Managing To Make It: Afterthoughts

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Preface

The premise that social units are more than just the sum of their members is an essential ingredient of the sociological perspective. This idea can be traced back to Comte and Saint-Simon, the early founders of sociology, but it is most clearly articulated in the writings of Emile Durkheim(1933, 1951, 1995), whose sociological theories influenced the Chicago School of Sociology founded in the early decades of this century. Later in the century, when the work of another French proto-social scientist, Alexis de Tocqueville (1945), were circulated in this country, the proposition that American society relied on local institutions that restrained central authority also stimulated research on community studies (Hollingshead 1949; Lynd & Lynd 1956; Park, Burgess, & McKenzie 1925; Seeley, Sim, & Loosley 1956; Warner & Lunt 1941). It is not surprising, therefore, that the sociology of neighborhoods became a popular arena of study by demographers, criminologists, urban anthropologists, and sociologists of all stripes (Banfield 1970; Duhl 1963; Gans 1962; Suttles 1968; Tannenbaum 1938: Walton & Carns 1977). Cohesive and well-functioning local communities have been considered to be the backbone of civil society and, along with the family, the seed bed of an active citizenry (Nisbet 1986; Vidich & Bensman 1968).

Community studies flourished in the middle part of this century and then briefly waned, perhaps because neighborhoods themselves became less prominent features of society in the post-industrial era. Credit belongs to William Julius Wilson (1987, 1996) for resurrecting the neighborhood as a topic for sociological investigation. Wilson argued persuasively that families residing in impoverished neighborhoods will function less well in protecting, cultivating, and promoting their children's life chances. His thesis linking changing economic patterns in a

global economy with community disintegration, declining family organization, and children's problem behavior has captivated social science researchers during the decade of the 1990s (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan & Aber 1997; Jargowsky 1997; Jencks & Peterson 1991; National Research Council 1990).

The idea that parents co-socialize their children with members of their community seems perfectly obvious and yet is woefully neglected as a topic in the literature of both social science and public policy (Furstenberg 1985). Strange as it seems, both liberals and conservatives have some discomfort pursuing this topic in research. The strengthening of local communities is greeted with a measure of distrust by some liberals because it appears to weaken the role of the federal government in insuring equality through the provision of resources and the enforcement of regulations that protect the disadvantaged. The conservative right sees the idea of a partnership between community and family as potentially undermining parental rights and authority. This strand of conservative thought has advanced the notion of a highly privatized family system that is based on a free market ideology. Parents should be trusted almost exclusively to make the best decisions for their children unfettered by intrusive institutions. As Margaret Thatcher once put it, "There is no such thing as society, only individuals." While this utterance seems almost a caricature, the idea of supporting the family through strengthening local institutions is an anathema for some conservatives. Witness the vitriolic political response to Hillary Clinton's (1996) seemingly uncontroversial book, *It Takes a Village to Raise a Child and other Lessons Children Teach us*.

Accordingly, in some quarters on both the left and right, Wilson's arguments have been greeted with some skepticism. Perhaps this is one reason why legions of social scientists have

been occupied with efforts to examine his argument empirically during the past decade. The book that is being discussed in this meeting— *Managing to Make It*— can be thought of as a part of the daunting task of investigating how communities, and more specifically neighborhoods, via the family, both directly and indirectly affect the process of human development. As such, it is also an attempt to revise how sociologists and developmental psychologists have treated the process of socialization, a theme to which I will return shortly.

This paper discusses selectively some of the key ideas in this book and highlights what I believe are some of its most interesting findings. I'll conclude with some remarks about some potential policy directions that are suggested by the findings of this study as well as a few directions for future research.

Origins of the Study

Managing to Make It is the first of a series of related reports resulting from a ten-year long research network supported by The MacArthur Foundation. The Network on Successful Adolescence in Disadvantaged Communities was initiated in 1989 to explore promising research and policy directions aimed at promoting the healthy development of youth who were at high risk of encountering problems in adolescence and early adulthood (Jessor 1993). An interdisciplinary group of 14 social scientists worked closely together to understand how and why some youth were successfully navigating this period while others were floundering[1]. Given the composition of the group, it was not in the least surprising that we elected to focus on the multiple contexts in

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[1] Members of the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Successful Adolescent Development Among Youth in High Risk Settings: Dr. Albert Bandura; Dr. James Comer; Dr. Thomas Cook; Dr. Jacquelynne Eccles, Dr. Glen H. Elder, Jr.; Dr. Delbert Elliott; Dr. Frank F. Furstenberg; Dr. Norman Garmezy; Dr. Robert J. Haggerty; Dr. Beatrix A. Hamburg; Dr. Richard Jessor; Dr. Arnold Sameroff; Dr. Marta Tienda;

which youths resided and to link these contexts to the process of development and measures of ill and well-being. In one way or another, each of us adopted a similar strategy of using both qualitative and quantitative methods to measure the influence of these multiple contexts on the course of development (Cook et al. 1999).

