A Clinical Sociologist's Journey as Children's Rights Advocate

Yvonne Vissing
Salem State University

Abstract

Career decisions are not randomly made; they are the result of personal experiences that drive our motivations and interests. Many of these occur when we are children, which is defined by the United Nations as any time before age 18. This article considers the importance of the social construction of children's lives and the importance of autobiographical memory in understanding our professional choices. It chronicles some of the journey and insights behind one scholar's drive to promote the issue of children's human rights and its relationship to clinical sociological policy and practice. The use of a clinical sociological approach could reduce harm and improve benefits to children, families, and society.

Keywords: clinical sociology, children, human rights, childhood, youth, transformation

Few people announce in high school that "I want to be a clinical sociologist when I grow up". This is a profession that many people don't know about. I did not know of the field, yet fate groomed me for it. Becoming a clinical sociologist has helped me to make sense of the world and find my place in it in a way that few other professions allow.

1. Clinical Sociology as a Human Rights Framework

Clinical sociology "is a creative, humanistic, rights-based, and multidisciplinary specialization that seeks to improve life situations for individuals and groups in a wide variety of settings" (Fritz 2020, p. 4), such as the small group, local, national, and international levels. Clinical sociology's integrative framework and approaches are used by scholars, policymakers, and others to problem-solve in many different fields such as immigration, housing, health, education, safety, and counselling. Clinical analysis allows for the critical assessment of beliefs, policies, or practices with an interest in improving a situation. Intervention is based on continuing analysis; it is the creation of new systems as well as the change of existing systems (Fritz 2020, p. 4) and includes an emphasis on prevention. A clinical sociological approach allows professionals to assess situations and prevent, reduce, or solve problems through a combination of analysis and intervention. It includes both macro and micro forces in a way that shows their inter-linkage. This approach has been very useful to me, since my work has spanned all of these levels, fields, and approaches. Clinical sociology has provided me a way that integrates them and helps me to make sense of the interface between my personal experiences and professional interests. This is something that compartmentalized disciplines do not allow.

Children's human rights are an area of study that fits perfectly into a clinical sociological framework. Child rights as a field concerns global, national, community, and family levels of both policy and intervention. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child focuses on issues of provision, protection, and participation (Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights 1989). A clinical sociological perspective views children's lives as dynamic; its open-systems approach sees complex systems as interrelated. For instance, children's lives are simultaneously impacted by the operation of economic, education, health, transportation, recreation, religious, gender, racial, and political institutions. A change in one influences the other. A child rights perspective recognizes young people as human beings with agency who both act and are impacted here-and-now, as well as human becomings whose future life trajectories are shaped by the opportunities and challenges afforded them when they are young (James and Prout 1997).

I did not realize that children's rights had always been a driving theme in my work until one day when I paused to reflect upon the trajectory of my career. Almost everything I had done from graduate school forward pertained to children's issues in one form or another. It took a while for me to see how all the puzzle pieces hooked together. When analyzed in their totality, a clear picture emerged. I had labeled myself as a pediatric sociologist long before it was ever identified as a field; I founded the Center for Childhood and Youth Studies at Salem State University; I am the US child rights policy chair for the Hope for Children CRC Policy Center in Cyprus; I used a Whiting Foundation fellowship to visit child rights scholars in Europe; I have developed dozens of courses and conferences around the issue of children's wellbeing; I was a visiting professor in the Department of Pediatrics at Michigan State University; I was a National Institute of Mental Health Post-Doctoral Research Fellow to study child maltreatment; I have worked with a variety of science and educational organizations; I work with congresspeople to develop bills establishing children's commissions; I work with communities to conduct strategic planning; and I have been on boards ranging from juvenile justice and parole to state and national homelessness coalitions. I work with the courts as a Guardian ad Litem in divorce cases. I made an award-winning film on child homelessness for a Ben & Jerry festival; I am the author of 15 books and many chapters and articles about child wellbeing issues. The list of my child-oriented accomplishments has become lengthy. I have become an international expert in children's human rights. The question that stared me straight in the eye was – why?

Why have I spent my career dedicated to trying to understand children's lives, their rights, and helping communities to honor young people? During my graduate school years, I was encouraged not to pursue the sociological study of children. If I was interested in them, faculty members asked, in a condescending tone, why didn't I become a teacher or social worker? As a sociologist, I believe there is a status hierarchy with fields like criminology, race, gender studies, or political sociology at the top. Children are low on that list. Likewise, historically there has been little discussion about human rights as a discipline within the field even though it is obviously relevant. Unlike the rest of the United Nations member countries that have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the United States has not, and the fact that children could be entitled to human rights was never mentioned in my community or in my classes.

Figuring out why I would "waste my time" on children took me some time to unpack. It required years of therapy, Buddhist training, patient friends, loving animals, planting flowers, and quiet moments of reflection. It was confusing because I was fortunate to have many resources as a child that fostered my agency and resilience, but segments of my rights were violated and, as a result, I replicated family and community patterns that resulted in my making poor choices and bad decisions. I grappled with conflicting messages, denied reality, and paid a heavy price in preventable sadness and suffering. It was slow to dawn on me that my professional interest in understanding children's lives was driven by my personal experiences, both good and bad.

2. Framing Children's Social Construction of Reality

How we decide to put together certain pieces of lives is an academic exercise in and of itself. Episodic memories, like the personal ones I will share in this article, are important because they contain emotional triggers that become meaningful in the way we perceive ourselves and the world. Emotions are powerful forces for sealing experiences into memory. Important parts of our life stories are memories of emotionally intense experiences. Together, as we assess them, we are engaging in autobiographical memory analysis (Legg 2004; Munoz 2015; Psychology Today 2021; Schacter and Addis 2007).

