

Societal Contexts for Family Relations: Development, Violence and Stress

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The effect of families on whether children do or do not flourish has long been recognized by psychology. However, families do not spring up in isolation from their social, economic, and cultural contexts. As the primary means of socialization, families have to prepare children to function in their larger cultural context. In other words, what we are dealing with is not a matter of simple causes and effects but of mutually supporting interactive systems dynamics.

Analyzing these interactive dynamics has been the focus of my multi-disciplinary cross-cultural historical study of human societies. (Eisler, 1987; 1995; 2000; 2007) This study led to the identification of two underlying cultural configurations that transcend conventional categories such as religious vs. secular, Eastern vs. Western, preindustrial vs. industrial, or rightist vs. leftist: the *partnership system* and the *domination system*.

No society is a pure domination or partnership system. However, as I will briefly develop in this chapter, the degree to which a society orients to either end of the *partnership/domination continuum* affects the kinds of beliefs and behaviors people consider normal or abnormal, moral or immoral, and even possible or impossible – with profound implications for whether or not children flourish.

The Interaction of Family and Society

A growing literature shows the impact of children's early family experiences on how people think, feel, and act – and even on how their brains develop. Much of this literature has focused on

the effect of abuse and neglect (Perry, 2002). Psychologists have long pointed to the scars from harsh childhoods, and more recently neuroscientists have found that people who grow up in harsh families seem to have disrupted neurochemical patterns of both serotonin and dopamine activity, which lead to depression, irritability, and other problems (Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002).

What kinds of relations children experience in their families, including whether or not they have a secure bond or attachment with their caregivers, is certainly important for whether or not they flourish (Bowlby, 1969; Rutter, 1979; McCleod, 2007; Narvaez & Gleason, 2013). But other factors must be considered.

To begin with, basic matters such as lack of nutrition and health care adversely impact child flourishing. For example, poverty and discrimination (and they often go together) negatively affect child development, even survival.

Discrimination, as we still see all around us, can be based on factors such as race, religion, ethnicity, and gender, with severe gender discrimination still the cultural norm in some world regions such as Southeast Asia, where son preference leads to giving not only less health care and education to girls but less food (Eisler, 2013). This has intergenerational effects, since even those girls who survive this discrimination are typically malnourished, so their children, in turn, are robbed of their full potentials – matters I have researched extensively in my work on advancing the human rights of women and children (Eisler, 2013).

These kinds of cultural factors can be, and usually have been, studied in terms of direct causes of effects on children's wellbeing. However, the role of culture in child development is deeper and more systemic. For example, the level of stress of the caregivers; whether caregiving is given adequate social, economic, and emotional support; whether family relations model equality or

inequality; and whether the cultural norm for parenting is harsh, violent, and coercive with attendant levels of stress, or respectful, nonviolent, and caring, are among key factors that impact wellbeing.

This does not mean that all families conform to a culture's family ideal. For instance, studies indicate that authoritarian and punitive families were the traditional norm in Nazi Germany. Yet, as Pearl and Samuel Oliner found in their famous study of German helpers of Jews, the Germans who saved Jews from the Holocaust generally came from democratic and caring families – families that did *not* conform to the prevailing cultural norm (Oliner & Oliner, 1992).

However, in every culture a majority of families must conform to its family norm if the beliefs, behaviors, and social structures of the culture are to be maintained. The reason is that families are the first and prime instruments for socialization: for preparing people to function in the culture or subculture into which they were born. At the same time, what children experience and observe in families is directly affected by a culture's norms. Therefore culture plays a major role in how people's brains develop (Eisler & Levine, 2002; Eisler, in progress) – and hence profoundly impacts whether or not children have the opportunity for optimal human development.

Defining Optimal Human Development and Re-defining Cultures

This leads to a critical question: what kinds of cultures and subcultures promote or inhibit optimal human development. Answering this question entails two preliminary steps:

1. Defining what we mean by optimal human development
2. Re-defining culture from a perspective that recognizes the importance of how family relations are constructed in different types of cultural environments.

