

CHILD WELFARE AS A COMPONENT OF CULTURAL EVOLUTION

James Tierney

Not too long after retiring from my career as a social worker, I took a few undergraduate courses so as to update myself about some of the new fundamentals of our human existence. In the process, I discovered something called big history. Delighted to find a discipline somewhat different in academia, I explored it further. As one would expect, big history talks and thinks about the big picture.

It turns out that the size of time and space is almost incomprehensible. Our galaxy has somewhere between 100 and 400 billion stars. There are a similar number of galaxies elsewhere in the universe, each with their own vast numbers of stars and planets. The estimated number of stars is about 10,000 times the total number of all the grains of sand on Earth, and we, here on Earth, can only see about 15 per cent of the matter that we know is out there!

So, it is in this huge context that we consider the role of *Homo sapiens*. Many of us can recall 2,000 years of human history with some clarity, from what we learned in school, and maybe even 5,000 or 10,000 years. After that, it becomes a blur of 'hunter gatherers'. After 20,000 years, it's anybody's guess who we were. After 8 or 10 million years, we are no longer able to clearly see the origins of our species.

As I ponder the important issues of humanity, using my experiences and career as guidelines, I have come to see that survival in the universe

seems to boil down to the establishment of *optimal existence*. Biological evolution is a process of change from the simple to the more complex, and it is probably a universal process. It makes use of available energy flows to enable all sorts of things, like bacteria, to emerge and maintain, as long as the energy flow remains optimal.

What we have not seen as clearly as we might is that culture has stepped up to dominate the evolutionary process for humans here on Earth. Cultural evolution is far more complex than physical evolution. And, more importantly, the pace of the change is accelerating dramatically. So, as a result of my career in social work, I would like to address a few of my concerns about cultural evolution.

Social Work

My work in child welfare has given me the opportunity to observe both the greater complexity and the enhanced pace at which the change occurs. When I graduated from the School of Social Work at the University of Connecticut in 1967, I looked for work in my region of New England, in the northeastern United States, since I knew that the issues that I hoped to deal with were similar to what I knew and had been trained for. I took the job as Regional Director of the Portland Office of the Maine Department of Human Services. The work was fundamental. There were four operating manuals that I took home with me that night and I was able to read them all before the evening news. Ten years later, in 1977, when I left to take a job teaching at the new Social Work Department at the University of Southern Maine, I left three book cases of manuals for the person replacing me.¹ Not only does this speak to the incredible complexity that comes with the culturally driven change of our modern era, it is testament to how such change is insidious and builds on itself without clarity of direction. We had been raising children within families, more or less successfully, for thousands of generations, but, within fifty years, we created a monumental paper bureaucracy to supplement that effort. The caseloads had increased from 27 per worker to over 800 in that decade. To what end?

1 For more information about the School of Social Work at the University of Southern Maine, including an interview with James Tierney and others about social work and their careers in the field, see 'History of the School of Social Work, University of Southern Maine' at the Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History, Maine Folklife Center, University of Maine, Orono, Maine, eds. Sandra Wachholtz and Barry Rodrigue; the portal for the Northeast Archives can be found at <<https://umaine.edu/folklife/archives/>>.

Child Protective Services

In 2016, one of the reports that reached the desk of the President of the United States was, ‘Within Our Reach: A National Strategy to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities’.² Five or six children die every day within the confines of the system created to protect them. Most of the deaths make the newspapers but few readers would believe such a loss is occurring. Even more surprising is that many of them die at the hands of caretakers who profess to love them. Bureaucrats within the system will do their best to integrate the findings of the new report with the findings of hundreds of other reports, but like them, it will find its way onto a dusty shelf or into a bottom drawer to be soon buried under the next report and then the next. The one I liked best, which I left in a bottom drawer when I retired was, ‘Having the Power, We Have the Duty’.



John Romanyshyn, chair of the Department of Social Work, University of Southern Maine, playing music for his students at graduation in Portland, May 1992. Photograph by Penthea Burns.

