



December 1974

## A Holistic Perspective on Child Abuse and Its Prevention

David G. Gil  
*Brandeis University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the [Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence Commons](#), [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#), and the [Social Work Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Gil, David G. (1974) "A Holistic Perspective on Child Abuse and Its Prevention," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol2/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [maira.bundza@wmich.edu](mailto:maira.bundza@wmich.edu).



## A HOLISTIC PERSPECTIVE ON CHILD ABUSE AND ITS PREVENTION

David G. Gil

Professor of Social Policy

Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts 02154

In recent decades, child abuse has come to be considered a social problem of significant scope and has, therefore, attracted intense public and scholarly interest. Yet, in spite of efforts by scholars, professionals, government agencies, concerned individuals and organizations, and the media of public communications, misconceptions prevail concerning the nature, sources, and dynamics of this destructive phenomenon and concerning effective approaches to its primary prevention. Such conceptual shortcomings, and a related persistent failure to design effective policies and programs for the primary prevention of child abuse, seem to be due to a number of obstacles.

### Obstacles to Development of Valid Theory and Effective Policy

Perhaps the most serious obstacle is the prevailing conception of social problems as isolated, fragmented phenomena, rather than as consequences of the societal context in which they evolve, and as related to, and interacting with, other social problems generated in the same societal context. This symptom, rather than source, oriented conception of social problems has caused scholars and social planners to consider child abuse as a separate and unique entity, to study it in isolation, and to design around it specialized policies, programs, and bureaucracies. We tend to deal in this way with all social problems, such as alcoholism, drug addiction, crime, mental illness, corruption, inflation, unemployment, urban decay, poverty, etc. The frustrating results of this fragmentary approach to social problems which are deeply rooted in the very fabric of our society, are too well-known to require detailed discussion: the problems tend to persist unchanged, or even to increase in scope, while the bureaucracies which study and deal with them tend to grow over time into major, separate industries, each of which would face "unemployment," were its "house-problem" overcome. Thus, one cannot help wondering whether these specialized, symptom-focused agencies are, indeed, committed to the eradication of social problems, or whether, perhaps, out of a symbiotic relationship with, and a myopic perspective on them, the agencies themselves become factors contributing to the perpetuation of the problems.

Another, equally serious, obstacle to understanding and over-

coming social problems is the tendency to interpret their causation and dynamics along single dimensions such as biological, psychological, social, economic, political, etc. The explanatory dimensions correspond, usually, to the academic discipline or the professional field of the investigators who suggest them. One suspects, therefore, that the interpretations reflect the credentials of investigators rather than the multi-dimensional nature of the phenomena. The long-standing controversy as to whether child abuse is caused by individual psychopathology of perpetrators or by societal forces is an apt illustration of the futility and absurdity of the single-dimensional approach to the causal interpretation of social problems. Such rigid, explanatory paradigms are derived from relatively closed thought structures of academic disciplines and professional groups, and reflect the "trained incapacities" and the vested research and practice interests of these disciplines and groups. They are unlikely to be correct representations of real human phenomena which are always multi-dimensional and which, therefore, do not fit neatly into the conventional division of labor among academic disciplines, university departments, and programmatic agencies.

It should be noted in this context that observations of cases which can be shown, reliably, to result from a specific factor, e.g. psychopathology, must not be interpreted as evidence against the possible operation of other causal factors, in other cases showing the same symptoms, or even as contributing factors to the observed cases. Such inferences would obviously not be logical.

One more obstacle to conceptual clarity may be understood as a special manifestation of the just discussed fallacious tendency to interpret social problems along single dimensions. In our society, this tendency seems definitely weighted in favor of individual, rather than social interpretations. William Ryan has labeled this process very aptly, "blaming the victim."\* By positing individual factors as causal agents of such social problems as poverty, crime, corruption, addiction, and child abuse, attention is diverted from likely sources in the social fabric. Intervention programs are consequently designed to change individuals involved in, or affected by, the problems, rather than possibly pathogenic aspects of the social order. By blaming individual victims, or groups of victims, for the social problems they experience, and turning them thus into scapegoats, society as a whole is absolved from all blame and responsibility. No doubt, this conception of the dynamics of social problems is functional for the defense and maintenance of the social status-quo.