For the first step, I borrow the definition of optimal development or flourishing proposed by Gleason and Narvaez (2014) in “Childhood Environments and Flourishing.” They write:

Flourishing among adults has been defined by positive psychologists as living ‘within an optimal range of human functioning, one that connotes goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience’ (336) . . . Our

concept of flourishing for *children* includes these same areas of physiological, emotional, and social health. We explicitly expand the notion of flourishing to include an emphasis on the sociomoral aspects of development, such as strength in empathy and cooperation. In other words, flourishing is conceptualized with an emphasis on the moral domain, such that it includes considering how actions affect others, taking into account the wellbeing of others, and including the community when making decisions and selecting actions (337).

This definition of optimal human development makes it possible to further narrow the question of how culture impacts human development as follows: *What kinds of cultures support or inhibit the development of “goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience” as well as “strength in empathy and cooperation” and “considering how actions affect others, taking into account the wellbeing of others, and including the community when making decisions and selecting actions”?* Put another way, *what kinds of cultures support the expression of our human capacities for consciousness, caring, empathy, and creativity, or, alternately, our capacities for insensitivity, cruelty, and destructiveness?*

To answer these questions requires the second step delineated above: Re-defining culture from a perspective that recognizes the importance of how family relations are constructed in different kinds of cultural environments. For this second step, I draw from the multi-disciplinary cross-cultural and historical research that led to the identification of the partnership system and domination system as social categories that, as noted, transcend conventional ones such as religious or secular, rightist or leftist, Eastern or Western, Northern or Southern, industrial or pre- or post-industrial (Eisler 1987, 1995, 1997, 2007).

Before describing these social categories, I want to say a few words about the method of inquiry that led to their identification: *the study of relational dynamics*. Unlike conventional studies of society, this method focuses on two primary relational dynamics. The *first* is what kinds of relations – from intimate to international – a particular culture encourages or discourages. The *second* is how various elements of a culture interactively relate to shape and maintaining its basic character.

To analyze these relationships, the study of relational dynamics applies the method of systems analysis: the study of how different components of living systems interact to maintain one another and the larger whole of which they are a part (See e.g., Emery & Trist, 1973; Ackoff, 1974). The study of relational dynamics evolved out of a wide-ranging exploration of how humans think, feel, and behave individually and in groups, drawing from a trans-disciplinary data base. Its academic sources include cross-cultural anthropological surveys (e.g. Murdock, 1969; Textor, 1969; Sanday, 1981; Coltrane, 1988), as well as anthropological and sociological studies of individual societies (e.g., Benedict, 1946; Giddens, 1984; Abu-Lughod, 1986; Min, 1995). Examining various periods and places (with greater focus on western societies because of greater availability of materials), sources also include writings by historians, analyses of laws, moral codes, art, literature (including fiction, biographies, and autobiographies), scholarship from psychology, economics, education, political science, philosophy, religious studies (including the study of “mystery cults” around the Mediterranean from before the rise of Christianity), archeological studies (primarily of western prehistory because of greater availability of materials, but also some of Indian and Chinese prehistory), the study of both western and eastern myths and legends; and data from more recently developed fields such as primatology, neuroscience, chaos theory, systems self-organizing theory, non-linear dynamics, gender studies, women’s studies, and men’s studies (For citations of sources, see e.g. Eisler, 1987, 1995, 2000, 2002, 2007, 2013; Eisler & Levine, 2002). In addition, and more personally, the study of relational dynamics has drawn from data obtained through experiences and observations from living in Europe (Austria), Latin America (Cuba), and North America (the USA), as well as travel (often including conferences and other meetings with a diversity of scholars) in Kenya, Japan, Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Columbia, Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Canada,

Mexico, Russia, and European nations such as Finland, Sweden, Germany, Italy, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Greece.

A distinguishing feature of the study of relational dynamics is that it pays particular attention to the comparative status of males and females in different societies. Unlike most sociological analyses, it examines how a society constructs gender roles and relations as well as childrearing, and how these in turn are related to its political and economic structures and beliefs. In other words, while it accords special importance to family structures and normative beliefs about gender roles/relations and parenting practices, it examines these in their larger cultural, political, and economic contexts, combining the analysis of the so-called public sphere of politics and economics with that of the so-called private sphere of family and other intimate relations.

