CHILD ABUSE

A SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL PERSPECTIVE -- PART 2

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Social support network theory and research has come initially from the mental health field. One of the early hypotheses tested by social support network theorists was that mental health and ability to cope with stress was positively related to the number and potency of social supports (Gottlieb, 1980; Gottlieb, 1981). However, despite the attractiveness of the concept as a practical as well as an analytical tool, research is still at the rudimentary stage (Gottlieb, 1981). Methodological difficulties exist because of the mixture of objective and subjective components which must be taken into account in the operationalization of the concept. d'Abbs (1982) has identified some of the difficulties arising from this source for the comparison of research results.

Nevertheless, one of the reasons why the concept of social support networks is attracting increasing interest is because it is believed to be an anlytical or descriptive tool which better reflects social reality than some of the earlier tools of social categories or social group analysis (d'Abbs, 1982). Two other reasons for increasing interest are worth noting here because they are congruent with the value stance of "iceberg" child abuse theorists. These reasons are firstly that the nature of the study focusses on how resources are distributed and shared, and secondly how helping services are provided, particularly in terms of efficiency, responsiveness and the reduction of the bureaucratization of services. Definitions of social networks highlight the existence of relationships, and definitions of social support networks highlight the exchange of resources across these linkages:

For example: social networks are defined as "a specific set of linkages among a defined set of persons" (Mitchell, cited in Tietjen, 1980).

Social SUPPORT networks are defined as: "that set of personal contacts through which the individual maintains his social identity and receives emotional support, material aid and services, information and new social contacts" (Walter MacBride and Vachan cited in d'Abbs, 1982:9).

Social support network theory and research does not give definite data on the application of networking practice to child abuse at this point in time. Most of the studies represent analyses of existing networks. It is still on assum-

INTRODUCTION

This article, the second in a series of two, builds on the practice implications of the socio-environmental model of child abuse. The identification in this model, of necessary and sufficient conditions for occurrence of child abuse, leads to the conclusion that effective prevention and management can only be brought about by approaches which create nurturing conditions for all families. Helping programs must be intimately involved in the community of the families they serve — not only by integrating formal and informal networks, but also by promoting community involvement in the definition of community standards of adequate parenting, and in long term support of vulnerable families.

The present articles present some ideas as to how this can be achieved. Social support network theory gives some suggestions of the potential of social supports to provide a variety of resources and to counteract the social supports to provide a variety of resources and to counteract the social isolation identified by the socio-environmental model as an important necessary condition of child abuse. The article concludes by looking briefly at some practice approaches which attempt to maximize the availability and effectiveness of social support.

ption that artificial manipulation or creation of such networks will reproduce the same properties of those contained in "natural" (i.e. spontaneously existing support networks). In other words, if abusing families are encouraged to participate in existing networks, and social support networks are made more accessible to abusing families, would the potential for support be as great? Would the support offered and received be as effective? However, there are several reasons why it seems important to work with this assumption and to test out its applicability.

Firstly, the social support literature suggests that social support networks are a potent source of help and social enrichment. Social support networks can offer social identity, emotional support, material aid and other practical resources, information/feedback and new social contacts. These resources are seen immediately as of crucial importance to abusing families, especially

as they are characterized in the socio-environmental model. Abusing families who have learnt "parenting role incompetence" need feedback and information on parenting in general and their own skills in particular. They need access to material resources, as lack of such resources has long been accepted as a source of environmental stress and social impoverishment. They need increased relationships for normal development (and protection), and above all, they need emotional support and nurturance as they have been deprived of this necessity in their own lives.

Secondly, social support network literature suggests that such key resources can, theoretically, be provided together within the network. In other words, the provision of help does not depend on a model of family needs split into discrete and unintegrated categories — each to be served by a different agency or organization. Working directly with families, particularly those in greatest need, reinforces the idea that they do not themselves categorize their needs.

