behaviour. Family

chaos then replaces customary regulated behaviour and discipline is lost.

2. Competing authorities

Today education is largely in the hands of professional specialists, people who consequently have ideas in advance of the population at large i.e. the parents. By giving the younger generation this advanced scientific knowledge and ideas, they and many other agencies widen the intellectual gap between parents and youth. Young people get to know more than the parent. By African standards this is unthinkable. I cannot think of a greater insult to an African parent than that of suggesting that he knows less than his child. As a result, relationships become strained to the uttermost.

3. Emancipation from parental authority

In Soweto and all over the Republic generally, unlike in the primitive society, the exact time when authority is relinquished, the exact amount, and the proper ceremonial behaviour are not clearly defined. Not only do different groups and families have conflicting patterns, and new situations arise to which old definitions will not apply, but the different spheres of life, legal, economic, religious and intellectual, are never at one; maturity in the one sphere and immaturity in the other often co-exist.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that in modern African society the period of adolescence is very much prolonged and during this period many young people, though physically mature and able to assume the responsibilities of adulthood, are functionless except in a preparatory fashion. They have no specific function except "to grow". They are forced into a period of waiting instead of being in a period of transition. If culture does not provide for developments, an individual, in spite of specific ability, can achieve nothing. True, an inexperienced immature

person needs certain protections and gradual inductions, but it is equally true that experience does not come if it is permanently withheld - yea, responsibility long delayed is responsibility denied. For instance, because the culture of the Bushman does not provide for the role of professor, no Bushman is a professor in psychology.

For some reason which I have not been able to understand the average adult in African society, in spite of all he is and does for the infant child, has a very poor opinion of children and youth. In the family, children are often the last to have their meal. They have it separately and more often than not, it is not as good as that of the parents. "Eers groot mense dan lang ore" is our policy.

As for youth, as already suggested, it is not always that they can be given responsibility for, we "doubt the sapling courage that goes without the beard". Certainly such an attitude does not help to develop a healthy personality. Children grow with a poor image of themselves and at times never outgrow it. It is not surprising that some of them continue to act and behave like boys even when they are grown up adults. It is not surprising that gangs are so prevalent in the townships, for, in the gang the young person is accepted for what he is, he enjoys the privilege of "belonging" and has the status he so badly needs.

E. Conclusion

As I see it, conflicts and tensions between parents and children cannot and will not be entirely eliminated. The best that could be done to ease the tensions would be some constructive community programme that would help prepare parents and would-be parents for the task of child-rearing.

In the words of Eric Erickson, "A family can bring up a baby only by being brought up by him. His growth consists in a series of challenges to them to

serve his newly developing potentialities for social interaction".

Reuel Howe has it, "I need the grace to be in order to help my child, my wife, my friend, my student, to become". To put it in other words, my becoming is dependent on your being.

This is what I understand by the language of relationships, of interaction, the communication that results from living together and which gives us the basic and personal meaning for the words we hear and use.

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