This more systemic, trans-disciplinary, child development focused, and gender balanced, approach led to the identification of patterns: *configurations*, or interactions among key elements of social systems that keep repeating themselves cross-culturally and historically that are not discernible using a more siloed, uni-disciplinary approach. Since these configurations had not been identified or named before, the terms *domination system* and *partnership system* were coined.

I want to reiterate that these configurations transcend the familiar social categories of religious or secular, leftist or rightist, Eastern or Western, Northern or Southern, industrial or pre- or post-industrial. These categories only describe particular aspects of a society, such as ideology, technology, and geographical location. While this is important information, it does not tell us anything about how a society constructs the foundational gender and parent-child relations where children first experience, observe, and are taught what is considered normal and moral in human relations. By contrast, the new categories of the partnership system and the domination system focus attention on the foundational matter of the cultural construction of the relationships children first experience and observe. Using these

categories makes it possible to see connections that are otherwise invisible; for example, the connection between whether or not violence is considered normal in childrearing and whether a society is more warlike or peaceful and more inequitable or equitable.

I again want to emphasize that no society orients completely to either end of what I call the *partnership/domination continuum*. But the degree of this orientation affects all institutions, beliefs, and relations – and with this, whether our human capacities for consciousness, empathy, caring, cooperation, and creativity, or our capacities for insensitivity, cruelty, exploitation, and destructiveness are socially supported or inhibited (Eisler 1987, 1995, 2002, 2007, in progress). As I will later briefly illustrate, it even affects brain development. But first I want to sketch the core configurations of these two contrasting social systems.

The Domination Social Configuration

We clearly see the domination configuration in some of the most brutally violent and repressive societies of modern times: Hitler's Germany (a technologically advanced, Western rightist society), Stalin's USSR (a secular, leftist society), Khomeini's Iran and the Taliban of Afghanistan (Eastern religious societies), and Idi Amin's Uganda (a tribalist society). Viewed through the lenses of conventional social categories these societies seem completely different. But they share the same interactive configuration of four core components:

1. A structure of rigid top-down rankings in *both* the family and the state or tribe;
2. The rigid ranking of the male half of humanity over the female half, and an accompanying system of *gendered values* in which traits and activities culturally associated with women or the “feminine,” such as caring, caregiving, and nonviolence, are devalued – be it in women or men, or in business and social policy;

3. Culturally-accepted abuse and violence, ranging from child-and-wife-beating to pogroms, lynchings, public executions, and chronic warfare, to maintain hierarchies of domination – man over woman, man over man, race over race, religion over religion, tribe over tribe, nation over nation, etc.;

4. Beliefs that view relations of domination and submission as inevitable, normal, and even moral, and hence portray war and the “war of the sexes” as inevitable; beliefs that are today rejected by many people on the conscious level but maintain their unconscious hold as the traditional norm in some cultures and subcultures.

The Partnership Configuration

The basic template for partnership system also consists of four interactive components:

1. A democratic and egalitarian structure in *both* the family and the state or tribe. This does *not* mean there are no rankings, but they are what I call *hierarchies of actualization* rather than *hierarchies of domination*. In these more flexible hierarchies, power is viewed not as power over but as power to and power with. It is the kind of power described in the progressive management literature as empowering rather than disempowering and in the literature on parenting as authoritative rather than authoritarian.

2. Equal partnership between women and men. With this comes a high valuing, in women and men, of qualities and behaviors such as nonviolence, nurturance, and caregiving – qualities denigrated as “soft,” feminine,” and “unmanly” in the domination system.

3. Abuse and violence are not culturally accepted. This does not mean there is no abuse or violence; but they do not have to be institutionalized or idealized since they are not needed to maintain rigid rankings of domination.

4. Beliefs about human nature that support empathic and mutually respectful relations. Although insensitivity, cruelty, and violence are recognized as human possibilities, they are not considered inevitable or normal, much less moral.

As with societies that orient to the domination end of the partnership/domination continuum, societies that orient to the partnership end transcend conventional categories such as religious or secular, Eastern or Western, industrial, pre-industrial, post-industrial, and so on.

