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HEALTH MATRIX:
Journal of Law-Medicine

THE CRISIS FOR FAMILIES AND CHILDREN IN AFRICA: CHANGE IN SHARED SOCIAL SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN†

Thomas S. Weisner††

INTRODUCTION

IMAGINE A NEUROLOGICALLY SOUND, healthy newborn. If you could do just one thing to influence the future life course of that infant, what would that one thing be?

Of course, many things are important. Familiar responses to the question include providing adequate medical care, nutrition and shelter, nurturance, affection, touching and holding, verbal stimulation, love, attachment, basic trust and friends for the child. Although all of these things are certainly important, they are not the most important thing one could do. The most

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important thing one could do would be to determine the cultural place where the child will grow up.[1]

Place the child in a town in Eastern Sri Lanka, for example, occupied by all three of its religious and ethnic communities: Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims, or in a village in Western Kenya or Somalia. Situate the child in a rural native Hawaiian community or a suburb of Zagreb, Yugoslavia, or perhaps on a New England farm in 1830.

Once mentioned, of course, few would disagree on the importance of the cultural place in shaping a child's life course and developmental outcomes. The point, though, is that we tend to leap directly to dyadic relationship characteristics or practices which we believe would benefit the *individual* child's maturation, rather than the cultural place as a context within which all such practices and dyadic relationships have meaning.

By "cultural place" I include physical and ecological aspects, resources which provide constraints and opportunities for survival, demographic characteristics and health and mortality threats — as well as beliefs, practices and social arrangements shared by its residents which make living in that place meaningful.

When we are asked this rhetorical question most respondents tend to think only of individual or dyadic stimulation, and individual child outcomes benefiting a healthy, intelligent individual child. Yet this is ultimately not the only outcome of value to a community. Seeing the cultural place as the most important feature in human development drives us toward judgments of value and morality based on community and family resilience as well. A fundamental standard for assessing childrens' development is whether they are learning how to be *resilient* in the cultural place where they are going to live their lives. Resilience is the ability of an individual or social commu-

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1. *See generally* Thomas S. Weisner, *Ecocultural Niches of Middle Childhood: A Cross-Cultural Perspective, in* DEVELOPMENT DURING MIDDLE CHILDHOOD THE YEARS FROM SIX TO TWELVE 335 (W. Andrew Collins ed., 1984) (explaining various cultural factors which influence middle-childhood-aged children); Thomas S. Weisner, *Ethnographic and Ecocultural Perspectives on Sibling Relationships, in* THE EFFECTS OF MENTAL RETARDATION, DISABILITY, AND ILLNESS ON SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS RESEARCH ISSUES AND CHALLENGES 51, 51 (Zolinda Stoneman & Phyllis W. Berman eds., 1993).

nity to successfully adapt to threat.[2] Some stress or threat must be present in order to produce resilience. It can not manifest itself in a risk-free or unchallenging, utterly safe environment. Judgments of child status, therefore, involve assessing familial and individual resilience and adaptive potential measured in a particular cultural place. An important goal of parents, then, is to raise children who are competent and successful in participating in the activities that their cultural place finds important and meaningful. Thus, our judgments of which developmental outcomes are better for children depend on inquiring into their competence in a particular cultural place, as well as more general criteria for the successful and healthy development of individual children.[3]

The topic for discussion is "children in the non-Western world" — an impossibly diverse and large category. Although eighty-eight percent of the children of the world live in non-Western cultural places[4] — and no comprehensive view of the status of children could ignore them — children and families in the non-Western world present us with an astonishing range and variety of differences. This article will discuss primarily children in sub-Saharan African settings, mainly because it is the region with which I am most familiar. Thus, I am not discussing the non-Western world generally, but rather, only certain urban and rural cultural places in Africa.

Focusing on children in the non-Western world makes characteristics of the North American cultural place more visible and vivid to us by their contrasting beliefs and practices. However, non-Western cultural places are certainly not utterly different and incommensurate from North America, either. To the contrary, some characteristics of the lives of children in non-Western countries are found in the West as well, because of universal features of human development and limits on the range of cultural adaptations. Nearly all cultural places around the world participate, to some degree, in a common world econ-

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2. Barbara K. Keogh & Thomas S. Weisner, *An Ecocultural Perspective on Risk and Protective Factors in Children's Development: Implications for Learning Disabilities*, LEARNING DISABILITIES RES. & PRAC., Winter 1993, at 3, 4 (explaining various methods for studying the development of children's learning and social abilities).

3. *Id.*

4. UNICEF, THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S CHILDREN 1991, at 11 (1991) [hereinafter UNICEF 1991].

omy. Elites, middle class and impoverished families and communities are to be found everywhere in the world and have common characteristics as well.

Furthermore, when I talk about a "Western" counterview, I am referring primarily to the later twentieth century, and focusing on Euro-American middle-class American settings. The "Western" model is heterogeneous, as is the non-Western model. Indeed, as I describe some characteristics of other cultural places — especially their more social distributed system of nurturance and support for children compared to our own — they will often echo similar patterns in United States social history. They will reflect similar patterns in many ethnic immigrant communities in the United States today and among African-Americans and Latinos. These similarities are not accidental or mere minor variations in Western family practices. Some of these child care practices diffused to the West from other cultural places and still influence family life in the contemporary West, even though they are not culturally elaborated and valorized. Many of these practices persist because minorities face some of the same ecological and political pressures which produce such social practices elsewhere in the world. The value of making comparisons across cultural places, therefore, is that they illuminate our own cultural place, while assisting in our understanding of other places.

