

Career Come Full Circle: My Journey in Disciplinary, Paradigmatic, and Geo-Cultural Boundary Crossing

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This chapter presents broad strokes of my career contributions to applied developmental psychology. The first section chronicles time and work at six universities on three continents that supported my teaching, research, and institution-building activities. The second section presents specific conceptual and empirical contributions in the North American context across three thematic areas: early intervention, parent-child interaction, and internationally adopted children's behavioral adjustment. The third section presents selected contributions to the advancement of child development research, policy, and practice in Africa. In the final section, I echo the growing concern that our developmental science knowledge base is preponderantly Euro-American in sociocultural texture and, therefore, limited in relevance and applicability elsewhere. I advocate for field building and research capacity enhancement in Majority World societies to ensure that the developmental science of tomorrow will increasingly reflect greater representation of inquiry contexts, philosophical world-views, and ethnocultural idea systems informing local conceptions of human development.

A village boy with academic promise and lofty dreams faces derailment of hope and ambition by twin villains: elitist postcolonial education and familial material poverty. Denied the benefits of secondary school education, his middle school leaving certificate gains him admission into a four-year nondegree teacher training college at age sixteen; but that is not his desired destination. He beats the odds and receives university education after studying privately to meet admission requirements typically fulfilled after five years of ordinary-level plus two years of advanced-level secondary schooling. He excels in his undergraduate studies and is appointed to teach at his alma mater on graduation. His dream of pursuing graduate studies abroad materializes, but his ambition to return home to make a difference in an environment that most needed him remains unfulfilled, this time not by adversity but by successes away from home. He traverses the North American academic landscape pursuing research relevant to Canada and

the USA and preparing future generations of researchers at advanced graduate and postdoctoral levels, while also working relentlessly to help build capacity for developmental research, practice, and policy on his native continent. He ends up interrogating Euro-American developmental science, advocating for a global endeavor with broader content and relevance across geo-cultural contexts.

That is my story. My career in human development and education began in 1977 at the University of Cape Coast (UCC), Ghana, at the youthful age of twenty-five. For two years I taught a child development course to all first-year students across the university. By 2019 when I retired at age sixty-seven and returned with my wife (Rose) to settle in our native land as dual Ghanaian-Canadian citizens, I had been affiliated with six universities on three continents. Along with numerous opportunities to play roles typically associated with senior faculty positions, UCC gave me the confidence to dream big and the wings to fly high and far in search of scholarly excellence. In September 1979, then, I landed in Edmonton, Canada, to begin that search at the University of Alberta (U of A).

U of A embraced my strengths, invested in my promise, and provided exposure to many role models. Gerard Kysela was more than my dissertation supervisor and mentor; he became a dear friend with profound empathy for what it took for foreign students like me to transition into a new culture. The foundations for my work in early intervention and parent-child interaction were laid during the years I worked with Gerry in the role of research assistant. I learned about factor analysis and theory building from J. P. Das during the period when he was engaged in theoretical bridge-building across psychometrics, neuropsychology, and cognitive information processing. W. H. O. Schmidt and John W. Osborne sowed some of the seeds for my fascination with the history of psychology and the philosophy of science, while Robert Mulcahy nurtured my teaching and research interests in cognition and instruction. I left U of A on an emotional high, having received a postdoctoral fellowship, the 1985 G. M. Dunlop Award for Best Doctoral Dissertation in Educational Psychology in Canada, and an assistant professorship – all within several months of defending my dissertation.

Working at Memorial University in St. John's, Newfoundland was a profoundly positive experience. A year into my position I received a Spencer Fellowship award from the US National Academy of Education, followed by a grant from the Spencer Foundation, an internal grant from the Office of Research, and a granting of tenure within eighteen months of my appointment. Under Glenn Sheppard, the Department of

Educational Psychology offered a rare blend of the best of family and workplace relationships. St. John's and Memorial University gained significance not just as the place where my post-PhD career took off but also where Rose's North American postbaccalaureate nursing career began and where the world welcomed our two lovely daughters (Amma and Nana).