To illustrate, in contrast to some domination-oriented tribal societies where family violence is customary and may even include brutal rituals such as female genital cutting/mutilation, the forest Teduray, as University of California anthropologist Stuart Schlegel observed, have the core configuration characteristic of the partnership model. He writes: "I used to call them 'radically egalitarian.' But... they have the core configuration characteristic of the partnership model: they are generally egalitarian, women and men have equal status, and they are peaceful" (Schlegel, 1998: 244).

In describing his fieldwork among the Teduray, Schlegel further writes:

"Softer, stereotypically 'feminine' virtues were valued; and community well-being was the principal motivation for work and other activities. Nature and the human body were given great respect. The emphasis on technology was on enhancing and sustaining life" (Schlegel, 1998: 244).

Another example of orientation to the partnership side of the continuum are the agrarian Minagkabau, the fourth largest ethnic group in the Sumatran archipelago. As among the Teduray, here women play major social roles, violence is not part of Minagkabau childraising, and stereotypically feminine values such as caring and nurturing, as University of Pennsylvania anthropologist Peggy Sanday writes, are valued in both women and men (Sanday, 2002).

In contrast to more domination-oriented ideologies, in the Minagkabau belief system nurture is a basic principle of nature. As Sanday reports, the Minagkabau weave order out of their version of wild nature by appeal to maternal archetypes. She writes:

The Minagkabau subordinate male dominion and competition, which we consider basic to human social ordering and evolution, to the work of maternal nurture, which they hold to be necessary for the common good and the healthy society . . . Social well-being is found in natural growth and fertility according to the dictum that the unfurling, blooming, and growth in nature is our teacher" (Sanday, 2002: 22-24).

On the other side of the globe, Nordic societies, such as Sweden, Finland, Iceland, and Norway also orient more closely to the partnership side of the continuum. While these highly technologically advanced societies are not ideal, there is more democracy in *both* the family and the state with no huge gaps between haves and have-nots; women hold high political offices (they are 40 to 50 percent of national legislatures); and because the status of women is higher, the status of the “feminine” is also higher. Hence nurturance is supported by fiscal policy through measures such as universal health care, high quality childcare, elder care with dignity, stipends to help families care for children, generous paid parental leave for both mothers and fathers, and other caring policies (Eisler, 2007).

In other words, these more partnership-oriented societies support the kinds of activities that would promote child flourishing in the sense described by Gleason and Narvaez (2014) of helping children grow into people who are more empathic and cooperative. And these nations do tend to be more empathic, as shown by their large investment in caring for their own people as well as in NGOs that care for people on the other side of the globe. They also highly value cooperation, as shown by their many cooperative economic enterprises. And, not coincidentally, these more partnership-oriented nations have been in the forefront of the movement to leave behind traditions of violence and domination. They have a strong men’s movement to decouple “masculinity” from its association with domination and violence; they pioneered peace studies programs; and they introduced the first laws against the use of physical discipline of children in families (Eisler, 2007).

Bio-Culturalism

This leads to the new theory I have been developing for understanding the role of culture in the expression of different aspects of our large spectrum of genetic possibilities: *bio-culturalism* (Eisler, 2014, work in progress). Bio-culturalism still awaits the input, testing, and contributions of others from both the social and biological sciences, but by melding what we are learning from the biological sciences,

especially neuroscience, with findings from the social sciences, especially from the study of relational dynamics, it provides a new conceptual framework for studying the interactions of biology, culture, and human agency. It is based on the following principles, some of which also underlie disciplines such as cultural psychology and biocultural anthropology (Super & Harkness, 1986; Worthman CM. 2010.)

1. The study of social institutions and human behaviors must take into account the interactions between genes and experiences as influenced by our environments, especially the cultural environments that at this point in human evolution are our most important environments.
2. Understanding these interactions requires particular attention to the cultural construction of the primary human relations: gender and parent-child relations.
3. Our species has a vast spectrum of behavioral capacities: we are genetically equipped for destructiveness and creativity, cruelty and caring, rote conformity and independence, suppression of awareness and consciousness of ourselves, others, and our natural habitat.
4. While there are individual biological differences, due to the enormous flexibility and adaptability of the human brain, which of these capacities are expressed or inhibited largely hinges on different cultural norms..
5. These cultural norms are reflected and perpetuated by all social institutions; however families play a primary role because they are the context for a child's earliest and most formative experiences and observations.