The last obstacle to be noted here is the tendency to define

---

\*William Ryan, Blaming the Victim, New York: Pantheon Books, 1971.

social problems too narrowly, in descriptive rather than analytic-dynamic terms. Descriptive definitions are of limited utility in guiding investigations into the etiology of phenomena, and in developing measures for primary prevention, the effectiveness of which depends on a penetrating analysis of the sources and dynamics of the problems, and the identification and elimination of causal agents. It should be noted also in this context that definitions of social problems ought to incorporate explicit value premises in order to be conducive to the design of socially significant research, and to the generation of effective intervention measures.

#### A Holistic Definition of Child Abuse

In developing a holistic perspective on child abuse, freed of the obstacles discussed in the preceding section, one must first redefine this phenomenon in a comprehensive, dynamic manner. I have suggested such a definition in testimony before the Sub-Committee on Children and Youth of the U. S. Senate, at hearings, in March 1973, on the "Child Abuse Prevention Act" (S.1191). This definition includes also specifications of value premises and of the rights of children. Abuse is viewed as inflicted deficits, or gaps, between the specified rights and the actual circumstances of children, irrespective of the sources or agents of the deficits:

Every child, despite his individual differences and uniqueness is to be considered of equal intrinsic worth, and hence should be entitled to equal social, economic, civil, and political rights, so that he may fully realize his inherent potential and share equally in life, liberty, and happiness. Obviously, these value premises are rooted in the humanistic philosophy of our Declaration of Independence.

In accordance with these value premises then, any act of commission or omission by individuals, institutions, or society as a whole, and any conditions resulting from such acts or inaction, which deprive children of equal rights and liberties, and/or interfere with their optimal development, constitute, by definition, abusive or neglectful acts or conditions.\*

---

\*Child Abuse Prevention Act, 1973, Hearings before the Sub-Committee on Children and Youth of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, U. S. Senate, 93rd Congress, 1st Session, on S.1191, Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1973, p. 14.

In this definition, the dimensions of child abuse are derived from the stated egalitarian value premises and the related position concerning the rights of all children to optimal development and self-actualization. Obviously, if different value premises and a correspondingly different position on children's rights were specified in a definition, the dimensions of child abuse would be modified accordingly, provided abuse is conceived of as an inflicted deficit between the specified rights of children and their actual circumstances of living.

### Analytic Concepts

The holistic definition of child abuse presented above suggests the use of two related analytic concepts for studying the nature of child abuse and for developing effective policies and programs for its prevention. These concepts will be referred to here as "levels of manifestation" and "levels of causation" or "causal dimensions." The levels of manifestation identify the agents and the settings in which children may experience abuse, or, in terms of the holistic definition, in which the inflicted deficits between their rights to develop freely and fully and their actual circumstances become manifest. The levels of causation unravel the several causal dimensions, the interactions of which result in abusive acts and abusive conditions at the levels of manifestation. The distinction implicit in these analytic concepts, between the levels at which abuse occurs and the forces that underlie the occurrences is important, for these levels and forces are not the same. They do, however, complement each other and interact with each other in multiple ways. Moreover, interaction takes place also among the levels themselves, and among the forces. Clarifying the nature of child abuse means essentially to trace these multiple interactions among the levels of manifestation and the causal dimensions.

### Levels of Manifestation

Three levels of manifestation of child abuse may be distinguished. The most familiar one is abusive conditions in the home, and abusive interaction between children and their caretakers. Abuse on this level consists of acts of commission or omission by individuals which inhibit a child's development. The perpetrators are parents, permanent or temporary parent substitutes, or others living in a child's home regularly or temporarily. Abuse in the home may be intentional and conscious or unintentional and also unconscious. Abuse may result from supposedly constructive, disciplinary, educational attitudes and measures, or from negative and hostile feelings toward children. Abusive acts in the home may be one-time events, occasional incidents, or regular patterns. So far, child abuse at this level of manifestation has been the dominant focus of scholarly, professional, and public concern with this destructive phenomenon.

