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The story of Matthew: an ecological approach to assessment

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Introduction

Although developmental stage theories in psychology have deepened our understanding of looked-after children, they have always run the risk of fixing the individual into a generalised framework so that their uniqueness is obscured (Scourfield, 2002). While theories such as those of Piaget (1959) or Erikson (1963) have forced us to focus on the importance of childhood, it could be argued that they also contribute to a view of the child as completely constrained and determined by internal and external factors (for instance disability, temperament and upbringing).

Concerns have been raised by writers both within the psychological tradition (Sameroff, 1987; Rutter, 1988) and within the sociology of childhood (James & Prout, 1990) about the implicit view of a passive child being socialised in a uni-linear direction by biology and environment. Piaget's methodology and his conclusions have been questioned by later psychologists, some of whom argue for a greater emphasis on children's competence (Vygotsky, 1978). Similarly, attachment theory as developed by Bowlby (1969; 1988) has also been influential. Attachment theory stresses the overwhelming impact of early relationships and has enabled us to examine their importance. It is argued, however, that once again we have not explored sufficiently how its deterministic view of the causes of problematic behaviour links with our belief in a child's capacity to change (Scourfield, 2002; Saleebey, 2006).

New approaches gradually became evident in the writings of Vygotsky (1978), Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Sameroff (1987). They questioned the apparent determinism built into some of the theories in developmental psychology, and suggested new approaches based on transactional relationships between the child and his or her environment. In particular, Bronfenbrenner (1979) presents a theory describing how internal and external factors around the child interact. Building on Piaget's (1959) theory, Bronfenbrenner emphasised the mutual accommodation between the child and their 'environment', focusing on the reciprocal and systemic nature of human interaction. The relevant 'environment' incorporates interconnections between settings such as home and school and wider socio-cultural influences. This ecological approach is conceived as concentric circles, named microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

In this paper I will follow the story of a child's life; I will call him Matthew. Through inquiring into his deprived and neglected childhood, I will attempt to capture the complex interactive influences on his identity and trace his capacity for positive change, using an ecological, transactional approach.

Matthew – an early history

Little is known about Matthew's early years. He was a fit and healthy baby but came to the attention of the social work department in 1989 when he was two years old, due to being left unattended on a number of occasions. Matthew spoke of physical abuse happening at this time but this was never substantiated. He also spoke about witnessing domestic violence. His parents subsequently separated. When he was six, he made allegations that his mother had sexually abused him and he displayed aggressive and sexually provocative behaviour in the nursery that he attended. The combination of neglect and abuse is considered to be particularly toxic for developing children (Howe, 2005). A picture emerged that Matthew had experienced a degree of physical and emotional neglect and lack of appropriate supervision.

It is difficult to appreciate the impact these experiences had on Matthew at a critical period for brain development; however, Rutter and Rutter (1993) refer to the fact that:

the 'driving' role of sensory input in organising neuronal development means that a lack of the relevant experiences can have a lasting effect on brain development (Rutter & Rutter, 1993, p.40).

As Howe (2005) argues, this can be seen as a form of sensory deprivation as the brain never switches off from being in survival mode. Extreme states of fear leave the child in a hyper-aroused, disorganised state. This helps us to understand Matthew's story of loss of control, chaos and aggression. Attachment theory has emphasised that sensitive, consistent parenting is essential for healthy development (Bee & Boyd, 2007). Disrupted attachments can result in a variety of attention seeking behaviours and these early formative experiences have been linked to the development of self concept, self esteem and identity (Daniel, Wassell & Gilligan, 1999; Bee & Boyd, 2007).

Matthew was assessed by a child psychiatrist at four years old and was placed within the range of mild learning disability, with developmentally delayed language. This will have compounded his vulnerability as research has shown that disabled children are more susceptible to abuse (Paul & Cawson, 2002). I will now turn to my analysis of Matthew's life using Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach.

Matthew's microsystem

A microsystem is the pattern of activities, roles and interpersonal relations

experienced by the developing person in a given setting (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.22).