The founding chair of the Department of Social Welfare at the University of Southern Maine, John Romanyshyn, edited a classic book called, *Social Science and Social Welfare* (1974), which was nationally known and used as a text in our courses.³ John described social welfare as an umbrella that shades a variety of programs, including most programs providing services to protect children. Those programs were also included in the commissioners report submitted to President Obama, but many layers were superimposed in the 42-year interim. We have made an enormous investment in social welfare, and this is one example of how cultural evolution is growing.

2 Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities, ‘Within Our Reach, A National Strategy to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities,’ US Presidential Commission, Final Report, 17 March 2016.

3 John Romanyshyn, ed., *Social Science and Social Welfare*, New York: Council on Social Work Education, 1974.

My sense is that we have limited capacity to assess outcomes in management terms and therefore less than ideal capacity to manage the investment that continues to grow. From time to time, data emerge which send concerns from top to bottom – like the observation that five to six children die each day within a system that exists to protect them, and good people step up and try to respond. One can feel the pain in their frustration and the wonder in those of us who do this work. I suspect there are some fundamental problems inherent in cultural evolution that make systems like child protective services more complex than functional.

It is important to note here that most children served by caseworkers, supervisors, technicians and clerks in child protective services are served well, in spite of the lack of clarity at policy and management levels, and the ambivalent commitment of citizens. I suspect such discontinuity is a major contributor to the challenge of accurately assessing the impact culture has on evolution. Clearly, the greatest challenge is that components of such systems are co-evolving with other components in society, and that they are not well coordinated or even well understood in the larger scheme of things. This adversely affects functionality. To use an example from the world of machines, an internal combustion engine does not work very well unless the air, fuel, compression and spark flowing through both the carburettor and the distributor are fully in synch.

In child protective services, components like public health nursing and the child's attorney are not even in the same location, let alone working together in the child's best interest. Anthropologist Joseph Henrich, in *The Secret of Our Success* (2015), describes how genes and culture are co-evolving, but he notes that no one seems to appreciate how the components of complex systems are co-evolving with other complex systems. This is certainly true in child protective services, especially with little attention being paid to functionality.⁴

This dysfunction has got to weigh against efficiency and would therefore seem to put the notion of 'optimal', which astrophysicist Eric Chaisson sees as central to evolution, in jeopardy. During my years in child welfare, I was continuously amazed by how well the systems

4 Joseph Henrich, *The Secret of Our Success*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.

functioned despite all the variables in conflict with structure and function. We would take children from one set of parents and place them with another set of parents, and, more often than not, the children would thrive and the parents would survive as well.

Culture has not been well integrated into evolutionary studies. The transaction is far more complex than any of us appreciate. The fundamental process is that change occurs and new entities emerge. It is fairly easy to observe new species emerging; this is where Darwin has made such an important contribution.... a beak or a tail feather changes, so the bird eats different seeds, which happen to grow a bit farther north than they did five years before.....

In terms of complex systems like child protective services, it is much more difficult to observe what has changed and how the notion of 'optimal' fits into the picture, but we can guess that the parameters that define optimal in terms of the functionality of a bird's beak also apply to cultural systems. Free energy flows through the system at varying degrees of density: too much energy and it fries, too little energy and it starves, just the right amount and it merges with other components to enable structures that help parent the children we worry about.

In the case of the internal combustion engine, the definition of optimal energy-density flow is precise. In most cultural systems, like child protective services, we don't know how much flexibility we have before an optimal situation reaches its limits. More importantly, we don't know what variables to include as we try to define it. One would think that variables like purpose, functionality and efficiency should be part of the measure, but this is new turf and we are yet to make the necessary breakthroughs. One would think that finding five or six children dead each day in a program designed to protect them would be a warning about functionality and optimality – this is a new cultural landscape.