A second level at which child abuse occurs is the institutional level. This includes such settings as day care centers, schools, courts, child care agencies, welfare departments, correctional and other residential child care settings, etc. In such settings, acts and policies of commission or omission which inhibit, or insufficiently promote, the development of children, or which deprive children of or fail to provide them with, material, emotional, and symbolic means needed for their optimal development, constitute - in accordance with the holistic definition - abusive acts or conditions. Such acts or policies may originate with an individual employee of an institution, such as a teacher, a child care worker, a judge, a probation officer, a social worker, or they may be implicit in the standard practices and policies of given agencies and institutions. In the same way as in the home, abusive acts and conditions in institutional settings may also result from supposedly constructive, or from negative and hostile attitudes toward children, and they may be one-time or occasional events or regular patterns.

Institutional child care settings such as schools are often perceived by parents as bearers of cultural norms concerning proper child rearing practices and discipline. Hence, when schools and other child care settings employ practices which are not conducive to optimal child development, e.g. corporal punishment and other demeaning and threatening, negative disciplinary measures, they convey a subtle message to parents, namely, that such measures are appropriate, as they are sanctioned by educational authorities and "experts." Influence flows, however, also in the other direction, from the home to the institutional level. Teachers and child care personnel will frequently adopt child rearing practices and disciplinary measures similar to those practiced in the homes of children in their care, on the assumption that this is what the children are used to, what they expect, and to what they respond. In this way, methods conducive, or not conducive, to optimal child development tend to be transmitted back and forth, and reinforced, through interaction between the home and the institutional levels.

When child abuse is viewed as inflicted deficits between a child's actual circumstances and circumstances that would assure his optimal development, it seems to be endemic in most existing institutional settings for the care and education of children, since these settings usually do not facilitate the full actualization of the human potential of all children in their care. Analysis of institutional child abuse reveals that this form of abuse is not distributed randomly throughout the population. Schools and institutions serving children of minority groups, children from deprived socio-economic backgrounds, handicapped children, and socially deviant children are less likely to facilitate optimal development of children's inherent potential than

schools and institutions serving children of majority groups, "normal" children, and children from affluent families and neighborhoods. However, even settings serving children from privileged backgrounds rarely encourage the optimal development of all children in their care. They, too, tend to inhibit the children's spontaneity and creativity, and to promote conformity rather than critical, independent thought. Only rarely will children in these settings develop all their inherent faculties and their unique individuality.

Worse though, than the educational system with its mind-stifling practices, its widespread use of corporal punishment and other demeaning and threatening forms of discipline, is the legally sanctioned, massive abuse of children under the policies and practices of the public welfare system, especially the "Aid to Families with Dependent Children" (AFDC) program. This system of grossly inadequate income maintenance - inadequate even by measures of minimal needs as published by the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics - virtually condemns millions of children to conditions of existence under which physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development are likely to be severely handicapped.

Similarly destructive versions of legally sanctioned abuse on the institutional level are experienced by several hundred thousands of children living in foster-care, in training and correctional institutions, and in institutions for children defined as mentally retarded. That these settings of substitute child care usually fail to assure optimum development for the children entrusted to them has been amply demonstrated and, thus, does not require further documentation here.\*

The massive manifestations of institutional child abuse tend to arouse much less public concern and indignation than child abuse in the home, although the abusive conditions and practices of public education, public welfare, and child placement are endemic to these systems, and are visible to all who care to see. Perhaps the enormity of institutional abuse dulls our sensibilities in the same way in which the fate of inmates of concentration camps, or of populations suffering from natural or man-made catastrophes, tends to arouse a lesser response than the killing of a single individual with whom we are able to identify.