To briefly contextualize this process, when individuals reflect on their pasts, they reflect on who they are, their relationships, goals, motivations, and career development. Memory is regarded as fundamental to our development of a sense of self, who we have been in the past, how we and our life have changed, and what our future could be like. Our past, present, and future are intimately linked by our memories. Scientists report that the same episodic memory brain processes used to remember the past also help individuals to plan for the future and imagine different possible scenarios (Legg 2004; Munoz 2015; Schacter and Addis 2007). The hippocampus operates to help us perceive our visual worlds, do language processing, and has the ability to integrate or "bind" different elements into a whole that seems sensible to us. Episodic memory is thus a constructive process; although memories may seem like recordings of the past, they are actually reconstructed from constituent details every time we retrieve them.

Autobiographical memory aids us by allowing us to mentally try out different strategies and work through potential outcomes; simulation can increase coping and decrease concerns about upcoming events. Memory is thought to be critical for our sense of who we are – in the past, present and the future. It holds important knowledge about our lives and our personal attributes and traits. It allows us to time-travel and to remember how things were, and to consider how the same situation could be differently transformed by shifting a few of the variables.

It is curious that sad, bad, mad, frustrating, embarrassing, and confusing memories get pulled up in our memories faster than sweet, happy, loving ones. Use of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) devices have shown negative events stimulate activity in emotion-processing regions of the brain, such as the orbitofrontal cortex and the amygdala. The more these emotional centers are activated by an event, the more likely an individual is to remember specific details linked to the emotional aspect of the event, like being hit or yelled at, while less likely to remember more mundane details like a street address or what Grandma gave you for your sweet-sixteen birthday (Kensinger 2007; Warner 2007). Developmentally, it is hypothesized that remembering unpleasant emotions may be hard-wired into people for survival; it's better to be aware that someone could be coming to hurt you than to remember the pink rose hedge you enjoyed looking at on your walk (Caren 2018).

I find this memory research to be very helpful in my work as a children's rights scholar. When I can relate emotionally to past experiences that I found wonderful or horrid, then I can sort out the independent, intervening, and dependent variables associated with them. Seeking to figure out what the factors were that led to positive outcomes, or negative ones, is essential when studying how the multiple levels of interventions supported by clinical sociology can be developed. Given the escalating rates of child trauma, most trauma that children experience occurs because adults, organizations, social systems, and governments don't defend children's rights. Parents probably never had a course in human rights or were taught what rights were or how to act upon them. The United States is the only member country of the United Nations who has refused to ratify the international children's human rights treaty, which is apparent in the lack of funding for children's health, education, and protection programs (Mehta 2015; Lesley 2022).

Our cultures and backgrounds, over which children have zero control, influence the shape of our lives. Where and how we grow up sets the stage for how we view ourselves and the world (James and Prout 1997). For instance, I grew up during the 1960s in Southern Indiana. I am the product of Western European lineage and was raised in a Christian household. My father[1], a veteran, was a car mechanic and wrecker-driver during my early years, who built a motel and later became the mayor of our city. He was an example of The American Dream. My farm-girl mother wanted to go to college, but her family was too poor to send all their five children and my mom was the one they didn't help to gain a trade. She became a stay-at-home wife because dad thought working women were an embarrassment because it meant their husbands didn't take good enough care of them.

As a child, I was well cared for. I had my own room in a nice house, I was properly clothed, had plenty to eat, books to read, and pets and toys with which to play. Family members visited regularly, and there was an extended social support network. I was protected from many of the bad things of life and encouraged to be educated and make a positive difference in the world. On the surface, I had an ideal childhood. Except surface images don't always convey the entire picture of how a child perceives their world.

Community climate and family norms shape children's lives. Conservative moral values and traditional gender roles of the day were to be strictly observed in my home. Organizations impact children's lives. For me, it was family, school, and church. Communities create a climate in which children grow up, and mine was in a working-class town that fed people's aspirations to become important. It was a time of social upheaval, the fight for women's and civil rights, and it seemed like the country was in transformation to President Kennedy and President Johnson's vision for a great society that cared about

1 People mentioned in this article have been given pseudonyms; the relationships I mention are however accurate.

justice and for each other. We are products of our time, and mine was filled with issues of equality, justice, and human rights.

The parenting philosophy of the day when I grew up took more of a "children should be seen and not heard" and "only speak when spoken to" approach. I know I was loved, but perhaps not in the ways that would have served me best, according to parenting research of today. Working-class parents of the 1960s had a utilitarian parenting style. In many ways, children were treated like pets, expected to "be good", stay clean, follow rules, sit quietly, not misbehave or bark requests, and "stay out of our hair", as my mom put it. Children could be rewarded when good or hit and yelled at when "bad" – whatever being bad meant at that moment. Being cuddled and coddled was not part of the plan.

It is curious how singular incidents can have lifelong impacts (Kensinger 2009; Kettlewell et al. 2020; Tyng et al. 2017). A singular adverse experience can impact a child, but accumulated assaults increase the probability of negative outcomes, as described in ACES, or Adverse Child Experiences Studies (Centers for Disease Control 2022). Aaron Antonovsky (1987; 1993) perceived children's daily life as constantly changing, or a heterostatic rather than a homeostatic state. Children are challenged to develop a sense of coherence as they manage the chaos and find strategies and resources available to cope with the changes in everyday life. His six C model included complexity, conflict, chaos, coherence, coercion, and civility, which could be applied by social organizations and institutions to help children manage daily challenges. I think that children's lives are terribly complex and confusing. They are regularly coerced, exposed to chaos and conflict that they don't know how to manage. They long for adults to exhibit civil behavior to help them develop a sense of coherence about themselves and their place in the world.