THE PROBLEM: CHANGE AND CRISIS IN FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

The African Crisis of Change

There is a growing crisis in many nations and cultural places in the non-Western world, a crisis fueled by population pressure, land and food scarcity, wars, political malfeasance, world economic conditions and public health concerns, including the Human Immunodeficiency Virus ("HIV").[5]

It is not necessary to present detailed material about this crisis. Other articles in this collection address these conditions. This crisis is not only one of child survival, fertility rates and resource control in times of scarcity — although these *are* very

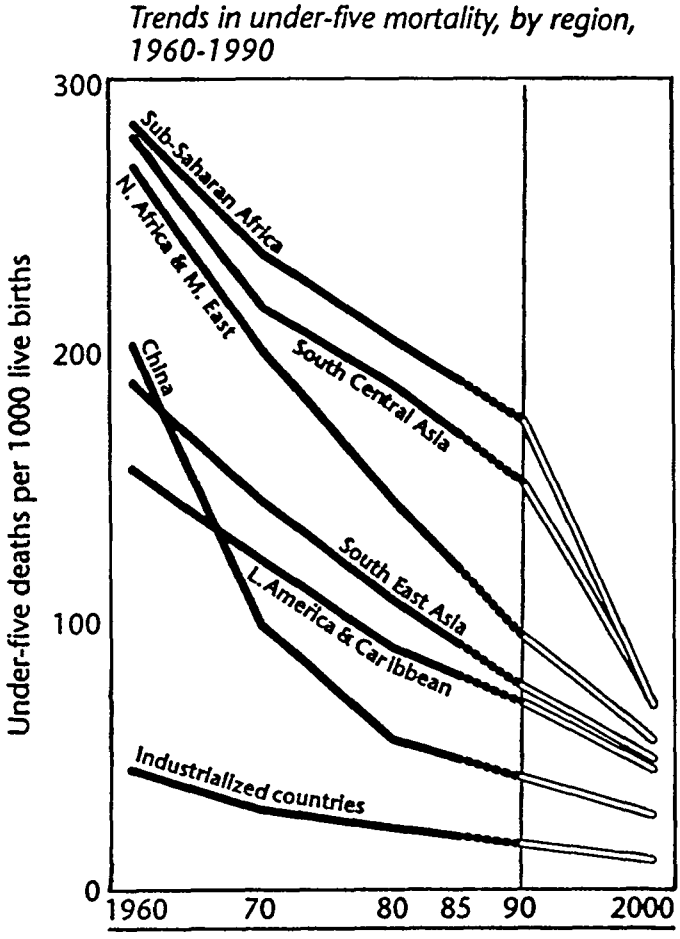
5. TONY BARNETT & PIERS BLAIKIE. AIDS IN AFRICA ITS PRESENT AND FUTURE IMPACT 1, 152 (1992).

real issues. It is also a crisis in how the cultures of the region redefine the meaning and moral significance of inter-generational relationships and social support for parents and children.

Although only suggestive of the many issues which are a part of this crisis, Figures 1 through 3, drawn from recent UNICEF reports,[6] illustrate some of the conditions facing African children today, and other children from the developing world.

6. UNICEF, THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S CHILDREN 1992, at 7, 53 (1992) [hereinafter UNICEF 1992]; UNICEF 1991, *supra* note 4, at 11.

FIGURE 1: Child Deaths[7]



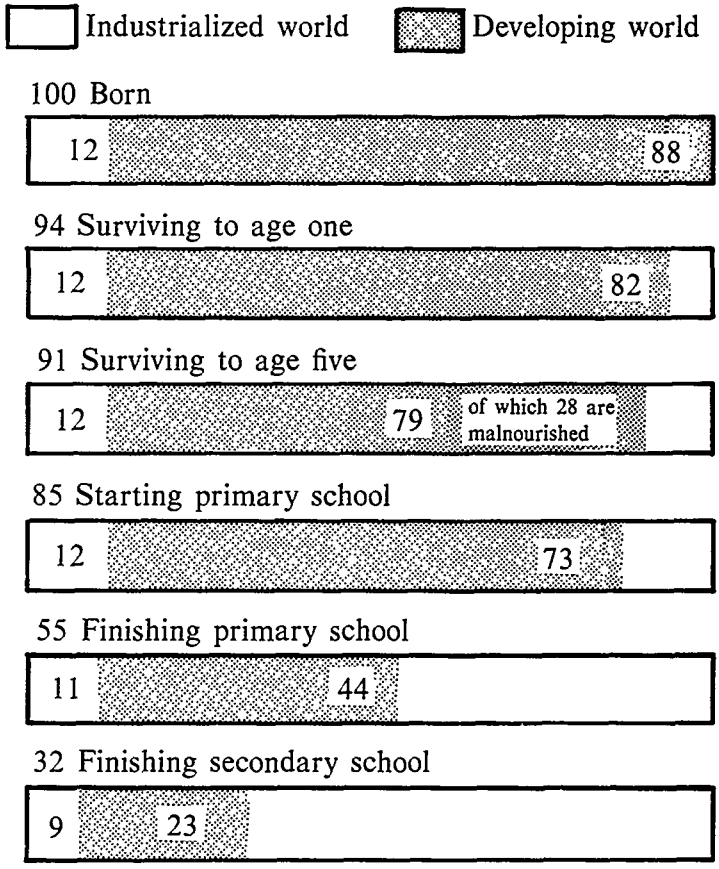
7. Source: UNICEF 1992, *supra* note 6, at 7 fig. 1.

Figure 1, for instance, shows that Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest under-five child mortality rate[8] of any region — about two hundred per one thousand live births in 1990 — and will require the steepest rate of decline to achieve the UNICEF goals for reduced mortality by the year 2000.[9]

8. Deaths before age five per 1000 live births.
9. UNICEF 1992, *supra* note 6, at 7.

FIGURE 2: The Children of the 1990s[10]

142 million children have been born into the world during 1990. The chart below presents this huge number as just 100 children and gives a schematic overview of what will happen to them in the decade ahead.