Institutional child abuse is linked, intimately, to the third level at which child abuse is manifested, namely, the societal level. On this level originate social policies which sanction, or cause, severe deficits between the actual circumstances of children and conditions

---

\*e.g., Alvin L. Schorr (ed.), Children and Decent People. New York: Basic Books, 1974.

needed for their optimal development. As direct or indirect consequences of such social policies, millions of children in our society live in poverty and are inadequately nourished, clothed, housed, and educated; their health is not assured because of substandard medical care; their neighborhoods decay; meaningful occupational opportunities are not available to them, and alienation is widespread among them. No doubt, these destructive conditions which result, inevitably, from the normal workings of the prevailing social, economic, and political order, and from the value premises which shape that order and its human dynamics, cannot fail to inhibit severely the development of children exposed to them.

Of the three levels of child abuse sketched in this section, the societal level is certainly the most severe one. For what happens at this level determines not only how children fare on the institutional level, but also, by way of complex interactions, how they fare in their own homes.

#### Levels of Causation or Causal Dimensions

Before discussing the causal dimensions of child abuse, it should be reiterated that the conventional dichotomy between individual and societal causation of social problems distorts the multi-dimensional reality of human phenomena. We know that psychological forces which shape individual behavior evolve out of the totality of life experiences in specific historical, cultural, social, economic, and political contexts. Individual motivation and behavior are thus always rooted in a societal force field. Yet societal forces are always expressed, or mediated, through the behavior of individuals, for societies cannot act except through their individual members. Clearly then, any human phenomenon, at any moment, involves both social and individual elements. In real life, these elements are inseparable. Their separation in theory is merely a product of scholarly, or rather pseudo-scholarly abstraction.

Based on this reasoning, child abuse, at any level of manifestation, may be understood as acts or inactions of individuals, on their own or as institutional agents, whose behavior reflects societal forces mediated through their unique personalities.

The most fundamental causal level of child abuse consists of a cluster of interacting elements, to wit, a society's basic social philosophy, its dominant value premises, its concept of humans; the nature of its social, economic, and political institutions which are shaped by its philosophy and value premises, and which in turn reinforce that philosophy and these values; and, finally, the particular quality of human relations prevailing in the society, which derives from its philosophy, values, and institutions. For, in the final



analysis, it is the philosophy and value premises of a society, the nature of its major institutions, and the quality of its human relations, which determine whether or not individual members of that society will develop freely and fully in accordance with their inherent potentialities.

To discern a society's basic social philosophy and values and its concept of humans, one needs to ascertain whether it considers everyone to be intrinsically of equal worth in spite of his or her uniqueness and, hence, entitled to the same social, economic, and political rights; or whether everyone in the society considers himself, and those close to himself, of greater worth than anyone else, and hence entitled to more desirable or privileged circumstances. The former, egalitarian philosophy would be reflected in institutional arrangements involving cooperative actions in pursuit of common existential interests. Every individual, and that includes every child, would be considered an equally entitled subject, who could not be deprived of his rights, exploited, and dominated by any other individual or group, and whose right to fully and freely develop his individuality would be assured and respected, subject to the same right of all others. The latter, non-egalitarian philosophy, on the other hand, as we know so well from our own existence, is reflected in institutional structures which encourage competitive behavior in pursuit of narrowly perceived, egotistical interests. Everyone strives to get ahead of others, considers himself entitled to privileged conditions and positions, and views and treats others as potential means to be used, exploited, and dominated in pursuit of his egotistical goals.

The quality of human relations and of human experience in an egalitarian social order would be essentially harmonious. A sense of true community and well-being would be shared by all. Economic institutions would be organized rationally, not for private profit and capital accumulation, but to satisfy everyone's real needs. Waste would be avoided, the environment protected, and natural resources preserved. Political institutions would be truly democratic and participatory; power would be equalized and decentralized; everyone would share equally in important decisions, and especially decisions affecting his existence. Clearly, all forms of domination and exploitation would be precluded, the scarcity and jungle mentality by which we now live would be overcome, and a true Commonwealth based on reason could evolve.