Without supports and buffers, episodic experiences can trigger children's vulnerabilities and become wedged into parts of their persona. For instance, Mrs. Ely, at church, said I shouldn't be in the junior choir if I couldn't open my mouth more, a silly condemnation which resulted to this day in my not wanting to sing in front of people. Sixteen-year-old Colin wasn't athletic but worked hard to become the first male cheerleader in the high school, yet the woman in charge of cheer at the school refused to put the yearbook photo of the squad with his photo in it, which terminated his interest in participating in team sports. Cousin Timmy was put at the "dumb kids table" in elementary school, where he colored all day because his learning disability was more than the teacher wanted to bother addressing – a course of action that led to his career being the guy who carries your sofa up to the third-floor apartment. When the school bus driver's bus mirror hit immigrant Cameron as he rode by on a skateboard, the boy died and the school didn't hold any organized response to his death, despite the fact that they had closed the entire school so students could go to the funeral when Biff, a popular sports-jock, had died of cancer a short time before. There was the evening when teenage Joe was driving home from work and got pulled over by the police and thrown onto the ground because of mistaken identity. And when 15-year-old Louisa went on a for-profit honor society trip to another country, her counselor bought alcohol for the under-age youth and had sex with some of her classmates; when her family confronted the director about these improprieties for minors, they were threatened with a lawsuit for even questioning their practices. These actions may be regarded as inconsequential to the adults who did them, but they occurred in contexts in which children had no counter to the adult's narrative. All of them were negatively impacted when children had no competing narrative or supports to cling to. Parent and adult rights always seem to trump those of children (Grady 2022; Graff 2021; Harris and Alter 2022; Lesley 2021).

In considering the social construction of my life, the hodge-podge set of my experiences, when taken in their totality, showcase certain themes that have been instrumental in my quest for children's human rights advocacy. A major one is that children are objects of violence. A second theme is on children's experience of marginalization, particularly around issues of gender, race, and social class. The third theme concerns the replication of one's childhood and my decision to change it. The fourth points to the systematic oppression of children that continues today and why clinical sociology is important in facilitating the defense of children's human rights.

3. Violence

I am an ardent non-violence advocate and fight for peace and justice whenever I can. Violence was a pervasive part of my childhood and impacted me for my entire life. I did not experience violence like children in war-torn areas, and I was never taken to the hospital for broken bones, and I am sure there are those who would say that I was never abused. But outside observer determinations are different from how a child may experience their treatment. Violence takes different forms, some which are often discounted as unimportant, like bullying or verbal abuse. Even witnessing violence of others sends children the message that they too could become victims at any time. Many children are the direct recipient of physical or sexual violence. Any of these forms of violence can start when we are babies and continue forward. It is no wonder that my work in human rights has focused on child abuse prevention, trauma, gun control, and both clinical and community interventions. My trying to prevent other children from such exposures is a logical response to my experiences.

Let me provide some examples. In hindsight, elementary school was a time for learning that both classmates and adults make fun of children; like sharks that smell blood, they go for the vulnerable. Wetting your pants, having a lisp, not knowing letters, having the wrong clothes, eating certain foods – anything could make you a target for bullying. When I ask my students today why they are slow to respond when I ask them questions, they report that their reticence began in primary school; it's better to not look up or get called on by the teacher because the penalties are intense for not knowing the answer, saying the wrong thing, or saying something the wrong way.

Getting hit was common where I grew up on the Mason-Dixon line, so much so that many folks thought that children sometimes "deserve a good whacking" and that doling it out is not a big deal. This often occurs in religiously conservative areas where there is a "spare the rod and spoil the child" belief. The pervasive attitude was that parents who hit their children should never be arrested or go to court; when parents punished their children, they may be seen as good disciplinarians, and other people were to "keep their nose out of it" because children were regarded as parental property to do with as parents chose.

I was spanked, pinched, had my hair pulled, hit with the flyswatter (my mom's weapon of choice) and threatened with "or else" regularly for things I did not even know were inappropriate. I did not like any of this but assumed it was normal. It was only decades later that I learned that many children were never hit. My mom was the punisher; evidently, when my brother was a baby, my dad hit him so hard that my mom said that she would leave him if he ever did that again. Dad checked out. He did not lay a hand on me – until the day I crossed some invisible line I did not know existed and recall with horror as my dad took off his belt to beat me because I wanted to go out with friends. He had also checked out of attending my birthday parties, school functions, when I was in the school play, and so on.

Second grade reinforced the notion that physical violence was an expected part of life and that children better be good or something bad could happen. It was common practice for classmates who lived nearby to walk home for lunch – something that would be forbidden in most communities today. One boy, Ralphy, lived nearby but instead of going home, he regularly walked a block to the corner store where he bought chips, Hostess cupcakes with the white squiggle on top, and red-pop soda for lunch. Other classmates did as well; I remember envying them because I could never go there at lunch because the teacher knew I lived too far away. We were in the middle of math instruction with Mrs. Moss when Ralphy's mother pounded loudly on the door. Turning, we saw a woman with mussy hair, wild eyes, wearing a pink housecoat, carrying a rifle that she pointed at our teacher. "Why'd you let Ralph walk to the store?!" she screamed. The woman was swearing at our sweet teacher. As second graders who had not even learned how to write our names in cursive yet, we were bug-eyed and scared. Mrs. Moss kept her voice soft and low and tried to reason with the emotionally dysregulated woman as her embarrassed son wriggled past to go for help. Walking slowly towards the woman, the teacher wrestled the rifle away from her. Overnight rules changed. Nobody was ever allowed to go home for lunch again.

Third grade was even more memorable. When our teacher Mrs. Burd brought her son, Billy Burd, to class to show us how to do art, he made fun of my picture in front of the class. I used the "wrong" colors and didn't stay exactly in the lines. That singular moment dashed my hopes of being an artist, even though I had spent hours enjoying coloring for years before. On another day, when school pictures came back, I gave mine back to Mrs. Burd, saying that she had given me someone else's picture. I could not possibly have looked like that ugly, fat girl with zits on her chin. "Of course it's you", I remember her smirking.