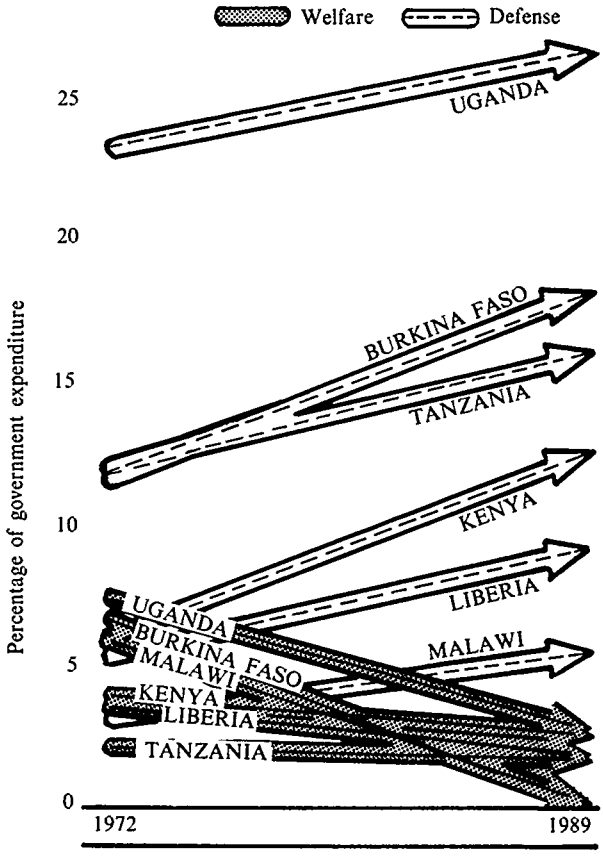
10. Source: UNICEF 1991, *supra* note 4, at 35 fig. 10.

Figure 2 shows the substantially poorer chances of children born in the developing world for survival, and of finishing school.[11] Seventy-five percent (nine out of twelve) of children born in the developed world will finish high school, for instance, compared to twenty-six percent (twenty-three out of eighty-eight demonstrated by Figure 2) of children born in the developing world.[12] Ninety-two percent (eleven out of twelve) of children in the developed world will finish primary school compared to only half (forty-four out of eighty-eight) from the developing world.[13]

11. *Id.* at 11.
12. *Id.*
13. *Id.*

FIGURE 3: War Versus Welfare[14]

Percentage of central government expenditures allocated to defence, and social welfare, selected African countries, 1972 and 1989



Welfare expenditures include housing and slum clearance; community development; payments to the sick, the disabled, the elderly and the unemployed; family, maternity and child allowances; welfare services for the elderly, the disabled, and children; pollution abatement, water supply and sanitation.

14. Source: UNICEF 1992, *supra* note 6, at 53 fig. 14.

Nor is public investment in Africa focused on these kinds of problems. Figure 3 shows a military expenditure rate rising upward for six African nations between 1972 and 1989, while there was a downwards trend for social welfare expenditures.[15] This government investment accompanies a net transfer of assets from poorer, developing countries to richer countries since 1983.[16]

These kinds of health, economic and political problems are not only national and international statistical matters, they directly affect childrens' and families' experiences. Figure 4 is taken from a study of children growing up in a squatters' shanty town in Capetown, South Africa.[17] During the time of this study there were police raids and internal violence facing these children and their families.[18] One child drew a picture of her small home (top portion of drawing), and a scene depicting the chaos of a police raid, (bottom portion).[19] The child's home, with its circle of order and with the family eating at the table in the center, is gone from the bottom picture.[20]

15. *Id.* at 53.
16. *Id.* at 49.
17. PAMELA REYNOLDS. CHILDHOOD IN CROSSROADS COGNITION AND SOCIETY IN SOUTH AFRICA 113 (1989).
18. *Id.* at 112-13.
19. *Id.* at 112.
20. *Id.* at 113.

FIGURE 4: Tozama's Scenes of a House and of a Police Raid in Crossroads[21]

