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Presents

**Children and Chaos:
How chaotic environmental settings influence human development
from infancy through adolescence**

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Bronfenbrenner Life Course
Center Faculty
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**Chaos Amidst Stability: The Diverging Fortunes
of American Children in Historical Perspective**

This article is based on a presentation at the first Urie Bronfenbrenner Conference at Cornell, October 2007.

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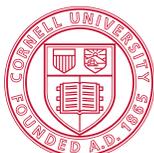
The first Urie Bronfenbrenner Conference, Chaos and Children's Development: Levels of Analysis and Mechanisms, was held on the campus of Cornell University in October 2007 in honor of the late Urie Bronfenbrenner, Jacob Gould Schurman Professor Emeritus, who is internationally known for his contributions to the ecology of human development. The focus of this interdisciplinary conference was on how chaotic environmental settings, characterized by high levels of noise, crowding, instability, and a lack of structure and predictability, influence human development from infancy through adolescence.

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model views child development as occurring within the context of the complex system of relationships in his or her environment. The main tenet of his theory is that development is powerfully shaped by the interactions between the child's own biology, immediate family, community environment, and the larger society. Four nested levels or systems influence each other and the development of children:

- **Microsystem:** Immediate environments such as family, school, peer group, neighborhood, and childcare;
- **Mesosystem:** A system comprised of connections between immediate environments such as a child's home and school;
- **Exosystem:** External environmental settings which only indirectly affect development such as parent's workplace; and
- **Macrosystem:** The larger cultural context, national economy, political culture.

According to this model, human development takes place through *proximal processes* – increasingly complex reciprocal interactions between the individual and the people, objects, and symbols in his or her immediate environment. Proximal processes are seen as the primary engines of development. Developmental outcomes are the result of the interaction of proximal processes and characteristics of the individual. Context can shape the occurrence of these processes as well as moderate their impacts. The length, frequency and regularity of exposure to proximal processes are also important to consider.

Using Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model as a theoretical framework, Lichter's presentation at the Bronfenbrenner conference, co-authored with Elaine Wethington, reviewed historical and sociological research on social change, family changes, and child development in reference to the emerging concept of "chaos." They



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addressed the specific question of whether chaos has increased in the lives of children over the last century. The authors challenge the conventional view that chaos is growing in the lives of American children. They argue that chaos in the early 21st century is manifested in much different ways from the past. The risks to children from environmental hazards, poverty, poor health and early death were much worse in the past. Chaos at the macrosystem level has been increasingly replaced over the past century by chaos at the microsystem level (i.e., in children's family environments). The authors also contend that it is difficult to assess whether the typical child today is worse off than in the past because the "typical" or average child no longer exists in our increasingly diverse society. Averages mask growing inequality and differences in childhood experiences.

As more American children are placed "at risk" because of family disruption, school dropout, drug abuse, delinquency, and teen pregnancy, we may nostalgically cling to the belief that chaos in the lives children is something new. "Chaos" is defined here as chronic or persisting instability in family life, neighborhood, and community and institutional connections. The past is often viewed in overly sentimental ways—strong family and kinship ties, stable neighborhoods knitted together by shared ethnicity, religion, language, and supportive community support networks.

Historical evidence suggests that we should question sentimental views of the past. The truth is that children in the past often faced harsh conditions known to be related to "chaos". These conditions affected their healthy development and transitions to productive adult roles. One hundred years ago many more children suffered from financial and social instability. Infants and young children were also more likely to be threatened by ill health and even death. Life was hard and children suffered in ways different from today.

Children in Historical Perspective

The early twentieth century was a period of great economic uncertainty and social unrest. Rapid growth and urbanization were accompanied by social and economic disruptions including two World Wars, the 1918 flu epidemic, massive immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe, the "Great Migration" of blacks out of the rural South, the Great Depression, and the Dust Bowl migration and other white migration from Appalachia to urban areas. Poverty levels were extremely high and have subsequently declined significantly. Given the context of rapid urbanization, economic dislocations and high rates of poverty and unemployment, geographical mobility rates were little different from the mobility rates of today. Maternal, infant, and child mortality rates were very high and child labor was prevalent. Children's lives in the early 20th century were difficult by almost any measure.

Childhood in Recent Historical Perspective

In the past, instability in children's lives reflected large-scale social and economic upheavals. Home was presumably a safe haven for children in a harsh and chaotic world. Today, the world may be a safer place for children in terms of health and government supports, but these benefits may be offset by increasing instability rooted in rapid changes in family life.

Demographic evidence suggests overall declines rather than increases in the conditions related to chaos along the dimensions of crowding, noise, and stressful neighborhood conditions such as crime. Household size has decreased, home ownership rates have increased, and the population has shifted to the suburbs and exurbs which are cleaner, quieter and safer.