Kent State University hired me into an associate professorship in 1989, the year I made a tough decision to move to the USA while considering offers from two other Canadian institutions. The US research funding environment made the move attractive. Within months of arrival, I had linked up with other researchers within the university and connected with service delivery agencies in the Kent-Akron-Cleveland corridor in preparation for collaborative research. My first major federal grant award was being finalized when I accepted a full professorship at the University of South Florida (USF) in 1992 following an invitation to interview for directorship of the doctoral program in special education.

USF offered exciting opportunities to help build an intellectual culture around cross-disciplinary research collaborations, early-career faculty and advanced graduate student mentoring, and a rethinking of the curriculum of research education. As I got knee-deep in administration and management, I feared trade-offs in career goals and worried particularly about the danger of sacrificing "personal" scholarly ambitions so early in my career; but I soon resolved that concern in favor of a history of blended contributions. I cannot take credit for the vision and leadership behind the 1990s image of my department as a vibrant unit attracting collaborative research involvement from academic units across the university, but I take great pride in having been instrumental in sustaining that image for close to a decade.

By the time I took up the founding directorship of the Center for Research on Children's Development and Learning and switched my tenure home to the Department of Psychological and Social Foundations in early 2001, it was clear that we had added to the college's visibility in external grant generation and scholarly productivity. Also, as a result of my work with Jim Paul, a course on the "Nature of Inquiry" became a requirement across the college's doctoral programs. It aimed to prepare students in the philosophical foundations of research and to advance the ethos that research education was not simply about cultivating technical skills. The perspectives informing our advocacy were articulated in a 2001 paper in the *Review of Educational Research* (Paul & Marfo).

In 2014, I was recruited by Aga Khan University (AKU) to lead the Institute for Human Development (IHD) as Founding Director. Nested

within the Aga Khan Development Network, AKU was founded in 1983 as the first private university in Pakistan, focusing initially on the health sciences. A task force commissioned to chart its future produced a blueprint (1994) for a comprehensive international university. IHD was one of several envisioned entities. My arrival in 2014 marked its official launch under a President (Firoz Rasul) and Provost (Greg Moran) committed to its success. Even in retirement, I continue to celebrate individuals (including Medical College Dean Robert Armstrong) and funders behind IHD's successes. Sustained Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and Aga Khan Foundation USA funding made it possible to achieve our vision of strengthening early childhood development practice and policy through the knowledge resource, *Science of Early Child Development* (<https://scienceofecd.com>). A generous joint grant from Canada's International Development Research Center and Aga Khan Foundation Canada also enabled us to launch a three-year project with University of Toronto colleagues to examine the impact of an early developmental intervention program on native Kenyan and embedded refugee populations in the Nairobi informal settlement of Kawangware. The close working relationship with both funders enabled us to adapt the proposed methodology to accentuate the project's meaningfulness, feasibility, and relevance as we learned more about the context through formative exploratory studies. Embarking on early succession planning toward the goal of replacing myself with a non-expatriate was a significant highpoint. In 2019, with Provost Carl Amrhein's support, we recruited world-renowned African scholar, Amina Abubakar, under whose leadership the institute has grown significantly.

Selected Contributions to North American Developmental Research

Much of my analytic and empirical scholarship over the years can be characterized as an exercise in *minding gaps and lags* between theoretical advances already embraced or freshly emerging within the field and the manifestation of such advances in new inquiry. I provide brief overviews of work in three areas: (1) early interventions targeting children with developmental disabilities and their families; (2) dyadic interactions involving mothers and children with developmental disabilities; and (3) behavioral adjustment in internationally adopted children.