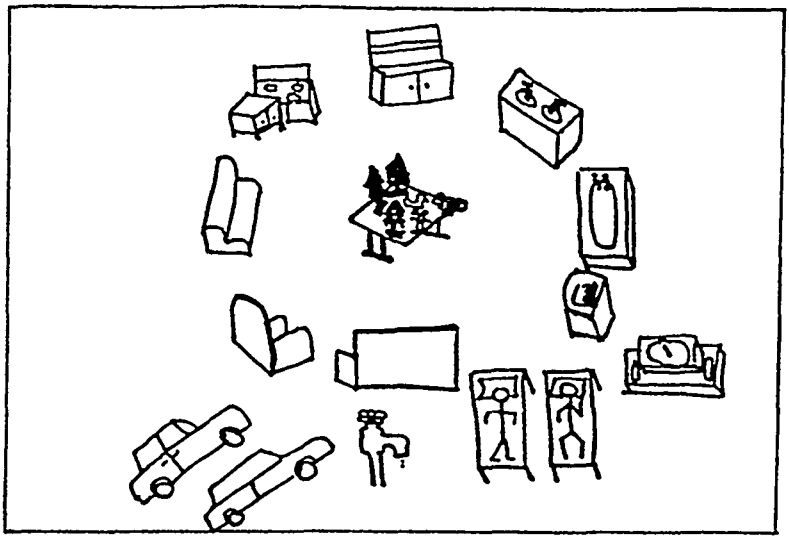


Figure 4-4a: Tozama's Scene of a House in Crossroads

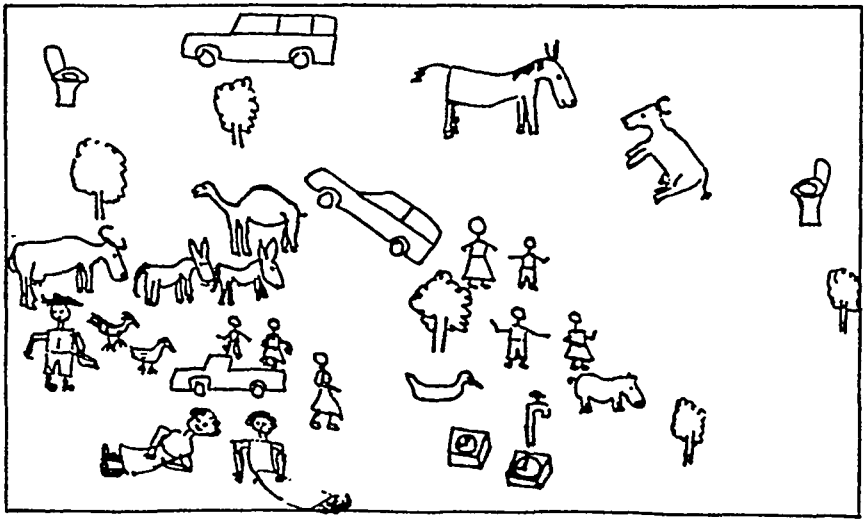


Figure 4-4b: Tozama's Scene of a Police Raid in Crossroads

21. Source: *id.* at 113 figs. 4-4a, 4-4b. Reprinted with permission from W.B. Eardmans, Grand Rapids, MI.

THE CULTURAL AND MORAL TRANSITION

The above-mentioned statistics suggest that communities all over the developing world are experiencing a cultural and moral transition, accompanying the economic, political and other crises at the national and international level. Cultures are moving away from a period in which participation in socially distributed systems of support, nurturance and social control in large families provided the core for a sense of security and culturally meaningful community protection. The current world is uncertain for children and parents alike. The concerns over family change are very salient in many non-Western communities, because sociality and socially distributed nurturance within the family unit are at the heart of important cultural values. Increasingly, families and children are faced with a world where the family and community are not the ultimate protection against threat, but among the threats to be faced along with population pressures, land shortage, wealth and education inequities between or within families or other reasons.

For instance, elderly people may worry that they no longer can expect to receive assistance and security from their children; instead, they are being put to work managing farms and caring for grandchildren. Women are having more children outside of the patrilineal descent system or other traditional kinship system.[22] Brothers might be less likely to assist each other in marriage arrangements, or monitor as carefully the circumstances of their sisters who have married into other families.[23] Abuse and neglect of children and the elderly is reportedly growing in many areas, at least among some subgroups.[24]

These families are changing from a world in which poverty and threats to individual survival came more often to the socially isolated, and less often to participants in family and community life. In previous generations, the poor and exploited were often socially isolated and abandoned.[25] Family membership, and the access to labor and security which family membership provided, was at least a partial guarantee of social sup-

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22. PHILIP L KILBRIDE & JANET C KILBRIDE, CHANGING FAMILY LIFE IN EAST AFRICA 173, 191 (1990).

23. *Id.* at 196.

24. *Id.* at 229, 232.

25. JOHN ILIFFE, THE AFRICAN POOR 4-5 (1987) (discussing the history of the structural poor in Europe and Africa).

port, although certainly not the guarantee of an easy or safe and secure life. But today, participation in rapidly changing family situations and in communities that are overpopulated or lacking land for the first time has meant that even those in families are now at greater risk.[26]

Large families implied security from predators, both human and nonhuman, and sufficient labor to obtain food, raise livestock and perhaps even expand one's territory. Not to have access to labor and sociality was what led to poverty and risk. Lack of social participation in one's community and family was considered morally inappropriate and socially threatening. Since labor came from family and kin, loss of kin led to poverty. In a land-rich African ecology, loss of labor and the social ties necessary to obtain labor was both morally inappropriate and economically hazardous.[27]

These conditions lead to a cultural emphasis on sociality and local support. From an African cultural point of view, for instance, a feeling of being alone is often identified as one of the most feared and threatening experiences one can have.[28] The word for a poor person in Kiswahili, "*Maskini*," can mean someone without a family or home.[29] Martha Wenger has described the "companionship group" among the Giriama of Kenya, a group of peers and kin from one's home community.[30] When Giriama migrate or are separated from this group for long periods, they report never being truly comfortable and always feeling somewhat lonely. Although the system for providing social support for families and children in non-Western cultures such as those in sub-Saharan Africa is changing, such support is still very much in evidence.[31]

In the remainder of this article, I outline how children provide support and nurturance for others and how children are

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26. *Id.* (discussing the poverty in India closely associated with large families).

27. *Id.* at 143.

28. Thomas S. Weisner, *Cultural and Universal Aspects of Social Support for Children: Evidence from the Abaluyia of Kenya, in* CHILDREN'S SOCIAL NETWORKS AND SOCIAL SUPPORTS 70, 87 (Deborah Belle ed., 1989).

29. FORMER INTER-TERRITORIAL LANGUAGE COMM. OF E AFR., A STANDARD ENGLISH-SWAHILI DICTIONARY 267 (1st ed. 1939).

30. Martha Wenger, *Work, Play, and Social Relationships Among Children in a Giriama Community, in* CHILDREN'S SOCIAL NETWORKS AND SOCIAL SUPPORTS 91, 103 (Deborah Belle ed., 1989).

31. Weisner, *supra* note 28, at 87-88.

themselves cared for, in this traditional shared management or "socially distributed" system of nurturance and support. Such a system has many ramifications for understanding the cultural status of children in the non-Western world and for understanding children's intelligence, health or well-being, as well as their mortality rates or risks of illness and injury.

Social support: socially distributed and shared management nurturance of children

Robert Serpell, in a recent review of the contributions of African research for Western psychology, lists three contributions to what he calls an "Afrocentric" psychology: 1) socially distributed nurturance, or prosocial, shared management caretaking arrangements; 2) the symbolic celebration of developmental transitions; and 3) apprenticeship learning, in which children learn through direct participation in activities, rather than indirectly through didactic instruction.[32]

What I mean by nurturance and social support includes many universal features recognizable in all cultural places around the world. Nurturance involves both recognizing and then meeting the needs of others. Nurturance and support include affection, physical comfort, assistance, providing food and other resources, protection against harm and aggression, and shared problem-solving.[33]

Support in socially distributed nurturance systems: how are children nurtured?

"Socially distributed" support, or systems of *shared management* of children and the family domain, includes, among others, these features:

1) Siblings and children provide as much or more caretaking and nurturance as do adults. Many family and community members do this. Children actively seek support from other children, not only from their mother or adults;

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32. *See* Robert Serpell, *African Dimensions of Child Care and Nurturance, in* CHILD CARE IN CONTEXT. CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES 463-74 (Michael E. Lamb et al. eds., 1992).

33. *See* Weisner, *supra* note 28, at 73-76 (discussing universal support functions as well as those found in certain localities); *see also* Thomas S. Weisner, *Socialization For Parenthood in Sibling Caretaking Societies, in* PARENTING ACROSS THE LIFE SPAN. BIOSOCIAL DIMENSIONS (Jane B. Lancaster et al. eds., 1987).