Thirdly, social support networks are likely to be a source of more effective and acceptable help because families are more likely to turn to personal social supports for help than to formal sources of help (Carter, 1981b and Gottlieb, 1980). Tietzen (1980) belives this is because help from the former source is more likely to enhance competence and self esteem. Tietzen (1980:19) writes:

"We turn to friends, relatives, and neighbours with whom we have relationships based on ESTEEM rather than on authority, on reciprocity rather than an undirectional aid."

In line with the commonality value base, abusing families are not seen as different from non-abusing families in their preference for help which empowers rather than undermines competence and control. Services which lable, stigmatize and are non-reciprocal do not enhance power and control. They may even reinforce isolation. This point provides one of the strongest arguments for exploring the capacities of social support networks to provide help for abusing parents and children.

At this stage it is not possible to be definite about the exact procedures in utilizing social support networks for abusing families. The approach suggests rather what not to do — rather than clearly stating what to do. Social sup-

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port network literature gives some indications that there are areas of confusion. For example d'Abbs (1982) states that we are not sure yet HOW social support networks affect well-being. He has identified a number of theoretical models (e.g. the "stress buffer model" and the "social bond" model) and concludes that the "feed-back/access" model has yielded the soundest data in respect of how social networks influence social identity, access to emotional resources and access to material goods and services information and new social contacts. The data suggests that different social support networks perform different functions.

Gottlieb (1981) also mentions confusion created by the failure to distinguish between different types of social support networks. He is talking of the broad groups of mutual help groups, neighbourhood-based informal arrangements for the delivery of helping services; primary group networks of family ties, and networks built up around "gate-keepers" such as local figures (Gottlieb, 1981:24). He advocates that these different networks be treated separately for analysis and for service planning aimed at support network utilization.

To return to the issue of service implications. The socio-environmental model and its value base suggests that helping services for abusing families need: to emphasize the common needs of abusing and non-abusing families; to acknowledge their needs over time; to reduce isolation, and to provide the necessary supports and resources in such a way that power and competence are enhanced rather than reduced. The social support network literature suggests that social supports have the potential to provide many of the necessary resources in such a way as to meet these requirements.

It is naive to argue that creating and utilizing social support systems is the answer to child abuse. Multifactorial causation, which the ecological model incorporates through its concept of social cultural risk at the various system levels, in itself provides argument against the one approach solution. The argument made here is that what is needed is increasing integration of formal and informal support systems for abusing families and for all families. Formal support systems are the range of organized services provided from some identifiable auspice, and typically covering the areas of social services, health services and cultural and recreational activities. As Tietzen (1980) points out, both formal and informal support systems can offer nurturance, feed-back models of behaviour and

opportunities to reduce stress. Both systems have their advantages and disadvantages. For example, formal systems usually have access to greater material and social resources, they have trained staff, they have the potential to offer impartial intervention — although the effectiveness of this advantage rests on the agency clarification of its own value base in respect of whose interests it is serving. The potential disadvantages of formal support systems as THE ONLY SOURCE OF SUPPORT to abusing families are serious. Agency intervention which relies on labelling (identifying a "population" of abusing parents) creates stigma and can increase isolation by reinforcing guilt and the feeling that abusing families have, that they are different from other "normal" families. Professional treatment, particularly within the parent pathology model, has tended to remove child abuse from its rightful place as an issue primarily of community concern and responsibility, and make it into an issue of professional concern, whose knowledge is not accessible to non professionals. Even more seriously, relationships offered to abusing families within formal support systems are likely to be shorter and outside of the control of the abusing family in that they usually have little say over worker turnover. The relationships are usually offered to families within an agency framework which emphasizes their status as passive recipients (clients) Services are not usually offered within a context of mutual sharing, by giving opportunities for reciprocity and for user participation in management service. The frequently heard assumption that abusing families are too isolated and damaged to reciprocate and participate is just as likely to have more to do with the formal services have been offered in the past, than to do with intrinsic inadequacies of abusers. Moreover such an assumption is contradicted by the ecological model which relates parental and child needs to a developmental framework of differing needs, strengths and weaknesses at different points in a family's life cycle. Within the developmental viewpoint, the family suffering from factors leading to incidents of abuse at one point in time, may be the family which has strengths and resources to help other families at another point in time.