While poverty rates among U.S. children have been relatively stable over the past three decades, poverty as an indirect indicator of chaotic conditions for children may misrepresent trends in more proximate family conditions that are ultimately more threatening to stability in children's lives. Presumably, living with single parents is associated with more chaos in the home. In the early 20th century, about 85 percent of America's children lived with both parents. Between 1970 and 1980, this percentage dipped to 70 percent, where it has remained. Today, over 20 percent of children reside with a single mother, which places them at risk of high poverty and chaotic home conditions. However, overall prevalence measures of children's changing living arrangements mask the complexity of recent family changes.

For example, divorce rates accelerated after 1970 and then leveled off at high level after 1990. Today, more than 1 million children per year experience the divorce of their parents. Divorce and remarriage of children's parents have

been associated with higher levels of sexual activity for daughters in adolescence, poor relationship choices, and depressive symptoms during young adulthood.

High rates of cohabitation and remarriage may also contribute to increasing instability of children's lives. An increasing share of children have the benefit of two caretakers and providers in the home, but are also exposed to new complexities unique to stepfamilies as well as the potential for increased conflict, economic instability, mobility, severed emotional ties to adults, and the reorganization of family processes and rituals. Chaos is also reflected in the increasing share of children born to unmarried and cohabitating mothers. Nearly 40 percent of children today are born out-of-wedlock.

Rapid changes in American family life since the 1960s have many causes, including the dramatic rise in maternal employment and women's growing economic independence. These changes may have introduced an additional element of chaos and complexity into children's lives. Whether increasing maternal labor force participation represents a source of added risk or has a net negative effect on children's healthy development, is a matter of debate.

The existing literature suggests that the effects of maternal employment depend on many factors such as work schedule, type of work, wage rates, and availability of high quality childcare. On one hand, maternal work can be an additional family stressor that places young children at risk. On the other hand, for some families, maternal employment provides more regularity in children's lives, a working parent role model, additional income, and connection to positive social and organizational networks in the larger community.

The longstanding concern that maternal work takes time away from children is also being revisited. Some researchers suggest that parents in the aggregate spend more time today with their children than they did in the past, despite working more hours. Employed mothers are mostly sacrificing leisure activities to maximize their time with their children and fathers are more likely than in the past to contribute to homework and childcare. Noncustodial fathers are also more involved with their children today than in the past. These are positive developments.

Divergent Destinies for Children in the United States

Arguments about growing chaos in the lives of children, especially chaos created by family changes, must be viewed in the context of growing economic, family, and cultural diversity. Overall rates of poverty, single parenthood, divorce, and other risk factors potentially mask growing social and economic disparities. Poverty rates based on absolute income have remained relatively stable over the past 25 years, but the poor have fallen further behind the middle-class and affluent U.S. population subgroups.

Parental work and marriage go hand-in-hand in shaping the economic trajectories of America's children. Over the period from 1960-2000, low- and high-educated mothers diverged significantly on median age at childbearing, single motherhood, and employment rates. Women at the top of the education distribution were far more likely than other women to delay childbearing, avoid out-of-wedlock childbearing, and work outside the home. Other studies show that college-educated women are more likely to marry and less likely to divorce than other women. Children living in families supported by single mothers, especially nonworking mothers, show a marked disadvantage. Almost 75 percent of these children were poor in 2006.

While there are potentially positive developments – reduced teen births, increased share of births to college educated mothers, and reduced share of children born to high school dropouts – some segment of American children may be falling behind on the road to adult success.

Those that fall behind may be increasingly differentiated by race and ethnicity. Current estimates indicate that one of every five children in America is the child of immigrants. Poverty rates for these children are much greater than the national average. New immigrant families are poorer and less skilled than in the past and often live in impoverished and highly congested urban ethnic enclaves.

A fundamental reason for differentiation between children at the top of the economic distribution and those at the bottom is that the children at the top have parents who are “winners” in the job market. The winners can afford to purchase stability—less chaos—for their children on a number of important dimensions. They are more likely to be married and they have a lower risk for divorce. Their children are more likely to live in stable, low-crime

neighborhoods, go to good schools, connect to effective social institutions, and live in relatively stable residential communities that provide good public and private support services. The experiences of poor, unmarried, minority or immigrant mothers and their children are much different and, arguably, are diverging from the experiences of the “typical” native born, white, middle-class child in America.

Conclusion

Chaotic conditions in children’s lives in the early 21st century are manifested in much different ways from the past. Children today are exposed to greater family instability, but fewer risks along other dimensions such as poverty and ill health. Ultimately, questions about whether chaos has increased or decreased over the last century may be less important than questions about whether it has increased or not for different groups in our increasingly multiracial, multicultural society. American children may be on increasingly divergent trajectories, with varying exposure to different forms of “chaos” widening the gap between the life chances of the poorest and richest children.