This study, situated in inner city Philadelphia, began with an exploratory field study of five varying neighborhoods, focusing on the transactions between parents and the surrounding community that were related to the children's development (Furstenberg et al. 1999). The idea behind the preliminary study was that parents might employ different strategies of managing their children depending on features of the neighborhood. These context-specific strategies in turn might have implications for the child's developmental path.

It should be noted that the idea behind this study was not entirely original. A tradition of research in both sociology and community psychology on the transactions between families and their immediate social environments dates back to the middle of this century. Some of the best and most careful studies were done by European sociologists and anthropologists, but American social scientists also picked up this keen interest in exploring how families situated themselves in local environments and engage in community-based institutions (Adams 1970; Bott 1957; Litwak & Meyer 1973; Medrich et al. 1982) . To some extent, this work has continued in a more specialized form as researchers have looked at parental involvement in the schools or in health care and social services (Schneider & Coleman 1993). And students of Urie Bronfenbrenner have maintained a strong interest in the ways that families are connected to their local milieus

Dr. William Julius Wilson.

(Garbarino 1992; Miller et al. 1992).

This previous work notwithstanding, the majority of the gigantic corpus of research on child development has assiduously focused on dealings among family members— and, at that, mostly on face-to-face interactions between parents and children. The assumption that parental child rearing practices shape the values and competencies of their offspring has been the central theme of countless studies in the social sciences (Anderson & Sabatelli 1999; Harris 1998). By contrast, hardly any attention has been directed to the ways that parents situate their children in the social world or directly and indirectly manage their children's opportunities outside the household. It is perfectly obvious that where parents elect to reside (if they are able to exercise any choice at all) can have an immense effect on their children's life chances. Similarly, the choice of schools, regulation of peer contacts, encounters with health and social services, and exposure to the media may support or undermine parental values. This neglected feature of socialization--- how families manage and oversee the world beyond the household-- was highlighted in our book because we thought it might provide insight into the link between communities and families.

The preliminary fieldwork carried out by a group of my students pointed to large differences in how parents related to the outside community that in turn appeared to reflect the extent to which the community shared values of the parents, or at least how parents' perception of the values of their neighborhoods mirrored their own. It also appeared that more disadvantaged parents were unable to situate themselves in communities with high social capital (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn 1997). Therefore, they relied more on in-home strategies to protect their children; strategies that sometimes isolated them from community institutions. African-

Americans, regardless of social class, appeared less likely to entrust their children to the surrounding social community because it frequently lacked essential social services and strong institutions. So the absence of local resources placed a greater burden on parents to micromanage their children.

The findings of the fieldwork were based on a small number of cases in a handful of diverse communities. Several of my colleagues on the Network and I decided that we would carry out a survey to explore the implications of the qualitative research. I shall not discuss in any detail the design of the research or the sample in this paper. However, it is important to acknowledge several significant limitations in the study: 1) Our sample contains a restricted range of neighborhoods. For cost considerations, the study was grafted on to another ongoing investigation which was confined to certain broad areas of Philadelphia. The sample therefore underrepresents both some of the poorest and some of the most affluent areas of the city; 2) The survey was conducted by telephone. This cost-saving approach inevitably means that some of the poorest families were excluded from the survey; and, 3) The study is cross-sectional, making it hazardous to infer causal relationships linking neighborhood, parenting style, and developmental outcomes. All of these limitations have been examined at length in the book but they should not be overlooked in this consideration of the study's findings. It seems highly likely that our results underestimate variation both across and within neighborhoods.

Despite this feature of the design, one of the most important results is the considerable variation that we do find in the functioning of urban families: parents report varying levels of success in monitoring their children's behavior, different amounts of closeness and conflict, and different degrees of compliance with rules and expectations. However— and this is the most

surprising result of the study— the degree of variation in these outcomes **across** neighborhoods is tiny compared to the degree of variation **within** neighborhoods. Whether we rely on parents' or youths' reports, we find little evidence that living in neighborhoods with greater levels of social cohesion, greater institutional resources, or even greater levels of problem behavior is strongly related to the key outcomes of well-being either at the family or individual level. This result surprised us and called for a closer investigation of the linkages between neighborhoods and child development indicators.