Cultural Evolution

Human culture has been impacting evolution for a long time. The co-evolution of our biology and culture integrates the traditional non-directed nature of evolution via genetics with highly directed cultural evolution like cooking. Cooking our food, and the more general use of fire, changed the muscle structure in our face and neck, along with less obvious changes, like the diameter of the *corpus colosseum* in our

brain. And cooking is not just something that appeared when someone invented a camp fire. It emerged as part of a wide array of evolutionary events. For example, fire needed wood, a fuel that was also evolving independently but in concert with food, such as tubers, and the muscles that our human ancestors used for eating.

I make two points here. The change that we call evolution has been going on for a long time, with little or no guidance from our species. This has evolved over the past 100,000 years, or maybe 2 million years, to become more progressively driven by us. Not so much by us as individuals but by our culture. This collectivity, which is unusual in the animal world, is what is called ‘cultural evolution’. How do we keep the process honest? In other words, how do we insure that the data that gets incorporated into solutions – whether they be child deaths we would like to prevent or cell behaviour that doesn’t result in cancer – is the correct data for that particular problem? The expectation is that science keeps the process honest. Is that as realistic when we are dealing with co-evolving cultural entities as complex as a child protective system? In fact, much of cultural evolution is at least that complex.

This change is increasing in pace and, in my opinion, is not well studied and consequently, not well understood in terms of the ways in which it is driving who we are becoming as a species. Sociologist Johan Goudsblom, for example, has done one of the few more comprehensive reviews of fire and its effect on civilization.⁵ Fire has emerged along with wood and stone tools to increase the pace and duration between major segments at which cultural evolution is occurring yet it continues to be less than clear when humans first controlled fire in terms of being able to strike the spark at will as opposed to simply maintaining the flame.

Some better understanding of that transition period might shed light on human behaviours which are not terribly clear in terms of something as basic as a capacity to share fire as opposed to fighting over it. There is no advantage to having more fire than you need at any given time. Why not share it? A better understanding of how we managed sharing fire may help us appreciate how to best share parenting. Clearly, there’s no advantage to having more children than can be effectively raised at any given time.

5 Johan Goudsblom, *Fire and Civilization*, London: Allen Lane, 1992.

More importantly, a better understanding of the behaviours involved in current cultural change may be more critical than can be imagined. Clearly, the period between thousands of generations of raising the children within families and the current procedure of supplementing that with all sorts of child support systems, is an extraordinary change in a very short time in a very fundamental function of human behaviour. To be sure, it is correct to observe that ‘it takes a village to raise a child’, but that catchy phrase might be obscuring some dynamics that should be better understood. The presidential commission’s report observing that five or six children die each day in the child protective services system should be a warning that some fairly fundamental institutions are changing in dramatic ways after being static for a long time. This too is cultural evolution and probably warrants a better understanding of not only the shocking data of child deaths but the broader trend and especially the pace of the change.

The Bigger Picture

Eric Chaisson and Akop Nazaretyan are two scholars looking at cultural change in terms of both the pace at which it occurs and the outcomes achieved during the transitions. In his essay, ‘Practical Applications of Cosmology to Human Society’, Eric Chaisson explores the current evolution of energy, climate, economics and cancer as four areas undergoing rapid change. As with child protective services, that change produces data that should be interpreted as worrisome especially when used to support narrow agendas as opposed to global perspectives.⁶ Social psychologist Akop Nazaretyan looks at the pattern between technological potential, the quality of cultural regulation and society’s internal sustainability. He concludes that the higher the power of war technologies, the more developed behaviour/regulation are required for the self-preservation of society.⁷

Neither the commissioners attempting to cope with child deaths or the supporters of greater investment in war technology have an adequate

6 Eric Chaisson, ‘Practical Applications of Cosmology to Human Society’, *Natural Science*, vol. 6, no. 10, June 2014, pp. 767–796.

7 Akop Nazaretyan, ‘Mega-Evolution and Big History’, in *From Big Bang to Galactic Civilizations: A Big History Anthology*, Volume I, *Our Place in the Universe: An Introduction to Big History*, eds. Barry Rodrigue, Leonid Grinin, Andrey Korotayev, Delhi: Primus Publishing, 2015, pp. 125–143.

grasp on what behaviour regulations are necessary to produce the results we hope for. This appears to be the case in the broader society as well. In fact, Chaisson and Nazaretyan are two of only a few scholars who recognize the importance of understanding the impact that culture has on evolution and who we are becoming as a species.