It was the year that Jimmy, an introverted, tall, lanky boy with sunken cheeks, asked Mrs. Burd if he could go inside during recess because he "had to pee". She refused his request three times, and in desperation he went over to the white ceramic drinking fountain on the side of the wall and relieved himself, turning the silver handle to wash urine down. A tattle-tale girl ran to the teacher, who reported the incident to the principal, Mr. Froggiet. It wasn't long after we came in from recess that the principal came to the door swinging a paddle in his hand. "Jimmy, come here," he boomed. Jimmy, being no fool, understood the severity of the situation and curled his ankles around the metal legs of his wooden chair as he gripped the sides of his wooden desk. After several demands for Jimmy to come (like a dog), the principal stormed through the desks of classmates, scattering them like bowling pins, as he started beating on Jimmy with his paddle. He screamed at the child the whole time he was hitting him on his back, arms, skull, and face. As he tried to land blows on Jimmy's buttocks, he hit the wooden chair so hard that it splintered in pieces on the floor around the child, who bravely whimpered in pain and tried to protect himself as best he could. The rest of us children thought the principal had lost his mind and we were terrified that we could be the next victims in his onslaught. Some classmates nearby climbed under their desks; others ran to the corners of the room while Mrs. Burd yelled at them to get back in their seats. With metal rungs and wood pieces on the floor, Mr. Froggiet dragged the crying boy into the corner bathroom, slammed the door, and that's when he really went to town hitting the boy. Then Jimmy screamed in pain, and the rest of the class sat silently, helpless, scared, without any idea what would happen next. We sat silently until the beating and screaming stopped and Mr. Froggiet dragged a sob-faced, limp-rag Jimmy out to head to his office, where God only knows what happened next.

As a follow-up to that incident, Jimmy and his father showed up at my house later that afternoon. My dad had recently been elected mayor of the city, and people came to him with requests of help for all kinds of things. Jimmy and his father sat in the carport explaining to Dad how "Jimmy got his butt beat" as I huddled on the kitchen floor under the window to listen. Jimmy's father was calm but very upset that his son was not allowed to go to the bathroom (he evidently had urinary tract problems) and secondly that he would be beaten for trying to take care of himself in the best and most discrete way he could and then violently accosted for it. I remember the father saying, "Jimmy, pull down your pants and show the mayor your butt." How humiliating that must have been for the boy. After they left, my dad put the Polaroid photos on the dining room table of the boy's purple and black swollen butt, the bloody open cuts on his face, and the bruises on his arms and back. I was only nine years old at the time, but I remember feeling that what the teacher and principal did was inappropriate. There was no place for Jimmy to go for help, which is why he ended up in our carport. The principal had no negative repercussions for his actions. Nothing. In fact, he got a big party when he retired and a town park was named in his honor. Life for him went on as normal. Except for Jimmy and the rest of us in the class, we had a new understanding of normal...

At my high school, classmates who violated behavior codes were subject to school-sanctioned abuse known as corporal punishment. There was a Dean of Girls and a Dean of Boys. Each had their own office at the end of a long corridor on the second floor. They had a variety of paddles hung on their walls, and they were not there for decoration. When a girl violated the rules for things like having a skirt that was too short or if a boy had his hair too long, they were sent to the Dean's office to be paddled. Students had the choice of which paddle they wanted to get hit with. There were different deans for boys and girls because when you were paddled, they paddled your bare butt. I guess the school felt they were being protective of children's rights by not allowing a man to beat the naked butt of a girl. I had a class in a room not far from the Dean's offices and could regularly hear the hit of the paddle and the screams of the students, screams which were met by the deans screaming back at them not to make noise. I was called to the Dean's office one day for a minor infraction and was terrified I could be hit for it. Instead, I got a shaming and blaming lecture that was full of future threats. The only reason I think I wasn't hit was because my dad was the mayor and the dean was afraid of repercussions if I was paddled.

I learned that adults always have the upper hand to being right, even when they violate my rights. When I was 16, I became a church camp counselor-in-training (my folks had never let me go to camp before, so I was very excited to become a CIT), and was in the chapel alone with Harvey, who was probably 60 years old and everyone's favorite counselor. I felt special getting attention from the top counselor when all of a sudden, he hugged me – with one hand on my butt, the other on my breast, as he stuck his tongue in my mouth. He told me I was his favorite and there was an assumption that I should be grateful and allow him to continue touching me. I ran out and did not know what to do – would anyone even believe what happened? I had been violated and knew that no adult would believe me. I tried to report it to the camp director, who disregarded the story since Harvey was a minister and I must have misinterpreted what happened. I've learned that in reporting violence, children often tiptoe into the conversation with adults, giving some preliminary information to see how adults will react; if they are open and listen, children may divulge more. If they are discounted, further disclosures cease. I did not press the conversation further as a result, and I sometimes wonder how many other children he molested that went unreported.

Violence against children is totally unacceptable in any form. It can kill and harm children in countless visible and invisible ways. My experiences have taught me that I could expect to become the recipient of physical violence. My NIMH post-doctoral fellowship in family violence indicated that children can still expect to be hurt by the people who are supposed to love and care for them. As I watch the news about the rape of ten-year-olds in Ohio, corporal punishment of six-year-olds in Florida, or school shootings across the nation, the violence I experienced may pale in comparison. If it has taken me decades to get past the impact of the violence I endured, I imagine they, too, will carry their memories of violence through a lifetime. I often think of the advice of my mentor, pediatrician Ray Helfer (1978), who observed that if we really put into place the things we know to prevent child abuse for today's children, in two generations, it could become a thing of the past. This is where clinical sociologists can play an important role.

4. Marginalization of Children

While we are told that being a child is the best time of our lives, frankly, I found being a child was demeaning, oppressive, and not very much fun most of the time. Sociologists analyze oppression and discrimination, but until recently failed to study its systematic impact on children. Clinical sociologists understand the relationship between macro and micro factors on a child's life. I always felt marginal and never understood why, until I was introduced to scholarly information that allowed me to make sense of it.