It is entirely possible that the variation would be greater had we included more neighborhoods at both tails of the distribution. Yet we also restricted the range of families within neighborhoods by omitting the least well functioning parents. Moreover, in companion studies carried out in Prince Georges County, Denver, and Chicago, the same result seems to recur— at least among youth in early adolescence. Results from the Denver study conducted by Del Eliot and his colleagues indicate that neighborhood variation may increase as youth enter their later teens. Also, we must admit that the measures of child development are incomplete, and of course, imperfect.

Yet, we are still inclined to conclude that across-neighborhood variation in youth performance (with one important exception that is discussed below) really is modest compared to within-neighborhood variation— at least at this stage in the child's life. Remember that even in high poverty areas (neighborhoods where 40 percent or more of the households are living below the poverty line), the majority of families are still employed and above the poverty line. Some of the neighborhoods in our sample have high levels of single-headed families and families on public assistance, but many of these families are functioning adequately— that is, their children

are attending school on a regular basis, do not exhibit signs of serious mental health, and have not (yet) become involved in the criminal justice system or become parents. These serious problem behaviors mostly occur in the later teens. Indeed, in our qualitative study of 35 families which extended beyond the survey, we began to see greater evidence of problem behaviors as the youth entered high school. In Philadelphia, close to half of all public school students fail a course in the first year of high school. About a fifth will drop out of school by the end of the tenth grade. Therefore, we cannot project the same levels of well-being in later adolescence that we found when the children were between the ages of 11 and 15.

While problem behavior was not strongly linked to locality, pro-social involvement was more closely linked to neighborhood because of the differential availability of programs for youth across Philadelphia. Neighborhood resources such as after-school and recreational programs were concentrated in the white, ethnic communities and less available in African-American neighborhoods. Thus, white parents could more often entrust their children to community-based programs in their own neighborhoods. This involvement helped to reinforce bonds of social trust and cohesion, neighborhood features that were far less likely to be characteristic of black than white communities.

Just as we had found in the qualitative study, the survey demonstrated a strong association between properties of the neighborhood and styles of family management. Unlike disciplinary practices or parental warmth, we discovered strong differences in the ways that families oversaw the external world that were completely consistent with the findings of our qualitative research. Co-socialization with neighborhoods was relatively uncommon is the most dangerous and depleted neighborhoods but common in the close-knit, white ethnic communities

that still exist in parts of Philadelphia.   In part, these differing processes depend on the availability of robust schools and youth service programs which are relatively rare; typically, the remnants of "traditional" neighborhoods only exist in Catholic, working-class communities in which parents still have access to schools and after school programs that they can trust. Most communities have low resources and low social capital. Parents either channel their children toward resources in other communities or hunker down.

Evidence linking family management to children's developmental status was mixed and not completely consistent depending on the particular measures employed. However, we were able to show that when we looked at all of the measures simultaneously, the results appeared to be more coherent. That is, children generally did better when they resided in better off communities so long as they lived in a reasonably well-functioning family. Conversely, the community characteristics conferred little or no advantage to children when they did not. At the other end, parenting processes and management strategies boosted children's chances of success even when they lived in a poorly functioning community. Nonetheless, the family could not make up for the advantages of the neighborhood even when parents were highly capable and committed to assisting their children.

These results ignore the possibility that capable families selected better off neighborhoods, producing the kind of synergy that I just described. Of course, they do, but we also discovered that families frequently were forced to trade off the assets of living close to supportive kin with getting the advantages or supportive local institutions. And many parents in our study were simply not in a financial position to choose either good neighborhoods or good schools. Thus, capable parents certainly can and do improve the odds of their child's succeeding,

but parenting alone (just like bowling alone) is a difficult enterprise. Our cross-sectional findings have to be regarded with an element of suspicion. However, we are currently examining data from a seven-year follow up of the families in the Philadelphia study, which should help to test the findings with a more rigorous design. We can also begin to tease out the community effects among older youth, for whom we have reason to believe the impact of neighborhoods may be more pronounced.

Reflections on Policy

Strengthening communities through an infusion of organizational efforts and resources has been episodically a goal of both government and foundations. It is difficult to demonstrate the effectiveness of such efforts either on strengthening parenting skills or on producing favorable developmental outcomes for children. It is not surprising that the effects of community building are difficult to trace. First, it is extraordinarily difficult to change the levels of resources and social organization of communities and then to observe an exposure of families to this organizational change lengthy enough to detect effects. Short-term studies are doomed to failure and long-term efforts require enormous and sustained improvements at the local level. It is far easier to show that community disorganization is not good for families or children than to demonstrate the converse through interventions.