2) Domestic and subsistence work often occurs along with support for children;

3) Children's ability to provide assistance and support is an important part of judgments of intelligence and competence;

4) Aggression, teasing and dominance over children co-occur with social support. These go together in children's experience and come from the same people. Support is often delayed and indirect, part of chains of assistance, rather than immediate, part of discrete dyadic relations;

5) Social support is not typically verbally mediated, with overt questioning and expressions of empathy and concern by caretakers; and

6) Food is used as an important token to signify support and nurturance and to soothe others.[34]

a. Siblings and children provide as much or more caretaking and nurturance as do adults

In studies of caretaking in sub-Saharan Africa, Polynesia and elsewhere, girls often were as likely to provide nurturance and support for other children as were mothers.[35] Non-Western cross-cultural samples show that older children are most often the caretakers of younger children after infancy, followed by other adult women second and finally mothers third.[36]

According to my research, mothers were the *exclusive* providers of social support in only twenty-three percent of all supportive acts among the Abaluyia of Western Kenya, for instance.[37] The remainder of the support came from other children, or occurred in the absence of the mother.[38] Figure 5 summarizes a series of studies of child care done with the Abaluyia of Western Kenya from 1969 through 1978.[39] The Abaluyia are a patrilineal, patrilocal, Bantu-language ethnic community

34. Weisner, *supra* note 28, at 79-84.

35. Thomas S. Weisner & Ronald Gallimore, *My Brother's Keeper: Child and Sibling Caretaking*, 18 CURRENT ANTHROPOLOGY 169, 175, 178 (1977).

36. *Id.* at 174-75 (discussing results of six-culture survey).

37. Weisner, *supra* note 28, at 83.

38. *Id.*

39. Thomas S. Weisner, *Socialization For Parenthood in Sibling Caretaking Societies*, *in* PARENTING ACROSS THE LIFE SPAN: BIOSOCIAL DIMENSIONS 237, 254 (Jane B. Lancaster et al. eds., 1987).

of some three million.[40] They are horticultural; they raise livestock and participate extensively in the rural and urban wage economy of Kenya.[41] Boys and girls in a rural village Abaluyia community were observed for many hours during their normal everyday routines and activities.[42] Urban families, living in a single housing area in Nairobi and from this same rural community, were also observed.[43] Hundreds of instances of nurturance were recorded in fieldnotes and observation protocols, and these results were grouped according to the nature of the dyad[44] and whether it was in the rural or urban sample.[45] Adding the child-to-child instances of nurturance and support shows that children are doing as much or more acts of nurturant care than mothers, and that girls do more than boys (although boys are involved as well); furthermore, this overall pattern persists even in Nairobi, away from the rural village context.[46] Sibling care also provides diffused emotional and affective support for children. There is evidence of attachment between children and siblings as well as mothers.[47]

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40. Weisner, *supra* note 28, at 77.

41. Weisner, *supra* note 39, at 154-55.

42. *See* Weisner, *supra* note 39, at 157-58 (in-home observation of children from 48 sample families within the rural-urban network were observed in their home setting to see what aspects of environment lead to rural-urban differences in children's social behavior).

43. Marc H. Ross & Thomas S. Weisner, *The Rural-Urban Migrant Network in Kenya: Some General Implications*, 4 AMERICAN ETHNOLOGIST 359, 360-61 (1977).

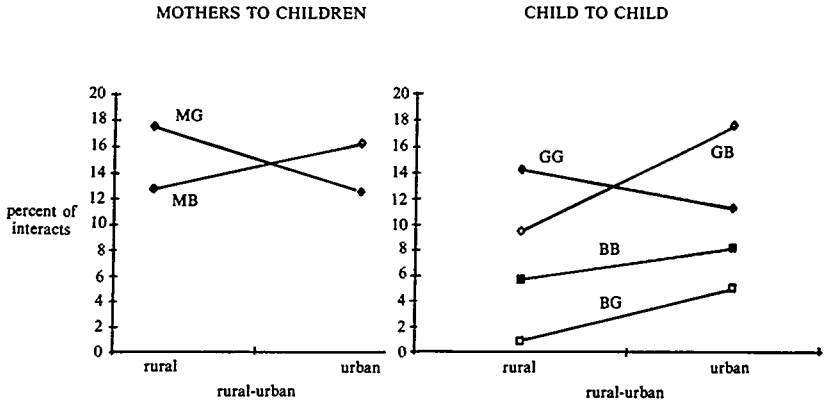
44. Thomas S. Weisner, *Urban-Rural Differences in Sociable and Disruptive Behavior of Kenya Children*, 18 ETHNOLOGY 153, 158 (1979).

45. *Id.* at 157.

46. *See* Weisner, *supra* note 44, at 170; Sara Harkness & Charles M. Super, *Shared Child Care in East Africa: Sociocultrual Origins and Developmental Consequences, in* CHILD CARE IN CONTEXT: CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES 441, 448 (Michael E. Lamb et al. eds., 1992).

47. Guy Reed & P. Herbert Leiderman, *Age-Related Changes in Attachment Behavior in Polymatrically Reared Infants: The Kenyan Gussii, in* CULTURE AND EARLY INTERACTIONS 215-234 (Tiffany M. Field et al. eds., 1981) (analyzing infant attachment to mothers, child caregivers and unfamiliar figures).

FIGURE 5: Nurturant Interactions (Direct Care And Emotional Support), By DYAD And Rural-Urban Residence[48]



CODES FOR DYADIC INTERACTION

GG = Girls to Girls
GB = Girls to Boys
BB = Boys to Boys
BG = Boys to Girls
MG = Mothers to Girls
MB = Mothers to Boys

48. Source: Weisner, *supra* note 33, at 254 fig. 9.1.

Further, in the system of social support I have outlined, women operate as "placers" of their children into everyday settings in which they are expected to care for others along with doing other work. Mothering does not necessarily consist exclusively of direct interaction with their children. Women in the Kisa data vehemently emphasize that multiple caretaking shows that they, the mothers, are performing good mothering[49] The two kinds of child care — maternal care and supervision of the caretaking system on the one hand, and child-to-child caretaking, on the other — go together.[50]

b. Work and social support

"My mother's cloth can't ever be folded [that is, one keeps folding it, but it never gets folded]. Which means: Labour, like the skies, is never ending."[51]

This riddle of the Tonga of Zimbabwe and Zambia suggests the hard, endless and grueling nature of domestic work in societies with socially distributed nurturance, and also the close emotional connections between work and family/maternal ties. The riddle accurately reflects the emotional and familial, as well as physical and timetaking elements of work in most sub-Saharan African societies for children and women.[52]

The system also provides early responsibility and nurturance training for children — for girls more than for boys.[53] Work and support for children constantly co-occur.[54] In fact, one culturally recognized and understood way of providing nurturance consists of assigning work to children (including "mock work").[55] Many other nurturant and supportive interactions occurred in the *context* of work assignments, although the interactions themselves were not work tasks. Assistance and nur-

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49. Weisner, *supra* note 39.