Bio-culturalism adds the lens of the partnership/domination continuum to these principles, positing that gene-expression tends to differ depending on the degree to which cultural norms and social structures orient to the configuration of the partnership system or the domination system.

To briefly illustrate, let us start with a look at how domination-oriented families – that is, highly punitive families where the ideal is authoritarian father-rule and anything classified as “soft” or

“feminine” is considered inappropriate for “real men” – lead to the suppression of empathy and the deflection of childhood pain, fear, and anger against “inferior” or “dangerous” out-groups, as is required to maintain the top-down rankings that characterize domination oriented cultures or subcultures.

These psycho-social dynamics first gained attention through the work of psychologist Else Frenkel-Brunswik studying the family backgrounds of highly prejudiced people. (Adorno et al, 1964), and since then have been documented by other social scientists. For instance, in *The Politics of Denial* social psychologists Michael Milburn and Sheree Conrad documented how people who had harsh childhoods are often drawn to political leaders who advocate a punitive social agenda such as capital punishment, heavy investment in prisons, punishment of “immoral” women and gays, and military force (Milburn & Conrad, 1996).

Of particular interest are Milburn and Conrad’s findings that these politics are especially pronounced in men who were severely punished as children. They attribute this to a socialization that teaches boys to allow into consciousness only anger and contempt as properly “masculine” emotions, and to suppress “soft” or “feminine” feelings such as fear, pain, and empathy for the “weak” – who should be punished as they were as children) rather than helped through healthcare, childcare, and other “soft” or “feminine” policies (Milburn & Conrad, 1996). Of course, not all people raised in domination families turn out this way. There are, and always have been, those who reject authoritarian and violent relations. This is a testimony to the powerful human yearning for caring, freedom, and equality – human inclinations that, given half a chance, can overcome dysfunctional cultural constructions.

Moreover, none of this means that genes do not matter. But the issue is not genes per se, but *gene expression* – which is largely a function of the interaction of genes and experiences as affected by different environments. As clinical scientist Bruce Perry writes, “By birth the human brain has developed to the point where environmental cues mediated by the senses play a major role in determining how

neurons will differentiate, sprout dendrites, form and maintain synaptic connections and create the final neural networks that convey functionality” (Perry, 2002, p. 86). Even genetic predispositions are not necessarily expressed. For instance, studies of adopted children show that even where there may be strong genetic predispositions, these are not necessarily expressed; experience makes a big difference (Fieve et al, 1975; Schiff, et al, 1982).

One of the most interesting studies demonstrating how environments affects the brain was that of neurobiologists Robert M. Sapolsky and Lisa J. Share (2004) who studied a baboon troop in Kenya. Baboon males are noted for their aggressiveness and violence: males often harass and attack females, who are only half the size of males and lack the males’ ferocious canine teeth. The more aggressive males also terrorize lower-ranking males with constant bullying and vicious physical attacks. So a strong argument can be made that baboons are genetically predisposed to live in domination systems.

Nonetheless, after the most bellicose males in the troop Sapolsky and Share were observing died from a virus, there was a radical shift in the troop’s behaviors. There were still fights, as one would expect from this species. But there was far less violence, and both females and males of all ranks now spent significantly more time grooming, being groomed, and huddling close to troop mates.

Not only that, the neurochemistry of the troop’s members changed. Hormone samples showed far less evidence of stress in even the lowest-ranking individuals compared to baboons living in more violent societies. And over two decades later the troop still retained its more peaceful character – *despite the fact that all the original males had died off or left, and new ones had replaced them* – demonstrating that significant behavioral changes in primates can occur without any genetic change and that these changes can become the new cultural norm in a short time.

