

Learning Task #1a
Podcast Review and Summary
This American Life – Episode 521
“Bad Baby”

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Notes from the podcast (one bullet point per act)

1. **Prologue** features a mother recounting her son's changes in behaviour, from a typical toddler, to about two years of age and beyond when the aggressive outbursts began. The aggressive outbursts coincided with the birth of his sibling. Since the age of five, the child gets multiple diagnoses (ADHD, CD, ODD, Mood Dysregulation Disorder, and ASD), and Behavioural interventions do not help. *Listening to the multiple diagnoses that the child received, I wonder how informative and helpful they become*
 - to reflect on: the journey thematically starts at birth and makes me think of the validity of the behaviourist "tabula-rasa" argument **#1BlankSlateOrNot**
2. **Act One** interviews Doris Lessing, author of "The Fifth Child," portraying a family similar to Cheryl's. The traits described point to issues inherent to the child and draw a parallel to Cheryl's experiences from the main story of this episode. *I tried to imagine what Cheryl's family (and Lessing's protagonist), experiencing this, including the siblings, and the hopeless situation they are in*
 - to reflect on: Cheryl's experiences of being judged by society speak to the view of human nature sometimes dependent on positionality: i.e. whether one is a professional looking at the family, or a parent
#2PositionalityInfluencesWorldview
3. **Act Two** explores a common denominator to disruptive behaviours, settling on the label "Bad" or "Badness" and when it starts. *Psychologist Paul Bloom references some of the findings from his research on the moral development of children. Bloom argues that a child's 'ontogeny' of moral development develops gradually; it starts with self-*

centeredness and eventually expands to include others we like and possibly even those different from us.

- to reflect on: explore Bloom's explanation of the nature-nurture interaction, and more specifically, which aspects inherent in the child interact with the environment and are shaped by it #3NatureNurtureInteraction

4. **Act Three** discusses the story of Chris, now in his thirties, recounting his childhood, offering a first-person perspective of someone who started as a "bad kid" but became a well-adjusted individual once he outgrew this phase. *This segment also looks at the overlap, or interaction, between nature and nurture, much like Bloom described in the previous segment, showing a progression from self-centeredness towards emotional and moral adjustment*

- to reflect on: explore why Chris outgrows this phase and becomes well adjusted later on (like the 80%, or four out of five as indicated) #4CaregiverImpact

5. **Act Four** discusses the story of Maurice Griffin and one of his earlier foster parents, Lisa, when Maurice is suddenly removed from the foster family home at the age of ten. *To me, the story illustrates the gaps in the foster care system, which rightly has protocols to address child maltreatment, but tends to overlook the relationships that the children form. Although ethically challenging for social workers, this story challenges our thinking on whether the system is working for the children it serves.*

- to reflect on: the need for belonging and how it manifests for children in the foster care system. #5MeaningfulConnections

Reflections

The podcast episode "Bad Baby" explores the nature-nurture debate through storytelling. It elegantly swings the pendulum and the listener's attention between arguments favouring the nature explanation at the beginning and towards the nurture explanation with each act (#1). Even if we grant that it is both nature and nurture, we may still wonder: why would aggressive outbursts persist in one out of five children? For example, the case with Cheryl's son is certainly perplexing as the behaviours seemingly emerge without any obvious explanation environmentally, although psychopathology is suspected. Furthermore, it also turns out that we are biased when it comes to evaluating the argument itself. For instance, the nature-nurture debate has its usual suspects aligned depending on positionality, with parents pointing to factors intrinsic to the child, whereas professionals considering the parents a contributing factor (Sameroff, 2010, p.7) (#2). However, evidence points to it being both and Bloom helps guide us in the right direction, explaining during the interview that the "Dark Knight" impulse in children is not typical and that most children gradually regulate it with the help of their caregivers and the social environment. Considering the complexity of the developmental processes, with all the moving parts in the bio-psycho-social axis that could go wrong, we ought to perhaps be amazed that most children adjust well (#3). In looking at other contributing factors, the podcast gradually shifts focus from the child's inherent qualities to the environment around them, hinting at the essential factors that help make a positive difference in each story; for Chris, it was the unconditional love of a mother (#4). With Maurice, on the other hand, we get to appreciate the meaningful bond with a caregiver, a need so strong that he sought Lisa for decades after, eager to be adopted even as an adult (#5). In sum, the underlying message throughout the program segments is that our impact on child development is still tremendous, provided we understand

that adjustment happens for better or worse and that the observed maladaptive behaviour is often an expression of unmet needs. A child is continuously steeped in, and interacting with the environment throughout the development, intertwined in what Sameroff (2010) would call, “a combination of neurons and neighborhoods, synapses and schools, proteins and peers, and genes and governments all into one” (p.7). With this in mind we can begin to appreciate that any presenting behaviour serves a function for the child, and is communicating a need as the child interfaces with those around them. By attempting to understand the function of the behavior, or the 'why,' we can then inform our approach in helping to address those needs in our various roles as stakeholders in the health and wellbeing of the children in our society.

References

Sameroff, A. (2010). A unified theory of development: A dialectic integration of nature and nurture. *Child Development*, 81(1), 6–22. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2009.01378.x>