50. BEATRICE B. WHITING & CAROLYN P. EDWARDS, CHILDREN OF DIFFERENT WORLDS THE FORMATION OF SOCIAL BEHAVIOR 86 (1988).

51. PAMELA REYNOLDS, DANCE, CIVET CAT: CHILD LABOUR IN THE ZAMBEZI VALLEY 41 (1991).

52. Note that I am describing African child labor in the family and domestic domains and in the community, *not* paid urban wage labor or exploitative systems of child labor which are also to be found throughout the world.

53. BEATRICE B. WHITING & JOHN W. M. WHITING, CHILDREN OF SIX CULTURES: A PSYCHO-CULTURAL ANALYSIS 150-51 (1975).

54. Weisner, *supra* note 28, at 79.

55. *Id.* at 80.

turance happens in the context of children's work activities. Giving a child work to do can mean providing support to that child. Assigning a task, or asking for help from, rather than offering help to, a child can signal not only task pressure or obligation, but also integration into the family network. That is not to say that children do not have to work hard, that they do not dislike work, or that they cannot be exploited in work. But work is a *morally* and emotionally important matter.

Workloads are heavy and skewed towards females who take on heavier domestic workloads. One study observed family work among the Tonga in Zimbabwe and reported that women were observed doing work-related activities ninety-two percent of the time, and girls ninety-eight percent of the time.[56] Boys under ten worked as hard as girls (ninety-seven percent), but boys ten to sixteen worked only forty-one percent of the time.[57] Child care clearly was the predominant work activity for girls and was done in the context of this heavy overall domestic workload.[58] Tonga women spent twenty percent of their work time caring for children; girls spent thirty-three percent and boys four percent. Girls under ten spent fifty-six percent of their time caring for infants and young children.[59] These data include direct involvement in attending to a child — not merely being around children while doing other tasks.[60]

Gender differences in workloads and types of work are often marked in socially distributed nurturance systems. Girls simply have a more diverse workload; they have more different people benefiting from, and working interdependently with them, in doing those tasks. Gender role messages play an important part in socially distributed nurturance systems.

Girls' labor, as well as women's, has declined less than boys' and men's due to children's participation in schooling. This parallels data from the Western world. Where both men and women work in a family, men assist somewhat more, but

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56. REYNOLDS, *supra* note 51, at 77-80.
57. *Id.*
58. *Id.* at 80-81.
59. *Id.* at 80.
60. *Id.*

women still do the bulk of domestic tasks in addition to their non-domestic work or schooling.[61]

Children are active agents in the process of carrying out work roles, not merely passive toilers. Many ethnographers describe how children will perform traditional domestic roles according to their age and gender when their grandparents are around, but revert to other strategies when their parents are present or when they are alone with one another.[62]

c. Children are valued for their skills

Children's ability to provide nurturance and work is valued. This includes judgments of intellectual competence. Moral significance is attached to such judgments.

The Chewa in Zambia define intelligence as ". . .*to be able to be sent out;*. . . . *one who is willing to go.*"[63]

Western students of intelligence, including educators and parents, appear to be dissatisfied with an exclusively cognitive/literacy based notion of the term, and are searching for better ways of understanding intelligence.[64] Ironically, many non-Western societies have used such broader-based ways of understanding and assessing competence and intelligence for a long time. The unremitting attention to education and literacy as measures of cognitive and intellectual development in studies of children misses the wider set of cultural meanings of intelligence and competence.

The meaning of intelligence and competence is broader in societies with socially distributed systems of nurturance and support.[65] In such systems, both intelligence as a mental ability and as competence in social context are tied to the abilities of children to provide social support and nurturance. Being

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61. Thomas S. Weisner, Helen Garnier, & James Loucky, *Domestic Tasks, Gender Egalitarian Values and Children's Gender Typing in Conventional and Nonconventional Families, in* 30 SEX ROLES 20 (1994).

62. REYNOLDS, *supra* note 51, at 80-82.

63. Robert Serpell, *Measures of Perception, Skills, and Intelligence: The Growth of a New Perspective on Children in a Third World Country*, 6 REV OF CHILD DEV RES 392, 422-27 (1982) (discussing the strategies of research and the ways of measuring intelligence).

64. *See* Charles M. Super, *Cultural Variation in the Meaning and Uses of Children's "Intelligence", in* EXPISCATIONS IN CROSS-CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY 199 (Jan B. Deregowski et al. eds., 1983); Serpell, *supra* note 56.

65. *See* Serpell, *supra* note 63, at 427.

"smart," yet *not* being socially competent, is not even an understandable category. Sending children on errands which require knowledge of kinship terms and rules for interaction marks their developmental maturity, and doing this task well is a sign of intelligence. One study points to the many variations within the diverse meanings of intelligence in many African societies, including: 1) cognitive cleverness; 2) cooperativeness and 3) social responsibility.[66]

Abaluyia mothers in Western Kenya use evidence that a child has the ability to give and receive social support and to assist others as markers of a child's more general intellectual developmental level, much as an American parent might use literacy skills such as knowing the alphabet, numbers or verbal facility to show how grown up or precocious his or her child is. African mothers proudly include helpfulness and task-competence as evidence that their children are maturing successfully.[67]

Literacy, urban residence and formal schooling are changing this picture, of course. Children are watched closely for success in school grades and national examinations and are encouraged, where possible, to continue schooling if they excel. Yet, other skills are still valued in both rural and urban contexts, and change may sometimes have altered the form of or the way in which cognitive skills are displayed more than they have changed the cultural understandings of varying cognitive capacities.[68]

d. Dominance, teasing and aggression

Dominance, teasing and aggression occur along with social support and nurturance; the same individuals and family unit that provides one provides the other.