The quality of human relations and of human experience in non-egalitarian social orders is, typically, characterized by competitiveness

and jealousies, individual isolation and loneliness, alienation, distrust, fear, and insecurity. These qualities are inevitable correlates of non-egalitarian, hierarchical, domineering, and exploitative social, economic and political institutions, which tend to be controlled by huge, centralized, and dehumanizing bureaucracies. Under such institutional structures, individuals cease to be subjects, or masters, of their own lives, and are turned into means for objectives far beyond their true existential needs. Real liberty and true self-actualization are not feasible in such social orders, irrespective of their ideological stances or window-dressings, be that ideology "free-enterprise-capitalism" and pseudo-democracy as in the United States and the so-called "free" world, or be it "state-capitalism" and centralistic pseudo-socialism as in the Soviet Union and several other so-called "socialist" countries.

This brief sketch of contrasting social philosophies, societal institutions, and modes of human relations suggests that full and free development of every child's inherent potential may be possible only in a society organized consistently around egalitarian and cooperative value premises, since the equal right to self-actualization is implicit in an egalitarian philosophy, while such a right is incompatible with a non-egalitarian philosophy. In a society organized on non-egalitarian and competitive principles, full and free development for all children is simply impossible as by definition, there must always be losers in such societies, whose chances to realize their inherent potential will be severely limited. Hence, significant developmental deficits for large segments of the population or high levels of socially structured and sanctioned abuse of children, are endemic in such societies.

A second, more specific, level of causation of child abuse may be intrinsic to the social construction, or definition, of childhood prevalent in a society. Obviously, this level is closely related to the first level. How does a society view its children, all its children, and how does it define their rights? How much obedience, submission, and conformity does it expect of children? Does it process children through caste-like channels of socialization into relatively closed and inflexible social and occupational structures, or does it encourage them, within limits of reason, to discover and develop their individuality and uniqueness, and to shape their lives accordingly? Obviously, optimal development of the inherent potential of all children is a function of the extent to which a society's processes of socialization are permeated with a commitment to such self-actualization for all. When this commitment is lacking altogether, or when it varies with such factors as sex, race, social and economic position of a family, etc., then differ-

ent children will experience varying deficits in realizing their potential. Presently, in our society, social policies which sustain different levels of rights for children from different social and economic backgrounds are a major, direct cause of many forms of child abuse on the societal and institutional levels, and an indirect cause of abuse on the family level.

A further causal dimension of child abuse is a society's attitude toward the use of force as a legitimate means for attaining ends, especially in imbalanced, interpersonal relations such as master-slave, male-female, guard-prisoner, and adult-child. The tendency to resort to the use of force for dealing with conflicts in our society seems to require no documentation here, nor does it seem necessary to document the specific readiness to use force, or the threat of it, as a means to maintain authority and discipline in adult-child relations in the public domain such as schools and other child care settings, and in the private domain of the family. The readiness to use physical force for disciplinary objectives is certainly endemic in our society.

It should be noted that the readiness to use force in general, and in adult-child relations in particular, is intimately linked to a society's basic philosophy and value premises, and to its concept of humans and their rights. A non-egalitarian philosophy is much more likely to sanction the use of force than an egalitarian one, since the use of force against other humans constitutes the strongest possible negation of equality. The use of force toward children is also related to the manner in which childhood, and the rights of children are defined by a society, and in turn tends to reinforce that definition.

As mentioned earlier, the use of force toward children is widespread in our society on the institutional and family levels. Attempts to limit and outlaw it in public institutions have had so far only limited success. It may be noted, in this context, that because of the compatibility between the use of physical force on the one hand, and an inegalitarian philosophy and competitive social, economic, and political institutions on the other, corporal punishment and the threat of it may actually be highly functional in preparing children for adult roles in an inegalitarian and competitive social order. For, were our children reared in a harmonious fashion without threats, insults, and physical force, they might not be adequately prepared and conditioned for adult roles in our inegalitarian, competitive reality.