Gender

As young as I can recall, I felt humiliated on a regular basis, highly controlled, and discouraged from trying things. I was barely out of being a toddler, but had already learned I was not smart, not cute, and not attractive. For instance, I was "just a dumb girl", as the boys in my life reminded me. Boys could play outside, build things, and enjoy sports, but I was chastised when I tried to do the same. At age four, I was already too embarrassed about how I looked to wear a cute red pleated short skirt that had red panties sewed onto it; when pretty cousin Ginny visited, my mom fawned over how cute she would look in that skirt and gave it to her without asking me "because you're not wearing it anyway". I learned that even my own parents did not find me pretty enough to suit them, and that my possessions were not really mine – parents could giveth and taketh away at will.

Perhaps a blessing in disguise, I spent a lot of time alone. My parents were always busy doing work or domestic chores. My brother was a bed-bound invalid for several years and much parental attention during my foundational years went to caring for him and making sure he did his homework so he wouldn't fall behind at school when he returned. There were no neighbor kids to play with. In response, I developed an internal world, played alone or with my make-believe friends, dog, and cats, ravished books, and watched too much television. I ate candy from the candy counter in the reception room at the motel; my mom told me to limit the amount of candy I ate, so I did. I only ate one candy bar for each of the shows I watched, and I watched one show after another for hours without end. Milky Way for *Leave it to Beaver*, Mr. Goodbar for *Gunsmoke*, Peppermint Patty for *Yogi Bear*, Snickers for *Ozzie and Harriet*, Zagnut for *Shirley Temple*, or a 7-up for *I Love Lucy*. No surprise, I got chubby. I was made fun of about it, but with no training on what was an appropriate weight or how to achieve it. Food, especially sweets, were used as a pacifier and as a reward.

Being fit and trim were causes for condescension. Mom instructed me not to exercise because men would never want me if I was sweaty and red-faced. In fact, she told me that doing exercise could make me sick. Children think their parents know best, so I believed her. She and all of her sisters were obese, with pork-chop arms that flapped when they moved. Having a child that was pretty would have highlighted her own insecurities, I have surmised over the years. Back then I laid down fat layers that have plagued my entire life.

Fourth grade introduced gendered peer pressure in a new way – around attractiveness and puberty. It was the first time I realized that girls will throw other girls under the bus if it advances their goals. Two girls, Suzanne and LeAnne, who lived a street away, showed up at my house one afternoon on their bikes and said they had a question for me about the *Growing Up and Liking It* book and movie we had been forced to view at school. "We think you're one of those girls, like Beverly", they announced. Beverly was a quiet, very sweet, black-skinned girl in class. Like me, she was a big girl with a big bust. I had started my menstrual periods at age 10, which had been a shock because I had been told nothing about puberty until I found myself bleeding and thought I was dying. Suzanne was a small girl who even then was into being wealthy and pretty (and was the first girl in our class to get a nose-job for beauty purposes), and LeAnne (whose disabled sister was kept in a crib in a back bedroom in the dark with the shades pulled down as her parents waited for her to have the courtesy to die), looked at me and demanded, "If you're not like Beverly, then pull down your pants so we can see if you have any hair down there." I still remember my heart pounding and their mean and eager faces, knowing that if I did, they were going to tell everyone in school what they saw. I felt like a trapped animal. For some reason, my mom looked out the window and saw that something was amiss and called me into dinner at that exact moment. They left me alone after that. Without saying a word, I gained a closer bond with Beverly. She, too, had identified the cloak of invisibility to be a safeguard.

Around that age, boys had the autonomy to be away from home. Like pack animals, they bonded together to do things that proved their manhood to each other. I found them totally uncivilized even as a child. Why were they being raised to think that bad behavior was good? These were the kind of guys that saw dogs as masculine and cats as feminine, so hurting cats was a way to terrorize girls. They bragged about putting kittens in a sack on the road so cars would run over them, hanging them on the clothesline by their neck as they stuck metal clothes hangers in them, or burying the cats with their heads out and then running over them with a lawnmower. Their cruelty was unimaginable to me, so when they threatened to do harm to people who got in their way, I believed they meant it. The importance of masculinity, disgust of femininity, approval of violence, power, sex, and the license to exploit others for their own purposes seemed to be part of the lessons little boys learned. I was perplexed when they boasted about going into the woods and doing masturbation games with each other, to see who could ejaculate first, or who could come last. They loved teasing LuEllen, who unknowingly started her period at school and had blood down her legs. Bra flipping was one of their favorite past times. As they got older, the boys had access to a cabin upriver where they would drink and have sex on mattresses that became crusty from use. The jocks, especially the big boys on the football team, had the run of the school. I remember working hard for several years on the student council and feeling crushed when I lost the election as president to the mouthy zit-faced football captain of the team, who had never been a council member or done anything to improve school activities besides play ball. Boys seemed to feel entitled to say and do whatever they wanted, and get away with it, no matter how nice girls were or how hard girls worked.

Even in high school, I wanted to grow up and get out of town as fast as I could. I looked at newspaper ads to gain an idea of my options. There were "Jobs Wanted: Men" and another category for "Jobs Wanted: Women". All the well-paying and interesting jobs were in the male column. Female jobs paid a pittance in comparison to wait on people or do dirty work. They offered no future that looked promising to me. Education was highly valued in my home, but especially for males. I saw that going to college was the only way I could get out of a future that seemed filled with gloom and doom. My older brother wanted to become a lawyer and was sent to a private college. In turn, my dad thought that I should become his secretary; I didn't really need to go to college. Thanks to an older girl friend who attended the state university who said she would watch over me, my mom, who had always wanted to go to school but wasn't allowed, was able to push my dad into letting me go to the university. It was a phenomenally difficult time but finally my parents let me go to the state university. My becoming a sociologist instead of "something useful" was met with chagrin. While they never said I wasted their money to study stratification and marginalization, it was clear they thought I did. They did not understand my interests any more than they understood me.