All socialization systems have costs. The same young people who nurture and support children also will threaten, tease, dominate, exploit, harass and take from their younger, more dependent charges. Socially distributed nurturance exemplifies the notion that relationships of care also are relationships of

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66. *Id.* at 422-31.

67. Weisner, *supra* note 28, at 260-61.

68. Thomas S. Weisner, *Urban Rural Differences in African Children's Performance on Cognitive and Memory Tasks*, ETHOS, Summer 1976, at 245-46.

power and authority and dominance. Children learn this lesson early.

Support often is delayed and indirect and occurs in chains or networks. Thus, an older sister helps a younger child and then is helped in turn by a still older sister or aunt or cousin. Dyadic, one-to-one relationships are complemented by these more larger chains of assistance.

Children participate in what Margaret Mead describes as pivot roles.[69] Children are simultaneously asked to care for another child (an eight-year-old girl responsible for her three-year-old sister, for instance), while also being cared for by a still older child (her twelve-year-old cousin, who for instance, is living at her family's home helping the girl's mother). Children thus learn through "enterprise-engaged" activities and roles in which they are able to gain increasing levels of competence through actual practice and experience.[70]

This is a political as well as a familial and emotional lesson. There is an often noted tendency among many African groups to envy others, to be jealous and suspicious of others and to ask for help and assistance even when refusal is a virtual certainty. When assistance is not forthcoming, there is then a tendency to blame the non-giver.[71] Of course, such responses are not universal in African communities and among individual Africans. Nonetheless, there is a culturally elaborated and sanctioned set of beliefs and practices common in many African communities sustaining these responses. Socially distributed support may be among the conditions encouraging this pattern. The pattern may, in part, originate in this repeated socialization experience of children in various kinds of socially distributed, emotionally diffused system of support. This pattern of socialization may exacerbate the already serious problems in African nation-states brought on by Western neo-colonialism and indigenous political malfeasance.

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69. MARGARET MEAD, COMING OF AGE IN SAMOA 39-58 (1939).

70. Thomas S. Weisner et al., *Unpackaging Cultural Effects on Classroom Learning: Native Hawaiian Peer Assistance and Child-Generated Activity*, 19 ANTHROPOLOGY & EDUCATION QUARTERLY 326, 330 (1988).

71. *See* Robert A. LeVine, *Patterns of Personality in Africa*, ETHOS, Summer 1973, at 123-152.

5. Much social support is not verbally mediated with overt questioning and expressions of empathy and concern

Support and assistance in Euro-American settings are usually accompanied by overt verbally expressed empathy and affection for the person assisted, and by gratitude or some kind of acknowledgment on the part of the person assisting.[72] The provision of comfort and warmth for Western children is an expectable part of help and assistance. Help is usually accompanied by efforts by parents, or others, to verbally frame the problem with the child, along with offering support: "What is the matter?"; "Oh, are you feeling scared?"; "Why are you feeling this way?"; "I'm sorry. . ."; "Thanks very much." In the Western model, these *negotiations* over the nature of the problem, and inquiries regarding the internal state and feelings of the person needing support, should include the person being assisted. The mutual questions regarding a problem and what might be needed to assist a child are themselves a kind of giving and receipt of sensitive and appropriate support.

The "negotiation" often is between putatively co-equal interlocutors, even though one member of the dyad may be an adult and the other a child. The discourse ideally "pretends" to create equality between the helper and the helped. The cultural and moral message is that it is a mutually beneficial, verbally agreed to, positive-valence interaction. Social support is similarly seen as ideally balanced and facilitative for all concerned. Although ulterior motives and exploitative forms of "support," of course, are recognized, they are not "true" instances of real support in the ideal Western cultural model.

Most assistance and support of Abaluyian children, as with many other African communities, does not have this verbally negotiated and framed, solicitously affectionate character.[73] For instance, in 48.5 hours of systematic behavior observations among Abaluyian families, there were no episodes of discourse between parents and children in which children were presumptive coequal interlocutors to adults or in which empathic questioning occurred in the context of supportive acts involving children.[74] Rather, social support for these children

72. Weisner, *supra* note 28, at 87.
73. *Id.*
74. *Id.*

was more sociocentric, requiring the children to seek and offer assistance in the context of a large, hierarchical network of siblings and adults who are performing joint tasks.[75] Negotiations between parent or older sibling and child, regarding the nature of the problems, what characterizes the child's internal state and feelings and why the problem happened, are not common. Co-equally framed discourse, in which adults establish a shared, joint discussion with children, is infrequent at best.

6. Food is a constant concern and a medium by which adults and children soothe one another

[The question — What am I?] "I lie flat facing the sky and my children suck my breasts." [The answer — I am food on a family table ready to eat.][76]

The Baganda, like many African societies, like to play with riddles and images. This one reflects, in addition to fun with the riddle game itself, a very deep emotional feeling about food, commensality, nurturance and family. Socially distributed nurturance is mediated by food, and concerns and fears about food are often involved in caretaking activities such as soothing children and in the tasks which go on around caretaking.

When Abaluyia parents were asked to describe the most important social problems in their community, two-thirds mentioned famine, insufficient food supplies or lack of security of their food supply as their number one concern.[77] Nineteen percent of the supportive or nurturant exchanges I recorded among the Abaluyia directly involved the exchange of food.[78] Many exchanges involving nurturance or support had cooking or subsistence-related tasks that involve food (such as imaginary cooking, children playing with food or work being done to prepare food) going on in the background.[79] The high percentage of instances in which food was used to comfort children may well be related to its perceived scarcity and uncertainty

75. *Id.* at 80-81.
76. KILBRIDE & KILBRIDE, *supra* note 22, at 90.
77. Weisner, *supra* note 28, at 83-84.
78. *Id.* at 83.
79. *Id.* at 83-84.

about future availability. This is a long-standing concern in many parts of Africa.[80]