Informal support systems, of course, have their own limitations. They are not seen in the present discussion as substitutes for formal support systems, but as necessary extensions to them — not as appendices, but as integral parts.

The integration of formal and in-formal support systems necessitates the examination of the role of professional worker. Professionals need to retain a sense of professional responsibility for abused children and a clear sense of the priority for urgent support for actual or potentially abusive families whether or not the families seek such support or are ready to accept it. However they need to find ways to be able to share their concern with the neighbourhoods and communities they work in. Lenrow and Burch (1981) point out that this sense of professional responsibility tends to lead to an unconscious acting out — through professional intervention — of the "all powerful rescuer" role. This in turn leads to a tendency towards unilateral action which operates against linking families into support networks in their own neighbourhoods.

Professional workers in the field of child abuse need to have an intimate knowledge of their community. In utilizing social support networks it makes more sense for services to have a neighbourhood focus rather than a non-local or regional base. Some recent neighbourhood analysis work has given some interesting directions in understanding neighbourhoods. For example, Warren's typology of neighbourhoods on the dimensions of identity, interaction and linkages gives a tool of analysis which directly focusses on neighbourhood characteristics of degree of social isolation, potency of support networks and neighbourhood problem solving potential (Warren, 1980). While noting the over-simplification that all typologies of complex social structures suffer from, it is clear that Warren's work gives some useful starting points. It is necessary to be wary of the tendency for neighbourhood analysis to represent merely a transfer of the "parent pathology" approach to the "neighbourhood pathology" approach. Garbarino's identification of "high risk" neighbourhoods appears to be an example of this approach (Garbarino & Sherman, 1980, 1980a). As such, it has two potential dangers. The first danger is that identifying high and low risk neighbourhoods focusses resources on the neighbourhoods themselves by ranking them on a value basis, at the expense of paying attention to wider social and political forces which have shaped the neighbourhoods. This leads to the second danger — that such an approach can provide date for the rationalization of limited welfare resources, based on the labelling of neighbourhoods.

Froland et al (1981) have identified five program strategies which represent current approaches to the integration of formal and informal networks. These approaches include:
1. The personal network mobilization approach. One example is family therapy based on family and friend network mobilization particularly at times of family crisis (Rueveni, 1979).
2. Volunteer linking-matching lay helpers to families.
3. Mutual aid networks (self help groups such as Parents Anonymous in Australia).
4. Identifying and supporting "natural" neighbourhood helpers.
5. Community empowerment (community development and social action).

Some recent helping programs represent attempts to integrate formal and informal supports by using various combinations of the above approaches. Giaretto (1981) describes an interesting and comprehensive community based program for helping and supporting families where sexual abuse is occurring. He stresses the necessity for having the three integrated components of the program: professional staff, volunteer helpers matched to families, and self help groups. Each component is directly linked to the other. What is not very clear is the amount of neighbourhood focus — in the sense of conscious strengthening of existing support networks.

Collins and Pancoast (1976 and Pancoast, 1980 and Collins, 1980) describe an intervention program which is unusual in that it focusses solely on using existing, "natural" helping network to help abusing families. The role of the professional in this approach is to locate "natural gatekeepers" — i.e. spontaneously helpful neighbours, and to offer his/her services as consultant in order to help the neighbours to do more effectively what they are already doing. Collins and Pancoast caution against the consultant attempting to artificially set up or manipulate these networks, or to encourage the natural neighbour to take on a pseudo professional helping role. The approach depends on a slow and thorough familiarization of the consultant with the neighbourhood chosen, and its existing natural helping networks. The approach does have its potential limitations. The main criticism is its tendency towards political conservatism. The aims of the professional consultants to support natural helpers may lead to the implicit assumption that these networks are "better" because they are "natural". In other words supporting what is already existing may function to maintain the status quo, when the existing networks are, in fact, adaptations to unfavourable social circumstances (d'Abbs, 1982). Social support network intervention

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must not direct attention from the need for social action and change. The concentration solely on informal support systems appears to ignore the need to integrate with formal systems. Help for abusing families through natural helping networks is likely to be less effective if help through formal services is based on a different value system.