Early Intervention

As transactional and ecological/social systems models gained prominence in the framing of the rationale and mechanisms of early intervention programs, it was natural to expect that research on intervention processes and outcomes would reflect new insights from these theoretical advances. In concrete terms, research designs would employ measurement frameworks comprehensive enough to yield data on a wide range of person-level, program-level, and broader ecological variables. Such frameworks would also prime the field to answer more complex questions which I and others had anticipated for a new generation of intervention research. My first formal review of early intervention research (Marfo & Kysela, 1985) predated the popularization of meta-analysis and did not have the bells and whistles of present-day systematic reviews, but its “gap-minding” mission was clear; it highlighted the slow manifestation of these advances in intervention research.

The twenty studies reviewed were conducted in five countries: Australia, Canada, Great Britain, Sweden, and the US. We coded each study on five criteria but focused particularly on the neglected areas of *process measures* and *outcomes beyond child-level impact*. Our most striking findings were that only 10 percent of the studies examined process measures and only 25 percent included impact measures at the level of parents or overall family ecology. The first finding underscored the imperative to drive efficacy research in the direction of answering more nuanced questions, such as the mechanisms by which different dimensions of the intervention process individually or collectively interacted with other variables to exert differential impacts on recipients. The second finding illustrated a lost opportunity to gather data on caregivers and other intervention agents, especially when interventions did not last long enough to warrant expectations of direct impact on child outcomes. Interventions with little or no noticeable changes in knowledge, competency, or behavior within the family ecology were less likely to yield enhanced child-level outcomes. These assessments guided my earliest fieldwork on program evaluation in the Canadian Province of Newfoundland and Labrador.

The Newfoundland Evaluation Project

This study was conducted on the Direct Home Services Program, unique nationally at the time as a centralized government program delivering home-based services to families of infants and young children with

disabilities. It had been in existence for about eleven years. Its home-visiting Child Management Specialists held a minimum credential of a bachelor's degree in psychology or related fields. Thus, our assessment of the general *framework for classifying variables in efficacy research* spawned by the 1985 review was done with data from a well-established program delivered by staff with strong professional credentials.

Noteworthy insights from the project included the following: parents with higher expectations for child developmental progress were more likely to expose their children to a wider variety of interactive games and activities; parents reporting stronger knowledge gain were more likely to engage in frequent interactions with their children; and quality of the home environment was associated with children's rate of development during the intervention. Through regression analyses we established that (1) prediction was maximized by considering all three classes of independent variables, (2) child-level and family ecological variables were more influential than program-level variables, and (3) child competence at intervention entry and parental expectations best predicted children's rate of development over the average intervention period of twenty-two months.

Parent-Child Interaction

Richard Bell's 1968 "reinterpretation of effects in studies of socialization" initiated a significant conceptual shift in parent-child interaction research. Interrogating the dominant unidirectional parent-control view driving much of the extant research, Bell advanced a bidirectional view emphasizing the way parental behavior was itself shaped by attributes of the child. Validation of bidirectional and mutual engagement models called for methodological tools capable of capturing temporal relationships within streams of interactions. Sequential analysis began to emerge in the late 1970s through the work of G. P. Sacket. Others, including Roger Bakeman and John Gottman, were soon to employ sequential analysis in other realms of interaction research. I was an early beneficiary (and possibly pioneer-student advancer) of this tool. At a time when studies predominantly employing behavior counts were driving inferences about a possible "directiveness syndrome" among parents of children with developmental disabilities, sequential analysis from my dissertation research on forty-five dyads from Alberta, Canada, painted a cautionary picture: parents of children with disabilities may use significantly more directives than parents raising typically developing children, but the presence of a disability did not necessarily compromise the quality of their interactions.

The literature review and conceptual work driving my dissertation research had been published much earlier in the *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* (1984). Editor Irving Sigel's generous summary of the reviewers' comments and his laudatory observation on the unanimous recommendation to accept the paper without revision were inspiring then. Now the potentially groundbreaking results from my sequential analyses spurred further confidence. I spent the next several years delving into the emerging literature on parent-child interaction within the developmental disabilities field. The focused assessment of research and thinking on *maternal directiveness* evolved into an intellectual preoccupation with my growing concern over the seemingly incurable propensity on the part of psychological researchers to infer deficit from difference. I surmised that there was no reason to view parents' use of directive or controlling behaviors any differently from the many other behaviors they employ routinely to mediate their children's engagement with the worlds of objects and persons. However, directiveness was increasingly being portrayed as an inherently problematic "style" of interaction with a possible causal link to suboptimal developmental outcomes.

