

## ***How does insecure attachment impair character development? §***

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What conditions undermine the development of good character? To answer this we have to agree on what good character is, but we do not. The fault line between political left and right separates differing views on virtue. A good character is honest, courageous and loyal but also in my view someone who can understand and get on with others; a good partner, neighbour, friend, son or daughter, sibling, citizen, colleague, lover and, if he or she has children, parent. I do not rate obedience so highly. Until not so long ago this quality was seen as highly desirable, especially in children, but it is now tarnished by its misuse in the futile battles of the First World War and the genocides of the Second, all carried out under orders. Independence of thought, knowing your own mind and being prepared to defend your views is of greater value to me. This fragile but liberating product of the Enlightenment – the freedom to think whatever you like – is always under threat from orthodoxies of various kinds. So good character has a cultural and historical context that defines it.<sup>1</sup> What is your view?

### ***The pilot light of character***

‘Insecurity’ is a term from attachment theory and is experienced as danger. Any newborn creature is vulnerable but the human is the most immature of all mammals, born much earlier than others because of its already massive brain, which still has most of its growing yet to come. While nutrition is necessary for survival, John Bowlby and others showed that the drives to seek and give protection are independent from the need to feed.<sup>2</sup> Being looked after is also a matter of life and death. All healthy infants are born (‘programmed’)

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<sup>§</sup> chapter in *The Character Inquiry* edited by Jen Lexmond and Matt Grist. London: Demos, 2011. [www.demos.co.uk/publications/thecharacterinquiry](http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/thecharacterinquiry)

with an optimistic expectation that someone will be there to protect them, and a keen social instinct to reward whoever does it with an intent gaze, remarkable feats of mimicry<sup>3</sup> and, after a few weeks, smiles and laughter.

This is the biological spark which when lit by attentive care gives you the capacity to love as you have been loved. But to keep the flame alight you need caregivers<sup>4</sup> attuned to your states of mind and body, to help you make sense of what goes on there. The methods are universal. For example, a man with a deep voice raises its pitch to female levels (around middle C)<sup>5</sup> when talking to babies, so they can most easily hear the tones, even though they do not understand the words. Attunement is a matter not only of pitch but also of timing. When you speak to someone on a phone line from the other side of the world have you noticed how the tiny lengthening of the time between what you say and the response you get can make you wonder fleetingly if you have caused offence in some way? When we are slow to respond to their messages that is how it is for babies too.

Here is an experiment carried out with normal infants. The mother is with her child and is told not to react when he tries to engage her. She just displays a blank face. This is the ‘still face paradigm’, a research method developed in the 1970s by the developmental psychologists Colwyn Trevarthen in Edinburgh and Ed Tronick in Boston.<sup>6</sup> It shows what well-adjusted infants do when the link with their primary caregiver is broken. They try in vain to get a response and within a few moments give up completely, as if they have lost the will to live. Their light goes out. It is upsetting to see recordings of these episodes. In a short moment the life of the infant with no one to answer him seems to have become a tragedy. The seventeenth century metaphysical poet George Herbert describes precisely the same experience of an adult in relation to God:

*Therefore my soul lay out of sight  
Untuned, unstrung  
My feeble spirit, unable to look right  
Like a nipped blossom, hung  
Discontented.*<sup>7</sup>

The infants in the laboratory recover quickly when mother's attentiveness is restored and no harm is done<sup>8</sup>, but if in real life you encounter unresponsive caregivers – who may be depressed or ill for example – your despair becomes chronic. You begin to adapt to being forgotten. Stress hormones are flooding and changing your brain while it is still growing in size and complexity. Parents of good character might not be aware that they are out of touch with the child, yet in the developing child these failures, often seemingly inconsequential to adults, can lead to insecurity.

Though we are clearly born with different temperaments, character develops in the human environment from birth onwards. Each stage of childhood builds on the achievements of the previous one. The intimate reciprocity of the first year is carried forward into the wider social relations of the second. As toddlers on our feet, we enter the great university of moral advancement, conducted in a storm of passionate, magical and violent emotions. Learning how to manage relationships – how to share for example – requires firm and affectionate looking after from familiar adults.<sup>9</sup> This is the time to forge character, in the heat of the moment.