The Data

In addition to the increased complexity and pace of change, the raw data we have to work with is no longer as clear as it needs to be. For example, a piece of wood used to enable the same cultural change for a million years can be depended on for its strength and colour and heat-producing capacity, as long as it comes from the same kind of plant. The data in the child protective service program is not so clear, and maybe data in general is not so clear either. When the data systems currently in use within social welfare were being built, I had the opportunity to participate in that effort in Texas, which was one of the first states in America to do so.

The US Congress appropriated about \$84 million, and Texas contributed an additional 20 per cent. My job was to insure that the new data-system was consistent with best practices, as defined by the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA). The CWLA had compiled several volumes of ‘best practices’ over five decades, which included the placement of children removed from the same family in the same foster homes. The Texas case-workers and supervisors were knowledgeable and sensitive to what was in the best interest of and unique to the needs of each child. Unfortunately, it was often not possible to comply with what we all knew was best for the child – for a wide range of reasons. For example, there were not enough foster placements in a given area and so it was not unusual to place children 800 kilometres from their siblings, who they might never see again. In other words, there were not enough of the right resources to go around, despite substantial investments.

For example, the city of Houston in Texas had 99 protective service units. This meant that there were 99 supervisors, each with six or seven workers, plus a couple of clerks, and a dozen more staff to provide supplemental services like licensing or training. So, when a best practice was not able to be implemented, it was not because of

the agencies' lack of understanding but because it was most often not available. It became clear that the problems were not in implementation but in management.

When I brought this to the attention of the private contractor hired to build the data information system, which was meant to be a model for replication elsewhere in the United States, the contractor advised me that they had been unsuccessful in identifying data for management purposes, so their plan was to provide all possible options and thereby enable future managers to choose what they needed to manage. In other words, the information system was not being built with management data needs identified in advance. When this became an issue, the program manager was discharged and the contractor's plan to provide all available data, rather than data specific to managing the program, was adopted. Similar systems have been implemented in all the other states, except Vermont.

So, complexity is increasing at an enhanced rate in cultural systems with co-evolving components that may or may not be coordinated and not designed around specific data for management purposes. If cultural evolution, like biological and physical evolution, is change from the simple to the more complex and that change depends on optimal energy density flow, we can expect such systems to either sustain themselves as they continue to increase in complexity or shut down from too much or too little energy density flow.

Social welfare is a good candidate to observe as that process proceeds in that we have at least one measure as an indicator – the number of children that die each day within the child protective service system. We do not have a full range of variables being scientifically observed as cultural evolution speeds the pace of change. Given how difficult it is to conclude what should be done to reduce the number of child deaths each day, one would think we would want to add as many variables as possible to the scientific review.

The Big History View

My take on all this is that we, as individuals and societies of a cultural species, need to think deeply about complexity – in its physical, biological and social forms. We need to weigh interacting components

carefully, in order to discover ‘best practices’ and achieve desirable outcomes. Humans have tended to make ‘off the cuff’ decisions without enough consideration of the impacts.

The search for optimal behaviour has a venerable tradition in society, having been celebrated as a *golden mean* by the ancient Chinese, Indians, Greeks and others. In the recent avalanche of information and complexity that has deluged our consciousness over the last century, I would argue that this need for careful re-evaluation of society fits well in the tradition of seeking balanced lives.

James Tierney is a social worker, retired from public service, and lives in Brunswick, Maine, USA. He worked for the state for four decades on issues relating to child welfare. He used a cosmological context as the base of an introductory course in social welfare that he taught in the 1970s. Jim’s interest in Big History lies in collective learning, and he sees violence against children related to violence in other areas. This has led him to study the big history of human behavior. He can be reached at <run437@hotmail.com>.