Whenever corporal punishment in child rearing is sanctioned, and even subtly encouraged by a society, incidents of serious physical abuse and injury are bound to happen, either as a result of deliberate,

systematic, and conscious action on the part of perpetrators, or under conditions of loss of self-control. In either case, but especially in the latter, physical attacks on children tend to relieve tensions and frustrations experienced by the perpetrators. Clearly, then, these attacks are carried out to meet emotional needs of the perpetrators rather than educational needs of the victims, as is often claimed by advocates of corporal punishment.

The next causal dimension may be referred to as "triggering contexts." These contexts operate jointly with the societal sanction of the use of physical force in adult-child relations. Adults who use force toward children do not do so all the time, but only under specific circumstances which serve as triggers for their abusive behavior. In general, abusive attacks tend to be triggered by stress and frustration which may cause reduction or loss of self-control. Stresses and frustration may facilitate abusive attacks even without causing a reduction or loss of self-control, as long as the appropriateness of the use of force in child rearing is accepted, an acceptance which was shown to be widespread in our society.

One major source of stress and frustration for adults in our society are the multi-faceted deprivations of poverty and its correlates, high density in overcrowded, dilapidated, inadequately served neighborhoods; large numbers of children, especially in one-parent, mainly female-headed households; and the absence of child care alternatives. Having identified poverty and its correlates as one important triggering context of child abuse in the home, we may now note that social policies which sanction and perpetuate the existence of poverty among large segments of the population, including millions of children, are thus indirect sources of child abuse in the home. It should be emphasized, though, that poverty, per se, is not a direct cause of child abuse in the home, but operates through an intervening variable, namely, concrete and psychological stress and frustration experienced by individuals in the context of culturally sanctioned use of physical force in child rearing.

Poverty is not the only source of stress and frustration triggering child abuse in the home. Such abuse is known to occur frequently in many homes in adequate, and even affluent, economic circumstances. One other, important source of stress and frustration in our society is the alienating circumstances in most workplaces, be the work manual labor, skilled and unskilled occupations, or administrative, managerial, and professional work through all levels and sectors of business, academic, and government bureaucracies. A recent report by a task force of the U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare documented the seriousness of work alienation which is

experienced by constantly growing segments of the working population.\* This government report is certainly not biased against the economic system of the United States. And yet, it reached similar conclusions to those voiced by many severe critics of this system in recent years. These conclusions are that the prevailing competitive and exploiting human relations in the work place, and its hierarchical and authoritarian structures, tend to cause psychological stress and alienation for nearly every working person. These pressures may lead to various forms of deviant behavior such as alcoholism, drug addiction, mental illness, white collar crime, etc. Perhaps the most frequent locus for discharging feelings of stress and frustration originating in the formal world of work is the informal world of primary relations, the home and the family. Conflicts between spouses are one form this discharge may take. Child abuse in the form of violent physical outbursts is another.

Here then, we identify once again a triggering context for child abuse on the interpersonal level, which is rooted deeply in societal forces, namely, the alienating quality of our society's economic and productive system complemented by the culturally sanctioned use of physical force in child rearing.

The final causal dimension of child abuse on the interpersonal level in the home and in child care settings is intra-psychic conflicts and various forms of psycho-pathology on the part of perpetrators. Child abuse literature is largely focused on this dimension and thus little needs to be said here to document it. However, what needs to be stressed is the fact that psychological disturbances and their manner of expression are not independent factors but are deeply rooted in, and constantly interact with, forces in the social environment of the disturbed individual. To the extent that psycho-pathology is not rooted in genetic and biochemical processes, it derives from the totality of the life experiences of the individual which are shaped by continuous interactions between the person and his social setting, his informal and formal relations in primary and secondary contexts. However, not only the etiology of intra-psychic conflicts and disturbances is conditioned, in part, by social forces, but also the manner in which these conflicts and disturbances are expressed in social relations is very much culture-bound. The symptoms of emotional disturbance and mental illness are not randomly generated phenomena, but derive from normal behavioral traits in a culture. These normal traits appear in exaggerated or negated forms in behavior which is considered deviant, neurotic, and psychotic. Hence, one may assume that in a society in which the use of physical force in general, and toward children in