### ***Compulsive self-reliance***

In response to what may be quite small but recurrent lapses in attentive care some children become increasingly anxious and clingy, but others suppress the experience of it, even while their physiological levels of anxiety remain high. If you are one of those, you may become hyper-resilient, learning to do everything for yourself without help. Teachers, parents and others begin to admire you for it. You can in time become a clever, successful and powerful adult. But this comes at a cost to your sensitivity. You have to work out through trial and error how to pay attention to other people's states of mind<sup>10</sup> – even to your own – because you have not had enough of this done for you earlier on. It will not come naturally to you to wonder how others might view the world, or how they are feeling.

In a state of compulsive self-reliance, admirable though it may be,

just feeling okay in yourself is harder to achieve. To reduce anxiety you might need something distracting or addictive, such as working or playing extremely hard, using alcohol, gambling or financial dealing, overeating, taking drugs or being sexually promiscuous. Although the kind of personality behind these different activities can be similar, the moral value attached to them is very different. In general only hard work merits approval. And when you do feel bad it is not easy to ask for help, because you have become used to finding your own respite. Your body and mind have by now learned from early experience to expect that help will arrive too late, or not at all. You do not want to expose yourself to the shame of feeling frightened and abandoned, and will have greater difficulty dealing with the inevitable conflicts of intimate relationships. Such crises can feel like the end of the world – that tragedy again – rather than the painful row that for most people can soon be repaired. A crucial ingredient in the development of good character has been missed. It is never too late to learn that we are good enough to be loved and trusted by others, but it gets harder the longer we leave it.

### ***The character of society***

In societies where conflict and survival is the rule, such as classical Sparta, or the gangs of street children in modern Brazil and India, compulsive self-reliance is an advantage. Gangs give some security but your membership is always provisional. Stealing, even killing, could save your life. In a plural democracy where prosocial attitudes are valued, compulsive self-reliance is not necessarily an asset, though it can lead to success. Admired individuals at the top of sport and entertainment, business, politics and the professions may be just like this. Whether they are of good character depends on their behaviour, but also on your view. Someone who makes his own way to the top without needing financial or moral support is often held up as a model citizen, a ‘self-made man’, especially by those who aspire to such success themselves.

‘If they can do that, so can I’ is one version of the American dream, with many echoes in the rest of the world, and this view is most supported by people who also see themselves as self-reliant. But this

ideal of good character implies that those who need looking after – children, the disabled, mentally ill, the poor, refugees, the old – are less worthy. Hard-working citizens question why they should have to fork out for others who appear to do nothing for themselves,<sup>11</sup> and often pay no tax (and some without children ask why they have to contribute to child benefit). In times like the present these sentiments are more easily expressed and felt, perhaps by you and me too. It is as if we were like the toddler who refuses to accept that the parents now have a new baby in their room: ‘It’s not fair! What has he done to deserve this extra attention? That’s my place, and he has taken it from me.’ In the displaced child’s eyes the new baby is a scrounger but parents can help by acknowledging his fury while at the same time showing him how to become a proud and more responsible older sibling.<sup>12</sup>

Current welfare policy tends to encourage successful and self-reliant citizens to see people dependent on benefits as undeserving failures. Of course there is cheating and incompetence in a welfare state but shameless prejudice against vulnerability<sup>13</sup> is a sign of social disintegration, and a betrayal of human consciousness.<sup>14</sup> Humans became one of the most successful species on the planet because we evolved, over hundreds of thousands of years, in social groups small enough for everyone to be interdependent.<sup>15</sup>

Like all societies ours goes through historical phases of cohesion and division, but this time we have knowledge of child development and social science that did not exist in the past. Insecure societies<sup>16</sup> promote insecure attachments, and anxiety in a parent is transmitted bodily to the child.<sup>17</sup> If you are not confident of your home, in your job, or even of your safety, your capacity to care for children is undermined. In very unequal societies everyone is living on a steep slope and only the very richest can shelter themselves from unease. Under these stressed conditions ‘what’s in it for me and mine?’ will always trump ‘what can I do for my society?’

Social investment in early childhood creates a benign cycle<sup>18</sup> rather than the vicious one we are in. At the most critical and anxious phase of their lives, parents need time, money and advice in order to

support each other and their young children. This means paid parental leave (which actually saves lives)<sup>19</sup> and highly qualified staff in children's centres<sup>20,21</sup> The kind of good character we want to promote turns out to be closely related to the kind of society we want to live in. Character must be defined in moral terms, but morality is not simply a matter of dutifully trying to be good, to follow the rules. The bleakness portrayed in the film *The White Ribbon* perfectly illustrates morality without attentive love.<sup>22</sup> Character grows out of our desire and our capacity for human relatedness.