The cultural place which provides the context for socially distributed support

Socially distributed support in a shared-management, family caretaking system occurs in certain kinds of ecological, demographic and cultural circumstances — an ecocultural context or developmental niche which encourages shared child care.[81] Shared child care is part of a wider "culture complex," a set of features which cohere together, mutually reinforce each other and are found together throughout a wide region. In Africa and elsewhere, this "culture complex" usually includes the following features:

- Relatively high total fertility rates, often between five and eight surviving children per woman, with accompanying annual population/growth rates of three to four percent. This allows many children, close in age and of both genders, to participate in sibling caretaking.[82]
- Declining child and adult mortality, in Figure 1 above.
- Relatively high family mobility, with families often living in more than one household, exploiting more than one resource (e.g., farming, wage labor, livestock, trade) and, therefore, sharing children between families and locales at different times of the year.[83]
- High variability in both fertility[84] and in household membership.[85] Within a community with high-average fertility, there will be barren women without children, women

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80. Sara Harkness & Charles M. Super, *Shared Child Care in East Africa: Sociocultural Origins and Developmental Consequences, in* CHILD CARE IN CONTEXT CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES 441, 446-47 (Michael E. Lamb et al. eds., 1992).

81. *Id.* at 455-58.

82. *See* Thomas S. Weisner, *Cultural Adaptions and the 5-7 Transition: Caretaking and Socially Distributed Support, in* REASON AND RESPONSIBILITY THE PASSAGE THROUGH CHILDHOOD 2, 9 (Arnold Sameroff and Marshall Haith eds., forthcoming 1994).

83. Marc H. Ross & Thomas S. Weisner, *The Rural-Urban Migrant Network in Kenya: Some General Implications*, 4 AMERICAN ETHNOLOGIST 359, 364-65 (1977).

84. *See* Barry Hewlett, *Demography and Childcare in Preindustrial Societies*, J ANTHROPOLOGICAL RES, Spring 1991, at 1, 2 (discussing fertility rates for various types of nonindustrial cultures).

85. GAVIN KITCHING. CLASS AND ECONOMIC CHANGE IN KENYA THE MAKING OF AN AFRICAN PETITE BOURGEOISIE 1905-1970 90, 91, 94 (1983).

having their first child, women who have completed childbearing and are assisting younger sisters just starting and so forth. Large sibling groups span fifteen or more years. This means that children and adults move between households to better balance household composition for caretaking and other needs, with fosterage and lending of children a common practice.

- A heavy maternal workload both in the domestic domain and other subsistence activities. This can lead to mothers relying heavily on a network of caretakers for their children.[86]
- A strong gender and age division of labor, which typically means that older boys and men are not heavily involved in domestic tasks or child care, and that younger boys and girls do women's tasks, while older boys begin doing men's tasks which girls rarely do.[87]
- Cultural beliefs and practices emphasizing the importance of children investing their time and work in the family economy or "estate," as a complement to the investment by parents in the future value of the child.[88] The culture complex also includes a strong cultural belief in the moral importance placed on family social support, emphasizes hierarchy and deference in family authority and management and presumes inequality between parents and children.
- Although formal education and schooling, urban migration, smaller family sizes and modern wage employment do modify beliefs and practices regarding sibling caretaking and socially distributed support, none of these features eliminates the practices.

CONCLUSION

Like all cultural strategies for socializing children, shared family nurturance and support has psychological and social costs as well as benefits for children and parents. These are

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86. WHITING & EDWARDS, *supra* note 50, at 82.

87. Candice Bradley, *Women's Power, Children's Labor*, 27 CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH 70, 70, 80 (1993).

88. Robert F. Gray, *Introduction* to THE FAMILY ESTATE IN AFRICA STUDIES IN THE ROLE OF PROPERTY IN FAMILY STRUCTURE AND LINEAGE CONTINUITY 4-7 (Robert F. Gray & P.H. Gulliver eds., 1964).

costs from the point of view of a Western or Euro-American observer, not necessarily from the point of view of participants in shared caretaking systems. I have mentioned some costs earlier: the absence of an open, empathic, verbal discussion of a child's concerns and feelings; the heavy workloads and hierarchical, patriarchal family system allocating work; the gender segregation of children and adults; the relatively little attention given to providing a "special" time for children, where they can play and delay assuming "adult" work and obligation.

And there are many benefits which we have also considered including the sense of sociality and belonging; the training in responsibility and social sensitivity children receive; the social protection which such networks of mutual obligation can provide; the ability of parents to exploit many sources of income and the rich and complex understanding of intelligence and competence in children promoted by their apprenticeship learning.

Under current conditions of rapid change, resource scarcity, continuing relatively high fertility, declining Western investment, indigenous political conflict, growing formal education and literacy and other sources of change, it would be a cause of concern if adaptive strategies for child care other than socially distributed nurturance were *not* being actively tested by many families and communities in the developing world. Certainly many new forms of care, and modifications of the ideal typical patterns I have outlined, are widely found. However, it would be of even greater concern if the tradition of socially distributed family nurturance were to be lost as an important cultural model, to be replaced in the developing world by the socially isolated conjugal family or single-parent household, with all the many known costs accompanying these systems.

Elements of socially distributed caretaking would benefit many families and communities in the U.S. Indeed, such features are already present among African-American and Hispanic families, for instance, as well as in many Euro-American family traditions — these caretaking strategies are, however, insufficiently recognized and supported. It is likely that many of the more positive or adaptive features of socially distributed caretaking could be beneficial were they to successfully diffuse in our culture, just as some of our conjugal family care systems are diffusing across as least some areas of the developing world.

Thinking about children from the point of view of their cultural place should encourage us to think about children's outcomes and what is better or worse for children from more than a strictly disease or mortality and morbidity perspective. The very real threats to children's health and welfare around the world come from changes in the nature of nurturance and the social and emotional well-being of children as well as from mortality risks.[89] We have much to learn from the resilient adaptations which communities in the non-Western world are trying to make in the face of change, including the continuing importance of socially distributed caretaking and nurturance of children.

89. *See* Arthur Kleinman & Jonathan Sugar, *Whither Culture in a Biological Era in Psychiatry?*, ANTHROPOLOGY UCLA, Special Issue Spring 1991, at 20, 31-34.