---

\*Task Force to the Secretary of HEW, Work in America. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1973.

particular, is not sanctioned, intra-psychic conflicts and psychopathology would less often be expressed through violence against children. It follows from these considerations that the "battered baby" syndrome and other forms of child abuse which are associated with psychological disturbances of one kind or another, are not independent of societal forces, although the perpetrators of these acts may be emotionally ill individuals. We are thus again led to the conclusion that abusive acts and conditions, irrespective of the level of manifestation, cannot be understood in terms of one specific causal dimension, but only in terms of complex interactions among the several causal dimensions sketched in this section.

### Primary Prevention

According to a general conceptual model, primary prevention proceeds from identification toward elimination of the causal contexts from which specified, undesired phenomena derive. It needs to be realized that the prevention of undesired phenomena may result also in the elimination of other phenomena whenever such other phenomena derive from, or are part of, the same causal context. The likelihood of simultaneous prevention of several phenomena could lead to serious dilemmas in situations when some of the phenomena are desired, while others are considered undesirable, or when groups in a society differ in their respective evaluation of the desirability of the several phenomena. Decisions concerning primary prevention of social phenomena and of "social problems" are thus essentially political choices.

Turning now to the primary prevention of child abuse, we may begin by summarizing our conclusions so far. Child abuse, conceived of as inflicted deficits on a child's right to develop freely and fully, irrespective of the source and agents of the deficit, was found to occur on several related levels: on the interpersonal level in the home and in child-care settings, on the institutional level through the policies and practices of a broad array of child care, educational, welfare, and correctional institutions and agencies, and on the societal level, where the interplay of values and social, economic, and political institutions and processes shapes the social policies by which the rights, and the existential realities of all children, and of specific groups of children are determined. The causal dimensions of child abuse are, first of all, the dominant social philosophy and value premises of a society, its social, economic, and political institutions, and the quality of human relations to which these institutions, philosophy and values give rise; other causal dimensions are the social construction of childhood and the social definition of children's rights, the extent to which a society sanctions the use of force in general and, more specifically, in the child rearing context, stress and frustration resulting from poverty and from alienation in the work place which may trigger

abusive acts, and expressions of intra-psychic conflicts and psychopathology which in turn are rooted in the social fabric. While child abuse, at any particular level, may be more closely related to one rather than another causal dimension, none of these dimensions are independent, and they exert their influence through multiple interactions with each other.

This analysis suggests that primary prevention of child abuse, on all levels, would require fundamental changes in social philosophy and value premises, in societal institutions, and in human relations. It would also require a reconceptualization of childhood, of children's rights, and of child rearing. It would necessitate rejecting the use of force as means for achieving societal ends, especially in dealing with children. It would require the elimination of poverty and of alienating conditions of production, major sources of stress and frustration which tend to trigger abusive acts toward children in adult-child interaction. And, finally, it would necessitate the elimination of psychological illness. Because of the multiple interactions among the several causal dimensions, progress in overcoming the more fundamental dimensions would also reduce the force of other dimensions. Thus, transforming the prevailing inegalitarian social philosophy, value premises, and institutions - and the kind of human relations they generate - into egalitarian ones would also result in corresponding modifications of children's rights, elimination of poverty and alienation at work, and rejection of the use of force. It would indirectly influence psychological wellbeing, and would thus eliminate the processes which now trigger child abuse in interpersonal relations.

Effective primary prevention requires working simultaneously toward the transformation of all the causal dimensions. Fragmented approaches focused on one or the other causal dimension may bring some amelioration, but one should entertain no illusions as to the effectiveness of such piecemeal efforts. Even such important and necessary steps as outlawing corporal punishment in schools and other child care settings would have only limited, though highly desirable results. There simply is no way of escaping the conclusion that the complete elimination of child abuse on all levels of manifestation requires a radical transformation of the prevailing unjust, inegalitarian, irrational, competitive, alienating and hierarchical social order into a just, egalitarian, rational, cooperative, humane, and truly democratic, decentralized one. Obviously, this realization implies that primary prevention of child abuse is a political issue which cannot be resolved through professional and administrative measures.