## **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> S Kraemer, 'Promoting resilience: changing concepts of parenting and child care', *International Journal of Child and Family Welfare* 3, 1999, pp 273–87.

<http://socialbaby.blogspot.com/2007/04/promoting-resilience-changing-concepts.html>

<sup>2</sup> J Bowlby, *A Secure Base*, London: Routledge, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> See [www.socialbaby.com](http://www.socialbaby.com) (accessed 29 Mar 2011).

<sup>4</sup> 'Caregiver' is not one person, but a small handful of intimates, mother, father, minder, nanny, grandparent, older sibling and so on who share the task. This work is emotionally highly demanding and labour-intensive.

<sup>5</sup> C Trevarthen, 'The musical art of infant conversation: narrating in the time of sympathetic experience, without rational interpretation, before words', *Musicae Scientiae*, special issue, 2008, pp 15–46.

<sup>6</sup> See S Kraemer, book review of E Tronick, *The Neurobehavioral and Socio-emotional Development of Infants and Children*, New York and London, Norton, 2007, in *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 50,

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no 11, 2009, pp 1437–38. 9-7610.2009.02131.x

<sup>7</sup> J Tobin (ed), *George Herbert: The complete English poems*, London: Penguin, 1991, p 74. My thanks to Wilhelmina Kraemer-Zurné for this citation.

<sup>8</sup> Attunement, which is accurate to hundredths of a second, is far from constant, nor should it be. Around 70 per cent of the time the caregiver–infant couple are not synchronised. ‘One can see that some amount of dissynchrony... can have positive effects’ (Tronick, *The Neurobehavioral and Socio-emotional Development of Infants and Children*, p 217, note 6). It is the intensely pleasurable reparations that follow – optimally every few seconds – which drive child development.

<sup>9</sup> MZ Woods and IM Pretorius, *Parents and Toddlers in Groups: A psychoanalytic developmental approach*, London: Routledge, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> P Fonagy, G Gergely and M Target, ‘The parent–infant dyad and the construction of the subjective self’, *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 48, 2007, pp 288–328.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Why should a hard working self-made man subsidise the workshy?’, *Observer*, 7 Nov 2010.  
[www.guardian.co.uk/theobserver/2010/nov/07/work-shy-hard-subsidise-society](http://www.guardian.co.uk/theobserver/2010/nov/07/work-shy-hard-subsidise-society) (accessed 29 Mar 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Of course children are not these days regarded as scroungers. We think we have moved on from the idea that children are innately sinful; ‘The innocence of children is in their bodies rather than any quality of soul,’ Augustine (AD 397–98), *Confessions* 1.7.

<sup>13</sup> T Dartington, *Managing Vulnerability: The underlying dynamics of systems of care*, London: Karnac, 2010.

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- <sup>14</sup> D Dorling, *Injustice: Why social inequality persists*, Bristol: Policy Press, 2010.
- <sup>15</sup> C Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest: The evolution of egalitarian behavior*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- <sup>16</sup> R Wilkinson and K Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why equality is better for everyone*, London: Penguin, 2010.
- <sup>17</sup> T O'Connor et al, 'Prenatal anxiety predicts individual differences in cortisol in pre-adolescent children', *Biological Psychiatry* 58, 2005, pp 211–17.
- <sup>18</sup> S Gerhardt, *The Selfish Society: How we all forgot to love one another and made money instead*, London: Simon & Schuster, 2010.
- <sup>19</sup> Paid parental leave up to one year reduces infant mortality, deaths that are the tip of an iceberg of non-fatal developmental damage: 'A ten week extension in paid leave is predicted to decrease post neonatal mortality rates by 4.1%'; see S Tanaka, 'Parental leave and child health across OECD countries', *Economic Journal* 115, no 501, 2005, pp F7–28.
- <sup>20</sup> T Papatheodorou and J Moyles, *Learning Together in the Early Years: Exploring relational pedagogy*, London: Routledge, 2009
- <sup>21</sup> S Scott, 'National dissemination of effective parenting programmes to improve child outcomes', *British Journal of Psychiatry* 196, 2010, pp 1–3.
- <sup>22</sup> M Haneke, *The White Ribbon [Das Weisse Band: Eine Deutsche Kindergeschichte]*, 2009.