Children's human rights treaties defend the right of gender equality in all its forms. The costs are enormous and gender rights are currently threatened. Women still make about as much on the dollar today as they did when I started college; lack of control over reproduction is nothing short of oppressive, and court rulings today are stifling the future of female children in particular (Chalfant 2022). Clinical sociologists' gender equality work at the policy and intervention levels are critically important.

Race

I remember life before segregation was outlawed. Growing up on the Mason-Dixon line, the community I lived in was primarily white with many black people in town. Our house was located in a racially-mixed area, there were regularly people of different demographics and backgrounds in our home and at our table, we all attended school together, and everyone seemed to be respectful and enjoy each other. My mayor-father had appointed the first black firefighters and police officers in our city. As a child, I was naively oblivious to the extent of the race issue. That is, until I was in high school.

The first moment of awareness came when I was in student theatre. Macey, a black student, had an amazing voice that carried the rest of us. Our traveling troupe was invited to do a performance at a community down-river. We loaded into three cars, did the show, and had a great time. On the way back home, the director, Mr. Hann, decided we should stop for lunch. The back roads we were on didn't provide many restaurant options, but one local family diner looked like a place we could get sandwiches. We all sat down to be waited on, but the waitress didn't come forward and huddled at the counter with her boss. The owner came toward us and took Mr. Hann aside. They talked for a few minutes and then went outside to carry on their conversation. When they came back inside, red-faced Mr. Hann told us all to get up and leave, that we weren't going to be eating there. Why? We were hungry. We learned that the owner said he would be happy to serve us, but that Macey would have to eat in the back outside on the picnic table because he wouldn't serve "her kind". I had never seen such blatant racism before, and segregation was illegal then! The director taught us all a valuable human rights lesson that day, and we all agreed it was better to go hungry.

A year later, I was a representative at a state-wide student leadership conference of 200 teens. In a pit auditorium, one white male student stood up and announced that he hadn't yet had an opportunity to talk with the student who was speaking, who was black. At this point the white male pointed to every student of color and said, and "I want to meet you, and you, and you…" to which a white girl in the group asked, "so why is it that you point to them and not include me? Am I not worth meeting too?" At that point, the entire auditorium burst into debate over race. It was the first time I watched in mass everyone, especially my age, struggle with how to think about, and talk about, race.

As the years went on, I have had a wide variety of people in my life who I have loved and cared about. Denying someone opportunity on the basis of race never made moral sense to me, yet data proves it continues to thrive. As a researcher, I now understand why it exists. Current data shows the continued discrimination that Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) children face. Demographic trends show that the majority of children in the US are no longer white; it is essential for racial discrimination to cease. Clinical sociologists are active in trying to eradicate the pervasive way racism kills souls and society.

Social Class

Children learn early on that money rules people's lives. They identify this by the kind of house, car, or clothes other children have. Materialism matters to children. They see how some children get phones and tablets and go to camp while others don't because their families can't afford such luxuries. School lunch may be the only meal some children get, and if their parents can't afford to pay for them, some schools refuse to serve children food (Nilan and Vissing 2019). Social class, in all of its facets, matters.

As a young child, my dad was a laborer whose clothes were soiled from his work. He had one suit that he called his "marrying burying" suit because weddings and funerals were the few times he dressed up. My mom was always embarrassed because she couldn't shop at the "fancy lady store" in town. I became embarrassed too when all the girls in my class wore a particular dress, and I was told we couldn't afford it. At grocery shops, I recall putting back a twenty-five-cent book because money was so tight my mom left many desired food items at the check-out counter when she did not have enough dollars in her purse.

There was talk about money in the house, but I was taught that richness concerned goodness of the heart, not money in the bank. Politicians were evaluated regarding how much they cared for others, remnants of my parents' FDR New Deal appreciation of helping the little guy. My mom would talk about people who were "trash" – those who cared more about their money and self-important lifestyle than being other people's brother. There was a sense that we were good people because we cared about others.

I thought we were seen as highly respected people in the community because we were nice, but didn't realize that others judged my worth by the money in our household. This was until I was having a conversation with a classmate on whom I was sweet. He seemed to like me but made advances I thought were inappropriate. He replied that he figured I was easy because of my family background and said that his parents actually did not approve of him getting involved with me because we weren't good enough for them. To him, we were trash. I was terribly hurt. All the good deeds that I/we had done did not matter because we did not have a fancy house in the upscale neighborhood. Parents who were common workers, with no college education, was seen to be justification to demean me. I never knew classmates, until then, whose parents had a college education or what avenues that opened for them. Once I learned, it was illuminating what money could buy.

People still connect money with goodness in a way that resembles Weber's essay on capitalism and the Protestant ethic (1930). Weber proposed that because people did not know if they were going to heaven, they looked for worldly signs – like money. If God loves you and you are seen as a good person, you must be blessed with wealth – but if you are poor, sick, or destitute, it is because you are less worthy or inherently bad. That view is still embraced by the public, even though, as sociologists, we know that one's placement in the stratification systems emerges because of a variety of social factors, not inherent goodness. What does it take to make us "good enough"? What does a child have to do to prove they are worthy? I have done extensive work with wonderful people who are homeless, hungry, and poor, and know that the social class issue is one that clinical sociologists must incorporate in their work for just policies for families and children. It is also one of my main areas of concern regarding children's rights.

5. Replication of Childhood

One of the central premises in the sociology of childhood is that for good or ill, children mimic and transform what they learned into new aspects of their life for the rest of their lives (James and Prout 1997; Jenks 1990; Prout 2011). As a former clinician, and from conversations with every therapist that I know, it is clear that what happens in childhood replays itself in various ways as people become adults (Caren 2018). When children do not have their rights protected, they pay a harsh price for it.

I had enough of my rights protected as a child that I was able to have a good life, and I am grateful to my parents and supporters along the way who have made this day possible. I feel it is morally right for me to use my professional skills to fight for justice for others. I learned from watching my dad morph from a wrecker-driver into the mayor of our city that we can use our agency to transform ourselves. I watched my mom, unable to go to college, fight for me to go. I watched her struggle to be a good wife and mother, and while she didn't always do things "right", her intentions were good. These role models gave me a foundation on which to be able to build a career that I describe in this essay.