The conclusion that is drawn here is that helping services for abusing families are likely to be more effective if they take into account the need to direct intervention both to the abusing families themselves and to the actual or potential networks. The aim of the first focus is to increase the skills, competence and confidence of abusing parents to utilize social supports. The aim of the second approach is to take into account the face that such supports — particularly informal networks, may not be as plentiful, effective or accessible as necessary.

Examples of current Australian approaches highlight these two foci. Family aide programmes involve the employment of paid lay workers to work directly with abusing families. The most usual approach is for the family aides to be assigned a small caseload of families and to work with them in their homes. This approach, while a vast improvement on earlier formal supports in terms of intensity, consistency and acceptability of help, as the limitations of potentially reinforcing isolation by encapsulating the aide/family relationship in the abused family's home. As Hinson (1981) writes — the main aim of the individual family aide program is to provide a "close trusting relationship". This is a valid aim, but it doesn't go far enough. The assumption is then made that: "Once people have experienced and integrated the feeling of being a person worthy of being loved, it is easier for them to accept help to expand their life options by developing their own support network, and the Aide is gradually able to withdraw". Hinson (1981:338). This puts the expectation on the abused family to develop their own support network — a very difficult task in an impoverished "high drain" community.

Group family aide services are very new and rare. However, they appear to have the potential of helping abusing families by simultaneously focusing on meeting the individual needs of abusing families and concentrating on increasing relating skills, while providing opportunities and resources for support network growth. The group programs consist of family aides located at a centre where group programs are carried out. Wadsworth (1979) describes a pioneering group program in Melbourne where the group approach is combined with an in-dividual aide approach. Such group family aide programs are likely to be more effective the more they are neighbourhood based.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The present discussion attempts to relate the value base of theoretical approaches to child abuse to the types of helping services based on these approaches. The argument presented is that child abuse is correlated with, and presumably caused by, a multiplicity of factors. If a value base is adopted which leads to abusing families being seen as qualitatively different from non-abusing families, because of the choice of parental pathology as being the most significant feature in this constellation of co-related factors, the effect of professional helping services is likely to be that of increasing isolation of abusing families.

If abusing families are not viewed as qualitatively different, they are seen as one end of a continuum in parenting. Their commonality with all families is emphasized by the social context model which sees all families as being influenced AT ALL LEVELS of their functioning by ecological factors and by the ongoing process of interaction with these factors Child abuse is seen by social context (ecological theorists) as being the result of environmental influence and interaction which does not support and nurture parent/child relationships, and which creates socio-cultural risk. All families are influenced to some degree in our culture by harmful sociocultural factors. Child abuse is een as the result of extreme degree of harmful interaction with the environment. Ecological theory identifies sufficient conditions amongst the multifactors, and draws attention to the two necessary conditions of any incident of child abuse which are: the cultural value of the acceptance of violence in Australian society (in general, and in particular in the rearing of children), and of the acceptance of nuclear family privacy and self sufficiency; and the social isolation of abusing families from social support networks.

The implication for helping abusing families is that helping programs MUST NOT treat abusing families out of their social context. The help offered must be part of the social context in two ways: firstly, formal supports must be integrated with informal supports by being neighbourhood based, by non-labelling of users, by providing opportunities for increasing user competence and self-esteem, and by increasing power through participation in management; secondly, formal supports must actively strengthen informal social support networks as the basis of acceptable help which reduces the isolation of families from family, friends and neighbours who live in their neighbourhood.

Helping services must take into account broader political factors which shape the social content of all families. The integration of formal and informal services therefore must avoid the tendency to ignore the need for social action and political change.

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