Primary prevention of child abuse would result also in the prevention of other, equally undesirable and equally inevitable consequences or symptoms of the same causal context, including many

manifestations of social deviance. However, it would also result in the complete transformation of the prevailing social, economic, and political order with which large segments of our society are either identified or drifting along, because this order conforms to their accustomed mental sets, and because they seem reluctant, due to inertia, to search actively for alternative social, economic, and political institutions which might be more conducive to human fulfillment for all. Some or many members of our society may even be consciously committed to the perpetuation of the existing order, not realizing how destructive that order may be to their own real interests.

Whatever one's attitude may be toward these fundamental political issues, one needs to recognize and face the dilemmas implicit in them and, hence, in primary prevention of child abuse. If one's priority is to prevent all child abuse, one must be ready to part with its many causes, even when one is attached to some of them, such as the apparent blessings, advantages and privileges of inequality. If, on the other hand, one is reluctant to give up all aspects of the causal context of child abuse, one must be content to continue living with this social problem. In that latter case, one ought to stop talking about primary prevention and face the fact that all one may be ready for is some measure of amelioration.

### Research

In concluding this essay on the nature and prevention of child abuse from a holistic perspective, some observations seem indicated on implications for research. Research, to be meaningful in a social sense, should derive from socially meaningful issues and should pursue imaginative hypotheses aimed at solving these issues. Far too often, scarce research resources seem to be wasted on essentially irrelevant studies which explore insignificant, fragmentary issues and pedestrian hypotheses, often with the aid of highly sophisticated research technology. These critical comments on the state of social research apply to a large part of past and present research on child abuse and its prevention.

The discussion in this essay of the levels of manifestation and the causal dimensions of child abuse does suggest a series of socially meaningful issues which could be addressed through social research. Likewise, the discussion of primary prevention of child abuse suggests one comprehensive hypothesis which could be explored and tested by means of properly designed research. The issues to be investigated are the validity of the causal model of child abuse and its several dimensions and their multiple interactions. The hypothesis concerning primary prevention states that societies which overcame the causal dimensions of child abuse identified in this essay would gradually free themselves of child abuse. These issues and



this hypothesis could be explored cross-culturally, historically, and experimentally. One could search for past and present societies and communities, whose philosophy, value premises, societal institutions, and human relations are relatively free of the posited causal dimensions of child abuse, and one could examine whether the incidence of child abuse on all levels of manifestation is indeed lower in these societies than in our own. Alternatively, one could stimulate and facilitate the emergence of communities organized on principles that preclude the hypothesized causal context of child abuse, and one could then observe whether the incidence of child abuse on all levels would decrease over time, and eventually cease altogether.

Less ambitious approaches to research are, of course, possible. However, if social research should guide us toward primary prevention, it needs to be designed around a causal model and a hypothesis concerning approaches to the elimination of the causal dimensions. Other types of research can guide only toward some form of amelioration, which may be all one is ready to engage in and which, of course, may have some utility as long as it is not misrepresented as a contribution to primary prevention.

Choices of foci for research turn out to be related to a scholar's fundamental social and political outlook, in the same way as attitudes towards primary prevention were shown to be essentially political. A researcher who accepts the prevailing social order is likely to select topics for study which will not threaten or challenge that order. On the other hand, a researcher who is committed to social justice for all, and who conceives of social science as a tool in the struggle for human liberation, will not hesitate to conduct studies of alternative social patterns and life styles which may thoroughly challenge prevailing assumptions, and which hold promise for a human existence freed of the many injustices of the prevailing social order, of which child abuse is merely one.

Note: This essay is based on the following books by the author and on a paper presented on June 17, 1974 at a conference on Child Abuse and Neglect at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Violence Against Children, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970, 1973;

Unravelling Social Policy, Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1973.