To complicate matters, families do not stay in place. As communities deteriorate, the most resourceful parents try to move out, and when they improve, new families may move in hoping to benefit from the local schools and services. It is not easy to model how these patterns of mobility work out for either family or child. Thus, we have turned to experiments like the

Gautreaux Housing Experiment (Rosenbaum 1995)and the more recent Moving to Opportunity program sponsored by the Labor Department to observe how similar families adjust to different environments. The results of these ongoing studies have thus far been encouraging though inconclusive. In any case, they cannot demonstrate whether neighborhood improvement benefits families and children.

Nonetheless, it is difficult to ignore the theory on which such efforts are founded, or the kinds of data that emerge from our study that indicate that parents are sensitive to neighborhood conditions in the strategies they employ to rear their children. Parents must allocate their own resources (time, money, skills) and one important way that they do so is to partner with other individuals and institutions (care givers, agencies, schools, service programs). Our results show, not surprisingly, that some parents have greater managerial talents than others and that parents are located in communities that offer differing levels of resources and support. Other parenting skills aside, we can show that children do better when their parents have greater managerial skills for utilizing programs and services, and they also fare better when they live in communities with greater resources (though here the results are relatively modest).

The large question is whether we can enhance both managerial skills of parents and the level of resources in distressed neighborhoods. Our concluding chapter discusses the prospects of both these approaches. On the first, we propose a few suggestions that might be familiar to any community organizer— find the most capable parents in the community and connect them with parents who might be able to learn from their experience. Get institutions to teach parents how better to search for support and to make use of it; help parents to be more discriminating consumers and to agitate for better services. This is familiar stuff though it needs to be restated

periodically because we forget that parents can and do acquire skills that are helpful to their

children's life chances. Building a sense of parental agency is probably not a bad thing, though

agency without resources has limited effectiveness.

Strengthening local institutions must begin with the ones that affect children most

directly: preschool services, schools, and after school programs. All three of these building

blocks for human development are in a deplorable state in most urban communities, such as

Philadelphia. The childcare institutions are overcrowded and underfunded. The facilities are

often poorly designed and the caretakers poorly trained. Parents turn to trusted relatives, friends

and neighbors who may do no worse than the average childcare center but also may provide not

much more than custodial care. The schools in Philadelphia are in deplorable condition, and

most serve their populations poorly. Beginning in middle school, the quality of school seems to

deteriorate as the demands on teachers and staff grow. The high schools— which I have been

studying in another project— range from mediocre to dysfunctional. Few of the high school

programs offer any extracurricular programs beyond a few sports teams. The typical

Philadelphia school is simply unacceptable to most parents who either move out of the city, send

their children to parochial or private schools or desperately search for a way out of their

neighborhood school.

It is difficult to imagine a way of community building without substantially strengthening

schools: both the educational content and after school programs. The schools are currently

incapable of providing much help to parents in providing their children with the skills, social

networks, and vision to find a place in society. The rhetoric of school reform often includes

enhancing parental involvement; parents need to know more about what happens at school and to

have greater influence and involvement in what takes place in the classroom. Yet it is chimerical to believe that parents can do more than become effective monitors and advocates. No doubt, the selection of schools is where they exercise their greatest influence. Most parents in Philadelphia simply cannot exercise much influence unless it is by moving out of the city— and the majority of families would do that willingly if they had the means to relocate.

A discussion of the problem of school reform is beyond the scope of this paper. It is sufficient to point out here that offering families better schools would go a long way toward helping children at risk of failure in adolescence or early adulthood. Youth services and summer programs— important as they are— cannot make up for the severe deficiencies in many urban, public school systems. If hospitals were providing the same level of services as schools, there would be a public outcry and an even larger number of lawsuits than currently occur.

It seems to me an open question of whether public policy should be directed at strengthening neighborhood schools and services or merely finding the means to move children to where better services exist. I am open-minded about a voucher system so long as it adequately funds and directs parents to higher quality educational programs rather than assumes that parents are informed consumers. This study suggests that parents operate with very partial information and simply do not possess the rudimentary knowledge of how the stratification system operates. They believe that the system is fair, and it is not. The parents who have the least knowledge and resources are required to select among inferior institutions and supports. Ultimately, and with good reason, they are inclined to rely on kin or close neighbors to make up for what is lacking in their immediate milieu. If they had access to thriving institutions, would they adopt different management strategies and their children would benefit accordingly. This thought experiment is

surely worth applying in reality.

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