This takes us to three key tenets proposed by bio-culturalism:

1. Levels of stress affect the brain, including its neurochemical patterns.

2. The high levels of stress inherent in domination systems tend to block the expression of our capacities for consciousness, empathy, caring, and creativity, or at best distort or compartmentalize these capacities to fit the requirement of imposing and/or maintaining hierarchies of domination.

3. The lower levels of stress in cultures that orient more to the partnership side of the continuum tend to support the expression of our capacities for consciousness, empathy, caring, creativity, and conscious choice, at the same time tending to inhibit the expression of our capacities for insensitivity, cruelty, violence, denial, and destructiveness.

Brains, Stress, and Cultures

This is not the place for an extensive discussion of the neurochemistry of stress. But I want to touch on a few salient points that are especially relevant to whether or not children flourish. To begin with, our human brain is remarkably flexible – so much so that it has been called a work in process. This great brain flexibility or *neuroplasticity* has enormous benefits. It enables us to learn, to innovate, and to survive in many kinds of environments, both natural and human-made. Yet our great brain plasticity also has drawbacks. Since our brain's biological design gives it an exceptional capacity to adapt to different environments, we are especially vulnerable to environmental influences.

If people grow up in domination cultures or subcultures, they would tend to develop a brain neurochemistry adaptive to these highly stressful, insecure, often dangerous environments. They would often want to flee, go into a physical or psychological attack mode, or just blank out. This would involve neural and biochemical patterns that trigger fight-or-flight and/or disassociation responses with high levels of the hormone cortisol and the neurotransmitter norepinephrine.

Conversely, free circulation of the neurotransmitters dopamine and serotonin, the hormones oxytocin and vasopressin, and other substances involved in bonding and empathy, would tend to be

associated with the less violent, less stressful, more caring environments characteristic of the partnership system. This brain neurochemistry in turn would support what Gleason and Narvaez (2014) call “the sociomoral aspects of development,” including “considering how actions affect others, taking into account the wellbeing of others, and including the community when making decisions and selecting actions” as their criteria for child flourishing (337).

On the other hand, as neuroscientist Debra Niehoff noted about what happens in a chronically stressed brain: “More constructive coping responses are lost, and the brain fixates on an increasingly smaller portfolio of counterproductive reactions. With fewer and fewer alternatives, violence, depression, and fear stop being options and become a way of life” (Niehoff, 1999: 187). The chronic stress inherent in domination systems would also tend to inhibit the expression of our genetic capacity for consciousness, empathy, and caring. Again in Niehoff’s words, “Empathy takes a back seat to relief from the numbing discomfort of a stress-deadened nervous system” (Niehoff, 1999: 185).

Again,, there will be individual variations in brain development because how people respond to stress is modulated by genetic factors and behavioral choices. But the key point is that there will be central tendencies so that domination systems are maintained.

Not surprisingly, then, a key feature of domination systems is the creation and perpetuation of high levels of stress. For instance, the economic systems of domination-oriented cultures tend to create a general sense of anxiety, insecurity, and fear through self-perpetuating patterns of economic scarcity due to factors built into these systems such as excessive distribution of resources to those on top, diversion of resources into weaponry, and destruction of resources through war and other forms of violence (Eisler, 2007). For those at the bottom of domination hierarchies, there is even further stress. For example, even in rich nations such as the United States children living in poverty are

often hungry, live in unsafe, vermin-infected housing, or are homeless. Children living in less extreme poverty also tend to live in dangerous neighborhoods, with poor schools and parents stressed by economic hardships (Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002).

Indeed, a recent study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (Kim et al, 2013) found that the stress-burden of growing up poor may help account for the relationship between poverty as a child and adult emotional and cognitive problems. The subjects of the study who had lower family incomes at age nine exhibited, as adults, greater activity in the amygdala, a brain area known for its role in emotions, including fear. They also showed less activity in areas of the prefrontal cortex, a part of the brain related to regulating negative emotion (Kim et al, 2013).

Domination systems also create stress by failing to invest in the work of caregiving. This in itself perpetuates cycles of poverty, not only because good care is key to proper development but also because a major reason for the fact that the majority of the world's poor are female is that in domination systems women are expected to do caregiving work either for very low wages in the market or for free in households, with no pensions or other retirement benefits (Eisler, 2007).