This is the backdrop to my 1990 paper, "Maternal directiveness in interactions with mentally handicapped children: An analytical commentary." I presented five central arguments and hoped that those arguments and the supporting evidence would stimulate a new generation of studies with more nuanced conceptual and methodological approaches. My modest contribution toward that goal was a basic, descriptive-correlational study of twenty-five mother-child dyads from Newfoundland and Labrador published in the *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* in 1992. Compared with previous research, that study differed in several ways. It employed two separate coding systems (subjective ratings and behavior counts), operationalized four distinct categories of directiveness (coded as behavior counts), and included a measure of intrusiveness to avoid the conventional conflation of directiveness and intrusiveness. The analysis showed that none of the measures of directiveness correlated significantly with mothers' intrusiveness ratings. Corroborating the sequential analysis findings from my dissertation, directiveness, while occurring more frequently in interactions with developmentally less competent children, did not necessarily compromise sensitivity, responsiveness, or warmth. What was more closely associated with suboptimal interactions was intrusiveness rather than directiveness.

In the last thirty years, the 1990 and 1992 papers have remained the most influential of my scholarly contributions, both by citation count and by the breadth of cross-disciplinary reach. Every once in a while, I see a citation mischaracterizing this work as favoring or advocating directiveness, but

overall, the work has brought greater clarity to the construct of directiveness, its measurement, its intended use by parents of atypically developing children, and its developmental ramifications.

Internationally Adopted Children

I entered this area of research through a mentoring relationship with Tony Tan who was recruited to USF after completing his doctorate at Harvard's Graduate School of Education. He had selected USF over two other institutions, apparently at the suggestion of a Harvard mentor who thought I could be an ideal mentor. I was unaware of this backdrop when I invited Tony to my center to discuss affiliation. For the next ten years, we had a very fruitful collaboration that included our measurement colleague, Robert Dedrick. We soon built a nationwide database of study participants drawn from at least forty-seven US states.

Among other contributions, we have addressed a significant constraint in international adoption research. While understanding the effects of institutional deprivation on post-adoption behavioral adjustment has been a core objective, researchers often have no access to information on the depth of individual children's presumed deprivation during institutional care. The preponderant use of "age-at-adoption" as a proxy measure of severity of deprivation has been based on a simple premise. If institutional deprivation had deleterious effects, longer exposure would exacerbate those effects and children adopted at relatively older ages would thus have much longer exposure to deprivation and, therefore, be at greater risk. Considering this assumption too speculative, we began our search for surrogate measures that might better approximate the magnitude of deprivation during institutional care. We constructed four multi-item scales as a measure of the residual psychosocial effects of pre-adoption adversity. As expected, we have shown in multiple studies that these measures are consistently better at predicting post-adoption adjustment outcomes than age-at-adoption.

Selected Collaborations in Advancement of Child Development Research in Africa¹

For eighteen years I worked with Alan Pence (University of Victoria, Canada) on various Africa-focused capacity-building initiatives. Alan was

¹ My earliest contributions on context-relevant knowledge for the Majority World were made with inspiration from three senior colleagues: Bernard L. Charles of Carnegie Corporation of New York,

using a generative curriculum model² to prepare early childhood professionals for First Nation communities in Western Canada through the Early Childhood Development Virtual University (ECDVU; www.ecdvu.org) distance education platform. Identifying faculty expertise to extend that work to Africa, he reached out to me, and I accepted an Adjunct Professorship at the University of Victoria to help offer the course, *Child Development in Eco-Cultural Contexts* with Jessica Ball.