But like most children, my life was not perfect. There were struggles that were preventable, struggles that were not in my best interest. The notion that "adversity makes us stronger" is bunk, in my opinion. Children thrive best when they have the things they need. The "when life gives you lemons, make lemonade" mantra becomes the only thing we can do to survive suffering and transform our lives for the good. To replicate anger, violence and inflict misery on others is not in anyone's best interest. So out of suffering, we have the possibility of gaining compassion for ourselves and helping others.

When I was a child, I could not do much to protect myself. I learned patterns of interactions and relationship expectations that were not in my best interest. I may have turned into an adult at age 18 but the impacts of what I had experienced did not end. Instead, I replicated them. I found myself attracted to men who were like my father – self-important, concerned with reputation, who had affairs, discounted my needs and emotions, men who were financially present but emotionally absent and less-than-perfect fathers and husbands. They played upon my history that rendered me impotent to stop their abuse of me or my children. Like my mom, I covered for them and even emboldened their reputation as good guys. This pattern continued into my adulthood when I, a scholar in family violence, am embarrassed to admit that I found myself a victim of domestic violence and realized that all of my children were abused by their fathers. This continued until I had the courage to confront what was happening and stop it.

When I had my own children, I tried to give them the love, attention, and compassion that I never got. But I hadn't learned about appropriate boundary management and sometimes defaulted into the parenting style I learned as a child. As a National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) Post-Doctoral Research Fellow, my clinical sociological perspective helped me to understand why sometimes mothers exert verbal and emotional control over children to keep them in line, so their husbands won't flip out and become violent to the children. If mothers can use emotional or verbal threats to control children, it is a sacrifice they may choose to make because they deem it is safer for the children than disregarding children's misbehavior and then having the dads become mean and violent. If that happened, children could get seriously hurt, the doctor or police may get involved, and then all hell could break loose at home. In trying to protect our children, moms sometimes violate some of children's rights. It is a balancing act that few of us do well. Our children have a right to be angry at us for our lack of perfection and violation, just as we have a right to be angry at our parents for the same. It takes time to understand that when moms attempt to control children's behavior, it might be to keep more serious child abuse or domestic violence – or divorce – from occurring. Little do such moms realize that often words hit as hard as a fist, and that emotional wounds take much longer to heal than physical ones (Vissing and Baily 1996).

It was a stark realization that knowing the research about how to best care for children does not mean that we can or will. This has been a huge challenge in my journey of becoming a children's human rights defender. Studies of epigenetics have helped me to consider that my mom was abused and felt bad about herself, as had her mom and her mother before her, and they transferred this legacy to me in a variety of ways (Gelenter 2014). Unknowingly, I became my mother, passive, waiting on others, excusing their violations, allowing myself to be gas-lit, putting my men's needs before my own or even those of my children, all the while knowing that they didn't really love me or the children. This realization has been a very hard pill to swallow, one which I hope time and forgiveness will heal. Defending children's rights and providing them with internal and external support is something that clinical sociologists can offer.

I keep thinking that because I have learned the importance of clinical sociological policies and practices, others know them too. Once you know them, they seem so obviously important. The reality is, most individuals and organizations do not. Here are two stories that convey the importance of addressing the multiple levels of policies and protections that children require.

When I became a parent, a new generation of child rights violations emerged. Finding safe daycare was almost impossible. There was the provider who exposed them to chickenpox the first day because she let all the babies sleep on the same bedding in cribs; there was the one who put hot mustard in children's mouths when they misbehaved; the one who felt it was appropriate to beat my children in the name of God, the one that had a dozen children in a room 10x10 feet with only a TV to entertain them, and the one where I found my toddler behind the wooden console tangled in TV and stereo wires.

Looking for greater safety for my children, I opted out of home daycare for the only daycare business in town, a church-run one. One morning as I pulled into the parking lot to take my toddler son inside, he turned into a screaming banshee and refused to go in because he was "afraid of the man, the mean man who had the dead frog in his pocket". This was about the same time period that the news was filled with articles about some daycare providers who allegedly sexually abused children and threatened the children not to tell by killing little animals in front of them and telling them that their parents or siblings would be killed if they told. I asked my son questions, and while he was three years old, he was credible and so upset that I would not take him into the daycare without doing more investigation. The man in question had previously creeped me out a number of times, like when I stopped by, he was often rubbing children's backs or fronts under their shirts, or he would glare for no good reason. If the man hadn't already raised red flags for me, I might have been less worried, but my intuition said that there was something going on with him that made my normally peaceful and sweet little boy this upset.

I took off work, went home, and called the director to talk with her about what had happened. I did not accuse, I was simply asking questions to learn more about this man, daycare protocols, and looking for explanations about why my little boy would be so upset. She was defensive and dismissive – she denied all possibility of improprieties. She showed up unannounced at my home that afternoon with a legal document she tried to force me to sign that said my son lied and no violation had occurred. I refused to sign – I told her that while my son was young, he had never lied to me. I just wanted to know what happened and to make sure children there were safe. When I asked to review her safety policies, she started yelling at me – I was clearly her problem now, not the question of whether her employee had acted inappropriately. Taking my son back to her daycare wasn't an option for her or for me. I was left in a childcare desert, a single mom having to work, and having to scramble like crazy to arrange safe care for him so I didn't lose my job. I went away, powerless to protect other children from suspected infractions. I didn't call a lawyer, thinking that it would do no good. Today I would not do the same thing – my intervention as a children's human rights defender would be strong.