Studies also show that mothers who are stressed, whether from their own early experiences or from unsafe relations with a husband or live-in male, are more likely to be abusive and/or neglectful of their children (Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002). In domination environments mothers also get little help from males because caregiving is not considered appropriate for "real men," further contributing to maternal stress, which in turn contributes to their children's stress.

Perhaps most insidious, taking us back to what we discussed earlier, is that ensuring that children "adapt" to domination cultures requires childrearing that relies heavily on fear or force. Having learned to deny the pain and fear of their childhoods, parents can then also treat their

children in unempathic, fear-and-pain-producing ways, perpetuating the stress required to produce the kind of brain neurochemistry needed for the maintenance of domination systems.

Schools in these systems are also often very stressful. For example, not long ago in the West physical punishment was routine in schools, as is still the case today in many world regions. Fear was a major motivator routinely used by teachers, causing children enormous stress (Eisler, 1995). Moreover, children's peer groups in domination systems are also typically stressful, with bullying one of the more visible legacies from earlier more rigid domination times.

I here want to emphasize that as critical as childhood experiences are, brains can change all through life. Indeed, studies show that choosing new behaviors can affect our brain neurochemistry. A striking example of how behaviors change neurochemical states is that when fathers spend time with their children, their levels of testosterone drop. For example, a large study found that those fathers who reported three hours or more of daily childcare had lower testosterone compared with fathers not involved in care (Gettler et al, 2011).

Even more interesting is that fathers in a Tanzanian culture where fathers are involved in parenting had low testosterone, whereas those from a neighboring culture without active fathering did not (Muller, 2009). Also relevant to the hypothesis of bio-culturalism that domination and partnership oriented cultures support different behavioral choices are studies showing that societies where fathers are expected to play active nurturing roles, as they are in more partnership-oriented cultures, tend to be more peaceful and egalitarian with lower levels of stress (Coltrane, 1996 SERT).

Cultural Transformation

As we have seen, it is through their experiences and observations in domination-oriented families that children learn to equate difference – beginning with the difference between male and female – with either dominating or being dominated, a mental template that can then be generalized to differences based

on race, religion, ethnicity, and so on. It is also in these families that children learn that the use of violence to impose one's will on others is acceptable, even moral, a lesson that can later easily be transferred into their political attitudes and behaviors. So we come back to the interaction between families and their cultural environments – and with this, the impact of either partnership or domination oriented cultural environments on how children develop and the kinds of people they become. However, this is not a static, much less immutable, condition. Just as individuals can change, so can cultures.

This too has been a major focus of my research, leading to the formulation of *cultural transformation theory*. Like chaos theory (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984), cultural transformation theory holds that living systems can undergo transformative change during times of disequilibrium. Introduced in my book *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (1987), which draws primarily from Western data, and was later tested by scholars using non-Western data (Min, 1995), cultural transformation theory provides a non-linear view of human cultural evolution.

To radically simplify, cultural transformation theory traces our cultural evolution from prehistory to our time. It holds that most gathering hunting cultures oriented more to the partnership side of the continuum, as also shown by studies of contemporary gathering hunting societies, and that evidence from archeology and myth indicates that this was the primary direction in most cultures well into the early Neolithic or farming age, and in a few places as late as the Bronze Age (Fry, 2014; Gimbutas, 1982; Mellaart, 1967; Platon, 1966; Marinatos, 1993; Hodder, 2004). Then, with the imposition of brutal domination systems during a period of great disequilibrium brought by massive climate changes, mass migrations, and other dislocations, there was a shift in the mainstream of our cultural evolution (Gimbutas, 1982; Mallory, 1989; Mellaart, 1967; de Meo, 1999; Kramer & Maier, 1989). Thereafter traditions of domination became the norm for much of recorded history, despite periodic movement in a partnership direction. In recent centuries, during another period of great disequilibrium brought by the gradual shift

from the agrarian to the industrial and now post-industrial age, the partnership movement has gained momentum, at least in some world regions.