As a diaspora scholar all too familiar with Africa's "brain drain" predicament, I found the ECDVU model both compelling and worthy of my commitment. Combining online delivery and face-to-face meetings convened in selected African countries meant that students were able to complete a postbaccalaureate program without having to leave their home countries. Between 2001 and 2015, five cohorts of twenty-four to thirty-five students each completed the program. The first cohort completed a three-year master's degree and were given the opportunity to work in collaborative writing teams, each led by a faculty mentor, to prepare cross-project integrative manuscripts representing their generative contributions to the ECD knowledge base on the continent. Those contributions were published as a special issue on *Capacity Building for Early Childhood Development in Africa* (Pence & Marfo, 2004) in the *International Journal of Educational Policy, Research, and Practice*.

In 2009, we convened an invitational conference on *Strengthening Africa's Contributions to Child Development Research* in Victoria, Canada, with funding from the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD). We first reached out to Robert Serpell and our now late colleague Bame Nsamenang of Cameroon, two leading African scholars with long-standing commitment to the preparation of generations of African developmental researchers. We then identified eight additional scholars known for significant research contributions on Africa and other parts of the Majority World to be part of several days of conversation and reflection on the status of, and potential future directions for, African child development research. (We would later dub ourselves "The Gang of Four.") The combined expertise spanned the fields of anthropology, child welfare, economics, education, and developmental psychology. Following the fruitful engagements around pre-meeting working papers, five contributions and an introduction (authored with Alan Pence, Robert

Edmund W. Gordon of Columbia University (and, later, Yale), and Sylvia Walker of Howard University. I honor them for their contributions to my career.

² Knowledge generated in the local context by students, elders, and other community members is integrated into conventional textbook-based resources to enhance local relevance.

LeVine, and Sarah LeVine) were published as a special section on the meeting theme in the SRCD journal, *Child Development Perspectives*.

These papers were disseminated extensively on the continent and, judging from the close to 400 citations I have tracked through Google Scholar, their impact has been remarkable. Equally noteworthy was the rapid fulfillment of one of two strategic goals set at the end of the conference, namely, to launch a research capacity enhancement initiative. Within eighteen months of the convening, the first African Scholars Workshop took place in Lusaka, Zambia, capitalizing on the location of the 2010 biennial congress of the ISSBD³ convened under the leadership of Robert Serpell. The “Gang of Four” would go on to facilitate four additional scholars’ workshops over the next six years, all in Africa, with funding from UNICEF, the Open Society Foundation, and other sources.

Robert Serpell’s invitation to co-edit *Child Development in Africa: Views from Inside* (Serpell & Marfo, 2014) advanced the field-building work one step further. Our introductory chapter provided a historical sketch of the earliest forms of expatriate research on the continent, paying particular attention to key interests driving much of that work, for example, validating Western theories in other contexts and searching for developmental universals. We then showcased research by African scholars based on the continent on a range of topics, for example, biomedical and psychosocial factors associated with developmental outcomes for HIV-affected children, eco-cultural considerations in children’s early socialization/education, and efforts to develop culturally appropriate assessment instruments. Our concluding chapter explored the degree to which the invited contributions connected with some of the values driving emerging visions of an African child development field, values such as epistemological and methodological pluralism, local relevance and accountability, culture-sensitive communication, and overcoming problematic legacies from the Euro-American context.

Quo Vadis? Globalized Euro-American versus Global Developmental Science?

In this final section, I reflect on aspects of my advocacy for a global science of human development, defining “science” as systematic, organized pursuit of inquiry using consensually determined values, methods, and techniques within a specific epistemological paradigm. Our field’s status quo is as

³ International Society for the Study of Behavioral Development.

a Euro-American science being globalized as if societies around the world share the historical, philosophical, and sociocultural traditions and values that gave birth to the field in the Euro-American world. It takes a jolt, every once in a while, to remind us of the limits of that status quo. That jolt has recently come from analyses of the problem in scholarly works like “The neglected 95%: Why American psychology needs to become less American” (Jeffrey Arnett, 2008) and “The weirdest people in the world?” (Joseph Henrich et al., 2010). So how do we get beyond a field built parochially around inquiry conducted on a small percentage of the world’s population? I do not profess to have *the* answer, but in my limited scholarship on the subject I have suggested a few directions.