Ecological theories such as those of Bronfenbrenner move beyond the focus on set events such as a disrupted attachment. They concentrate more on the manner in which different characteristics in a child trigger certain responses from the environment (Sameroff, 1987). It is known that Matthew was an irritable baby who slept little. This could have been compensated for by a secure attachment relationship but in its absence his temperament could have contributed to a 'poor fit' with his environment. Research has shown that parents tend to see their son's hyperactivity as intentional and respond with strictness and discipline, whereas girls are viewed differently. Boys are also more likely to be the object of criticism in situations of family discord (Rutter, 1988).

Within the microsystem, Bronfenbrenner considers that development can be promoted or constrained by the interaction of a wide number of biological and environmental factors. Thus each child follows an individual pathway which is not predetermined but is dependent on varying psychological, socio-cultural and economic resources (Belsky, 1984; Empson & Nabuzoka, 2004). It is important not to consider risk factors in isolation, however: it is the combination of risks which lead to the greatest adverse impact. Looking at Matthew's early life from an ecological viewpoint, one can see that multiple stressors such as family discord and inadequate support exacerbated by socio-cultural influences interacted with physical and emotional abuse.

Matthew often spoke about the period in his life when he went to live with his father again, after his parents had separated. Listening to him, I had a sense of being overwhelmed by abandonment, anger and anxiety as he described lying in bed in the dark waiting for the sound of his father's drunken footsteps and the inevitable violence that ensued. Many years later, when he was a teenager, I often experienced his preoccupation with these traumatic memories. Swinging from being a delightful table companion to a hostile neighbour, he vented his anger on anyone who appeared to be more vulnerable. Suddenly he would lapse into a 'trance' state and just as quickly become over-excited and sexually aroused. Stressful situations appeared to project him into a state where he had no awareness of cause and effect and so could not understand how his behaviour affected others. He was unable to understand the reasons for the separation of his parents and was flooded with powerful emotions of self-blame and shame which he seemed unable to integrate. Authors working within the ecological-transactional framework have stressed the influence of multiple attachments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Sameroff, 1987). Apart from his father, Matthew's younger sister was clearly important to him and could often have a calming influence on him. Sibling support is also a major resilience factor in childhood as it can buffer a child against the effects of stress (Daniel, Wassell & Gilligan,

1999). As mentioned earlier, however, boys and girls react differently to the stress of marital conflict and may be treated differently due to parental attitudes which are influenced by socio-cultural expectations. When Matthew was seven, he and his sister were adopted by a professional couple who were able to provide a safe and stable home for them. They provided a warm and secure family life that was a significant protective factor in the siblings' life as they entered into a markedly different socio-cultural world. When I spoke with the adoptive parents, however, I sensed that Matthew was expected to fulfil the role of an active and independent son and that they were always dismayed by his inability to control his sexualised behaviour. They received little support in understanding his complex emotional experience and unresolved loss. Thus even though both siblings received the same care and attention in their adoptive family, they had different experiences which were partly due to temperamental differences and gender expectations which affected their microsystems differently.

Matthew's mesosystem

A mesosystem comprises the interrelations between two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates (such as, for a child, the relations between home, school and neighbourhood, peer group; for an adult, among family, work and social life) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.25).

When Matthew attended nursery, he moved into the mesosystem. At this point, his difficulties became more pronounced. This may have been because of the formal demands of schooling which usually put extra pressure for 'good' behaviour on a child (Rose, 1999). Going to school is a distinct gateway into the public world outside the family through which the 'abnormal' status of a troublesome child is confirmed. Reading about Matthew's educational history, I had the overwhelming impression that it was generally a negative experience for him. Matthew attended a number of schools within a short space of time. As his aggressive and sexualised behaviour became unmanageable in different settings, increasingly specialised provision was sought. This issue was compounded by the traumatic events happening in his microsystem, leading up to his eventual adoption. With all these changes happening there was little possibility for school staff to form supportive relationships with the succession of people who looked after Matthew in his early years. Bronfenbrenner (1979) points to the importance of mutual trust and communication between the settings in which children and parents live their lives. Matthew was finally excluded from school at 13. This probably had the effect of reinforcing his negative self-image and sense of abandonment.