One social movement after another has challenged traditions of domination. The 17th and 18th century European Enlightenment “rights of man” movement challenged the so-called divinely ordained right of kings to rule. The 18th and 19th century feminist movement challenged the also supposedly divinely ordained right of men to rule the women and children in the “castles” of their homes. The 19th and 20th century abolitionist, civil rights, and anti-colonial movements challenged another supposedly divinely ordained right: that of a “superior” race to rule over “inferior” ones. The movement for economic justice challenges traditions of top-down economic rule and the peace movement, and more recently the movement to end traditions of domination and violence against women and children, challenge the use of violence to impose one’s will on others. And today the environmental movement challenges the once hallowed conquest and domination of nature (Eisler, 2007).

However, the progress toward partnership has not been linear. It can best be imaged as an upward spiral countered by enormous resistance and periodic regressions (Eisler, 1993; Eisler, Loye, & Norgaard, 1995). And a major reason for these regressions is that until now the primary focus of progressive movements has been on the so-called public sphere of economic and political relations – the “men's world” from which women and children are excluded in domination systems – while the most foundational human relations — parent-child and woman-man relations in the so-called private sphere — have received far less attention.

In sharp contrast, the most repressive modern regimes — from Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union to Khomeini’s Iran to the Taliban of Afghanistan — have made it a top priority to maintain or reinstate family and gender relations based on domination and submission. The recognition that these relations are fundamental is also why today’s so-called religious fundamentalists – be they Muslim,

Hindu, Jewish, or Christian – focus on returning to a “traditional family values” in which men dominate women and children learn never to question orders, no matter how painful or unjust.

It is also not coincidental that fundamentalist leaders fiercely oppose reproductive freedom for women and are virulently hostile to gays. Male control over women’s sexuality is characteristic of rigid domination systems (Eisler, 2013). And for people for whom the only choices are dominating or being dominated, gay men violate the “God-given order” of a man never taking the subservient role of a woman and a woman never taking the dominant role of a man.

Nor is it coincidental that fundamentalist leaders who would impose top-down theocratic control promulgate parenting guides that instruct parents not to “spoil” their children by responding to their pain, and admonish them to instead cause children pain to teach them the parent’s will is law. So they tell parents they must force eight-month old babies to sit still with their hands on their high chair trays and squelch any fussiness through threats and violence – effectively teaching their children to automatically submit to domination as adults (Gershoff, 2002).

Implications for Research and Our Future

As we have seen, in rigid domination environments where stressful experiences are extreme and/or chronic, neurochemical processes associated with fight-or-flight and dissociation become habitual, even though they aggravate rather than solve people’s problems. For instance, the high cortisol levels in individuals suffering from extreme and/or chronic stress have been associated with impulsive violence, which poses a danger to both the individual and others (Niehoff, 1999). The neurochemical profiles associated with depression and/or use of drugs or alcohol for psychological escape also create rather than solve problems.

Even beyond this, these behaviors are dangerously maladaptive when dealing with complex social challenges such as environmental and economic problems or conflict between groups and nations. They

are especially dangerous in our time, when the “conquest of nature” is devastating our planet and nuclear and biological weapons pose unprecedented dangers to present and future generations.

This is why the shift from domination to partnership is today more urgent than ever. But until we leave behind traditions of domination in our primary gender and parent-child relations, we will lack solid foundations on which more partnership-oriented societies can be built – while domination systems, be they secular or religious, will continue to rebuild themselves.

Fortunately, there is growing recognition of the need to change patterns of domination and violence in family and other intimate relations. The research on child flourishing is an important part of this movement toward the partnership side of the continuum, especially research probing the conditions that support the expression of our human capacities for consciousness, empathy, caring, and creativity. Continuing research on the effects on human development of partnership or domination oriented gender and parent-child relations can also make important contributions in this area.

As Kurt Lewin, the founder of social psychology, said, research can, and must, play a part in building a better society. Not an ideal society or *utopia* (which literally means no place), but what I have called a *pragmatopia* (a possible place), where relations – beginning with our foundational childhood and gender relations – are structured so every child can realize her or his highest potential. Through our research and writing, we can help lay foundations for building this more peaceful and equitable place.

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