My reflections are also informed by what I have learned about the “global use” of our science from direct involvement in several global policy/practice agenda-setting initiatives on ECD (early child development). Since co-chairing part of the planning toward the US National Academies of Science interdisciplinary, multi-sector *Forum on Investing in Young Children Globally* (co-chairs: Ann Masten and Zulfiqar Bhutta; project director: Kimber Bogard; www.investinginyoungchildrenglobally.org), I have participated in technical consultations giving birth to the global *Early Childhood Development Action Network* (<https://ecdan.org>). I was part of WHO technical working groups on the Nurturing Care Framework (<https://nurturing-care.org>) and the WHO Guidelines on ECD (www.who.int/publications-detail-redirect/97892400020986). Finally, while at AKU, I convened three biennial conferences on ECD involving participants from forty-two countries worldwide. In all these settings, I have been struck by widespread immodesty about the evidence on which recommended interventions are based, even as we lament the limits of the field’s knowledge base in diverse global settings. To be fair, in such international discourse there is increased acknowledgment that context matters, and that, therefore, local adaptations to practice and policy recommendations are imperative. However, to this point much of that is largely rhetorical, and we must still seek a healthy balance between exuberance over our science and circumspection in its utilization.

In considering pathways to a global developmental science, I place greater emphasis on the role of *field building* in societies outside the Euro-American world. Cultivated well within an ethos of pluralism (ontological, epistemological, and methodological) – and in ways that avoid some of the problematic legacies of Euro-American developmental science – fields emerging in Majority World contexts offer one hope for fulfilling a condition I deem necessary for a global developmental knowledge base

(Marfo, 2016): *representativeness of world views and idea systems* informing local conceptions of what is important in human development and what should, therefore, be valued and nurtured.

In framing African developmental inquiry, I have implied that regardless of context, a promising field emerging outside the Euro-American world must be conceived “not as a culturally insulated enterprise cocooned in its own traditions and designed exclusively to address questions of local relevance but as a field that is mindful enough of the interconnectedness of the human condition across cultures to be able to benefit from and contribute to other understandings” (Marfo, 2011). As a corollary, there must be a place for different purposes and forms of inquiry: those exploring – qualitatively and quantitatively – indigenous content as an important end in itself and those exploring, again, via diverse methods, how local understandings of developmental phenomena contribute to a global knowledge base that is mindful of and grounded in diverse local contexts.

So far, I have highlighted the promise of field building in Majority World contexts as one pathway to a global knowledge base. What, then, can we do to nudge the current *establishment developmental science order* in the direction of seeking enhanced global value? One easily achievable goal is incorporating larger numbers of geo-cultural sites into international comparative research. Generating data from wider-ranging eco-cultural settings increases “generalizability reach” and contributes to a broader knowledge base. Such research must also ensure shared representation of measured constructs and their underlying cultural meanings across contexts. This is a high bar, but unless instruments (and their translations) preserve comparability of measured constructs across sampled contexts, comparative data could prove meaningless. Thus, comparative research aimed at enhancing broader relevance of findings must demonstrate prudence in adopting instruments developed and validated in other settings.

I urge research education programs everywhere, especially those in Euro-American settings preparing researchers from around the world, to embrace modesty in knowledge claims and enhance their curricula beyond fostering technical expertise to include exposure to the historical, philosophical, and moral foundations of inquiry. If there is value in advocating epistemological, disciplinary, and methodological pluralism to overcome developmental psychology’s current shortcomings, no group can be better prepared to advance that value than today’s graduate students and beginning scholars. They must question orthodoxy, learn to see the world through others’ eyes, and shape their professional development beyond conventions handed down by their training programs.

Suggested Reading

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