Adopting Bronfenbrenner's view of the reciprocal influences operating between microsystem and mesosystem, the effect of Matthew's behaviour on the classroom was experienced as negative. A concern was voiced when he was five years old about the need to protect other children from his aggression. As Rutter

and Rutter (1993) argue, aggressive children establish negative reputations for themselves which lead other children to respond to them in a hostile manner. This peer reaction interacts with the 'hostile attribution bias' (Howe, 2005) typical of physically abused children. Living with Matthew, I could observe how often he misread other pupils' intentions as hostile, reacting negatively to any overtures of friendship.

Matthew's exosystem

An exosystem refers to one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.25).

There is no definitive evidence about the degree of poverty of Matthew's birth parents, yet it is known that his father was unemployed for long periods and that his family lived in a deprived neighbourhood. As Horwath (2007) argues, however, it is important to distinguish between deprivation and neglect. She cites Di Leonardi's comment that 'poverty is not a predictor of neglect: it is a correlate of neglect' (Di Leonardi, as cited in Horwath, 2007, p. 116).

Many families living in disadvantaged areas are able to promote their children's well being and safeguard them from the harms associated with such an environment. From an ecological point of view, however, one can see that opportunities for adequate parenting are reduced when economic constraints interact with other stressors such as family tensions and poor parenting skills. There was little support for Matthew's mother from any extended network, apart from a maternal grandmother. Neglectful families also tend to be isolated in communities, which acts as a further stress as discrimination and abuse compound the difficulties the family unit is already experiencing (Horwath, 2007).

When Matthew was adopted, he experienced a disjuncture in his life space in many ways. I referred earlier to the significant and unresolved loss which he felt and his adoptive parents often described to me their difficulties in trying to integrate him into their family unit. This was clearly exacerbated by the vastly different socio-cultural 'niche' (in Bronfenbrenner's terms) that he was now expected to enter. After a chaotic and frightening early childhood, he was now part of a stable, professional family which was solidly integrated into a middle-class environment. Although he faced huge struggles in coming to terms with his identity in this new environment, he now stepped into a more positive and resilient chapter in his life story.

Matthew often spoke about his 'new' grandmother whom he went to visit regularly. These visits were usually successful and he coped well with travelling independently to see her. Rutter and Rutter (1993) refer to an extended network of family relationships as an important resilience factor that can help to promote a

sense of identity and belonging. Just as adversity can be compounded by multiple stressors, it is important to see that resilience theory also traces the cumulative impact of such protective factors (Empson & Nabuzoka, 2004). In contrast to more deterministic stage theories, this view sees the potential for positive development if an individual is able to follow a different ecological pathway. As mentioned earlier, Rutter's (1988) research questioned Bowlby's view that disturbed attachment is irreversible. Saleebey (2006) perhaps extended this view by developing the argument that resilience is not a fixed trait but arises within the interplay of risk and possibility.

Matthew's macrosystem

The macrosystem refers to consistencies, in the form and content of lower-order systems (micro-, meso-, and exo-) that exist, or could exist, at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.26).

Matthew's life experiences up to this point had tended to reinforce his identity as an undervalued and dangerous individual. This was compounded by the sense of powerlessness he experienced through society's gendered expectations of the way boys should grow up to be men. Bruner (1992), writing from a social constructionist perspective says that any culture creates stories of how lives should be lived in that culture. Young males in Scotland receive countless messages that they need to be tough, invulnerable and must not show their feelings. Social class and race interact with these messages (Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman, 2002), as do the negative portrayals of men in the media as risky and dangerous (Brooks, 2006). From the view of the macrosystem, Matthew experienced contradictory cultural pressure not to show his feelings about all the loss and abandonment he had suffered. In family, school and wider society he was excluded because his confused, emotional, nervous and unstable behaviour did not fit the culturally accepted view of manliness and so was not 'normal' (Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman, 2002). In this manner, cultural messages about masculinity interacted with his social and emotional difficulties to form his subjective identity. He often said to me 'I'm just different, not normal'.