Courts are supposed to protect children, but I sometimes wonder how effective the courts are in protecting children's rights. As a Guardian ad Litem, I work on behalf of children who are pawns in divorce cases, with children seen as property that parents fight over instead of considering what is in the best interest of the child. I work with mental health, social service, and homelessness organizations that can't serve children without parental consent – and many children have parents who can't, or won't, allow their children to get help. Very abusive parents whose children are removed still get first priority on getting children back even when further abuse is likely because parents' rights always seem to come before children's rights. When I tried to pull in expert resources to protect children in a contentious divorce case because I felt the father (who was a lawyer) was manipulative, I was removed from the case because of being too "pushy" for requesting outside experts to intervene. A few months later, he murdered his wife, hid her body, and, when it was discovered, he tried to blame it on his adopted son, who he had threatened with bodily harm if he told anyone.

When I served on my state's juvenile parole board, troubled youth who came from dysfunctional homes were put into detention facilities that were sometimes abusive, only to be returned to parents who had not received therapy or had no community intervention services in place. The facility is now closed, and employees are being sued because of the child physical, emotional, and sexual abuse that occurred on their watch or at their hands (Ramer 2022).

These experiences have taught me that even the institutions designed to protect children aren't always acting in the best interests of the child, especially when it comes to high-power parents. The systems do not invest in what children need and then act surprised when children grow up to be troubled adults.

6. Conclusion

Sociological analysis of childhood experiences provides insights into how common experiences can have lifelong impacts. My childhood experiences aren't unique but widely shared by people from different races, social classes, religions, and genders.

I have been teaching child and youth rights courses for 15 years and have been collecting data on what I've observed. As their first assignment before we cover anything, I ask students to write an essay on what life was like for them as a child. This gives me insight into what kinds of issues students are carrying before they have read any course material. Some students had happy childhoods and were cared for. But the majority of students tell stories that convey sadness that they can't forget, many of which are heartbreaking. Trauma and abuse are commonly shared experiences. Students write about physical, emotional, and sexual abuse; domestic violence was a regular occurrence, which often led to divorce or students wishing their mothers had divorced bad dads but didn't. Some students were removed and put into foster care. Poverty and deprivation were shared by countless students, who talked about the emotional, physical, and social impacts of being poor. Some weren't able to participate in school functions or camps because their families couldn't afford it; hunger and housing distress were common, and they still felt the stigma and embarrassment because they were poor, and everybody knew it. Many had physical or mental illnesses, or members of their families did. Their parent's alcohol and drug use were big problems for them. Parents frequently had anger issues, boundary problems, and emotional dysregulation that led to inappropriate behavior and poor parenting. Students shared the experience of ridicule, exclusion, embarrassment, oppression, and discrimination; they were the wrong color, the wrong size, too fat, too skinny, too dumb, too smart, too ugly, too pretty, too tall, too short, from the wrong race, ethnicity, religion, country, family background, the wrong gender, the wrong sexual orientation, the wrong social class – the list of preventable grief goes on and on.

The students have not yet had the clinical sociological knowledge to link together their childhood experiences with their current life and future outcomes. As I write this, I am finishing my sixteenth book, this one an overview of children's human rights in the USA. It took me a long time to become a writer. I think back to my high school English classroom when we were doing a poetry unit. The Civil Rights movement was in full swing. In my bedroom, I wrote a poem that I read to the class the next day. The teacher listened to me read it. My classmates told me it was really good, then the teacher accused me of stealing the poem. She demanded to know where I got it, that it couldn't possibly be my own work. Except it was. It was so good that she thought it was a printed poem by a published author. I remember the flush flooding into my cheeks as I tried not to cry. On the way out of class, I crunched the poem's blue and white lined paper in my fist and threw it into the metal trash can by the door. I have often regretted throwing it away. The part I still remember went something like "you criticize, ostracize, and rationalize and refuse to realize that what you see is really me". Decades later as I have become a "real writer", I have wondered what could have happened if that teacher had encouraged my writing, worked with me to refine it, and assisted me in getting published. Instead, I waited until I was old to realize that I had something important that someone might want to hear.

Realizing that I have joined the family of clinical sociologists has been an honor I never expected. Early sociologists often came from family backgrounds in which religion was important. Whether Christian or Jewish, the moral underpinnings of sociology were influenced by the religious or moral views of parents or the larger community (Horil 2019; Kaufman 2019; Swatos and Kitisto 1991).

As a religion minor during my undergraduate studies, I have come to appreciate the secular religious premises underlying much of sociology. I grew up in a Christian household and learned to respect other traditions of faith and social justice. The principles imparted in Protestantism, Catholicism, Judaism, and indigenous cultures have shaped my foundations for human rights advocacy. The growth of Buddhist sociology (Immergut and Kaufman 2014; Schipper 2012) has been of significance as I have processed my life's work. Insights from anthropological work by shamans, as well as both clinical and applied sociologists, offer different visions into how to perceive ourselves and live in the world. Concepts like lojong and tonglen pertain to bodichitta on the importance of our actions. (Chodron 2020; Kongtrul 2006; Lief 2021). Without going into detail on these notions, they focus on how to contemplate one's actions and find a wiser, more compassionate way of reacting in the future. We can use our experiences to make the world a better place.

As a child, I suffered needlessly, as most children do. If parents and society approached children with loving kindness and followed the blueprint for their wellbeing as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Office of the High Commissioner 1989), children would fare much better. I believe that adults have blindly created much misery for children. I am sharing some examples of my critical life experiences to illustrate the short- and long-term harm they have created. I use a social constructionist, Buddhist, and a clinical sociological approach to propose how we could transform adversity for the good of children, families, communities and societies.

In short, my desire to advocate for children's human rights is not merely a professional interest. It is a spiritual quest at well. Clinical sociology has become a vehicle to improve the lives of children, so they do not have to suffer.

Children depend upon families and communities to defend them. Advice in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, from the American Academy of Pediatrics, and other child advocacy organizations exists to prevent children's suffering. The nation and world is at a fork in the road. It is my hope that we as clinical sociologists and human rights defenders will support children to use their agency and to be freer from the traumas and problems that adults inflict upon them.

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