According to Dahlberg and Moss (2005), over the last twenty five years during a time of widespread uncertainty and insecurity, a risk-averse climate has developed. This climate has often become highly emotive and politicised as society increasingly expects to be protected from risk in any form (Parton, 2006). Social workers and other professionals are increasingly pressured to monitor risks, to prevent harm to the client or to society and thus to anticipate potential damage. From an early age, Matthew was drawn into this system. He belonged to the category of children who are in need, at risk or vulnerable: this was further compounded by his learning disability. In other words, he was a grave cause for concern. There is a paradoxical tension within this construction,

however. Vulnerable individuals are viewed as victims to be protected by the system and yet are also expected to control their behaviour so as to become responsible citizens (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005).

Matthew suffered from multiple layers of disadvantage, exclusion and powerlessness due to the complex interaction between the different aspects of his ecology. Although professionals were concerned to use their power and influence to protect him, they had to operate within a society which presented many 'disabling barriers' (Kennedy & Wonnacot as cited in Horwath, 2007). Chief among these was misunderstanding and rejection of his excitable, nervous disposition and poor impulse control. Encountering negative attitudes, he habitually responded in a sexualised and aggressive manner due to the traumatic history mentioned earlier; however, when he was met by appropriate and consistent expectations he could surprise people with his maturity and competence.

As illustrated earlier, an ecological framework does not see dysfunctional interaction as fixed and immutable. It can be modified when a child enters a more supportive and enabling environment (Rutter & Rutter, 1993). There is no doubt that Matthew was a vulnerable individual in need of protection and care, yet his interests are not best served by an assessment which does not include an ecological perspective which takes account of resilience factors and contextual awareness.

The longer Matthew spent in the unit, the more it seemed that he could find moments when he could relax and let go of some of his anxieties. A transactional view of development (Belsky, 1984; Sameroff, 1987) sees it as a two-way process, between an active child and an active environment (Empson & Nabuzoka, 2004). Matthew had always influenced the way others reacted towards him but was beginning to experience that he could have a beneficial effect on others. In this way he could gain a sense of being a positive actor in his own life story. I remember how on one occasion when he could not sleep, he pointed to a painting he had made of a boat sailing on stormy waters into a harbour. 'Are they going to drown?' he asked repeatedly. When I answered him over and over that I thought they would be safe, he became suddenly quiet and thoughtful. 'You really mean that don't you?' he asked. I realised that actually I did and this came as a surprise to me as I didn't always feel that kind of confidence in life. In that moment it seemed as if we had both been able to let go of the cultural stories which so often influence and constrain the way human beings see life. Matthew now had the possibility of forging an identity which included strength as well as vulnerability (Saleebey, 2006).

Conclusion

Assessment can perhaps most usefully be seen as a process of inquiry (Baldwin & Walker, 2005) requiring reflection and self-awareness at each stage. It is

important to realise that my ecological approach to assessment can only be partial, influenced as it must be by context and environment. Within modern society one can sense the pressure on professionals for certainty, for assessments based on rational, linear thinking which present a clear picture with no blurring around the edges. Yet I have argued that residential workers need to resist this pressure, to enable a developing and contextual picture to emerge which allows for a nuanced and subtle understanding of another human being. Human beings are a complex blend of capacity and incapacity, of resilience and vulnerability. Any form of assessment that fails to capture this complexity does an injustice to the individual and adds to the disempowerment and exclusion that youngsters like Matthew have experienced throughout their lives. It is important not to minimise the difficulty of undertaking such complex assessments, yet neither should we devalue a young person's achievements by focusing unduly on their deficits and vulnerability, as some developmental theories may have us do.

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