

3.1 The Concept of Multicausality

When a person sets out to solve a problem, the most logical first step is to try to find out what has caused it. When the cause has been identified, a rational plan to solve the problem can then be designed. But as we try to neatly match solutions to problems, six principles of **multicausality** (<http://content.thuzelearning.com/books/Mandell.7875.17.1/sections/p700047913600000000000000000000021ef#P70004791360000000000000000000002265>) complicate the process.

multicausality

The view that personal or social problems are caused by many interacting factors, often too complex to allow a precise assessment of causality.

1. *In dealing with social problems, we can never establish causality with any solid degree of certainty.* Even though we may have collected all the data we could about a person, we still end up with a best guess, an informed hunch, or a hypothesis to explain the causes of his or her problem. For example, it is easy to make the assumption that if infants are picked up every time they cry, they will become spoiled. But it is equally possible that if infants are allowed to cry for long periods of time, they will become frustrated. As we watch a child who constantly seeks attention from a teacher, we cannot tell if the child's behavior is caused by too much or too little parental supervision at home. We also cannot tell if it is because of a genuine inability to understand the work and the child needs more instruction, or if it is because the work is too easy and the child is bored and ready to move on.

If we were to read all the books on the shelf of a library under the heading "Child-Raising Manuals," we would find many different views among the experts. Whether children should be spanked, breast-fed, sent to day care or kept at home, taught the alphabet early, and so forth are questions with many different answers (Breitbart & Schram, 1978 (<http://content.thuzelearning.com/books/Mandell.7875.17.1/sections/p700047913600000000000000000000022b4#P70004791360000000000000000000002325>)). Dr. Benjamin Spock, author of a best-selling manual on raising a healthy child, did a major revision of his book (Spock, 1946 (<http://content.thuzelearning.com/books/Mandell.7875.17.1/sections/p700047913600000000000000000000022b4#P700047913600000000000000000000025B5>), 1976 (<http://content.thuzelearning.com/books/Mandell.7875.17.1/sections/p700047913600000000000000000000022b4#P700047913600000000000000000000025B6>)). If you tried to follow his parenting advice in 1946, you would have raised your little boy or girl very differently than if you read his revised book thirty years later. Spock looked back at his first book and was shocked by his own sexrole stereotyping. In his later books, he confessed that his thinking had undergone a dramatic change (Spock & Morgan, 1989 (<http://content.thuzelearning.com>)).

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When we read about the lives of famous people, we find every possible kind of parenting. Some have excelled in life presumably because of supportive home environments, but others have excelled despite their negative home environments. Some of these people were orphans, some were the only child in the family, and some had many siblings. In landmark autobiographies, such as *Manchild in the Promised Land* (Brown, 1965 (<http://content.thuzelearning.com/books/Mandell.7875.17.1/sections/p7000479136000000000000000000000022b4#P700047913600000000000000000000002329>)), authors struggle to understand the impact of their early experiences on their adult personality and life choices and rarely can they come up with answers. Jerome Kagan (1989) (<http://content.thuzelearning.com/books/Mandell.7875.17.1/sections/p7000479136000000000000000000000022b4#P700047913600000000000000000000002453>), an eminent Harvard University child development specialist, has found that the more he studies, the less he is convinced that there are very many linkages between a person's early childhood characteristics and his or her personality as an adult.

2. *There is rarely one simple cause of a problem.* When we observe negative behavior, either in a social system or in an individual, we can be absolutely sure that more than one factor is responsible. Beware of popular wisdom and tabloid newspapers that will try to sell you simple reasons for a complex phenomenon. Headlines shout:

POLITICIAN DECLARES LACK OF DISCIPLINE IN HOME IS MAJOR CAUSE OF RISE IN JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

or

SCHOOL AUTHORITIES SAY INADEQUATE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM IS CAUSE OF CRIME INCREASE

or

SOCIAL REFORMERS DEMAND INCREASE IN JOBS TO STEM YOUTH CRIME

or

LACK OF RECREATIONAL FACILITIES CITED AS CAUSE OF JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

And as newspapers search for reasons that can be crammed into eye-catching headlines, supermarket magazines offer articles titled:

THE SECRET OF A HAPPY MARRIAGE

or

HOW YOUR BIRTH ORDER DETERMINES YOUR PERSONALITY

Pop culture encourages people to blame their problems on a single event in their lives—the “one cataclysmic event” theory of social causation. In television dramas, the kindly therapist helps the

distraught woman remember the horrible experience that led, twenty years later, to her mental breakdown; released from the prison of her repressed memory, she walks out of his office into the waiting arms of husband and children, made whole again. Veterans, refugees, and victims of violent assaults often suffer **posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)** (<http://content.thuzelearning.com/books/Mandell.7875.17.1/sections/p7000479136000000000000000000000021ef#P700047913600000000000000000000002275>) from the devastating things they have seen and felt. But neither the development of their problems nor the solutions to these problems are ever that simple.

posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

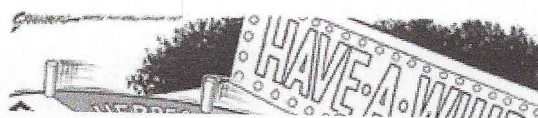
A common anxiety disorder that develops after exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal in which grave physical harm occurred or was threatened. Family members of victims also can develop the disorder. PTSD can occur in people of any age, including children and adolescents.

3. *Human service problems are the result of many intertwined personal pressures and social forces.* The problem of delinquency among young men and women involves so many different developmental stresses, such as family, peer, and school pressures, that it would not be possible to overcome delinquency by changing only one aspect of a teenager's life.

If we look at another of the headlines, we will find that there are no compelling research data proving that when fewer women worked outside the home, youth crime was substantially lower. Historically, poor and working-class women have always had to work outside their homes to feed their families. And given both the current economy and the realities of many women's desire for jobs and careers, it is hardly practical to expect all mothers to stay at home, even if that would solve the problem.

It is also unlikely that just increasing the length of prison sentences would stop the crime epidemic. Who gets caught, the bail set, and the kind of punishment given are more often connected to the socioeconomic status and race of the alleged perpetrators than to guilt or innocence. And the debate on capital punishment waxes and wanes, with no compelling evidence that it reduces the incidence of major crimes.

Although a severe lack of jobs, especially for young people, undoubtedly does encourage youngsters to resort to criminal behavior, jobs alone do not stop crime. Youth need to be trained adequately for rewarding jobs, and the jobs offered must hold the promise of a future. In addition, if simply having a job assured honesty, we would not have the widespread white-collar fraud that has led to the downfall of many banks and stock companies.





When we work for social change, rarely do we expect to be the target of police action. But Cheri Honkala, a member of the Chippewa tribe, discovered what it felt like to be treated like a criminal when she joined a protest against the lack of affordable housing.

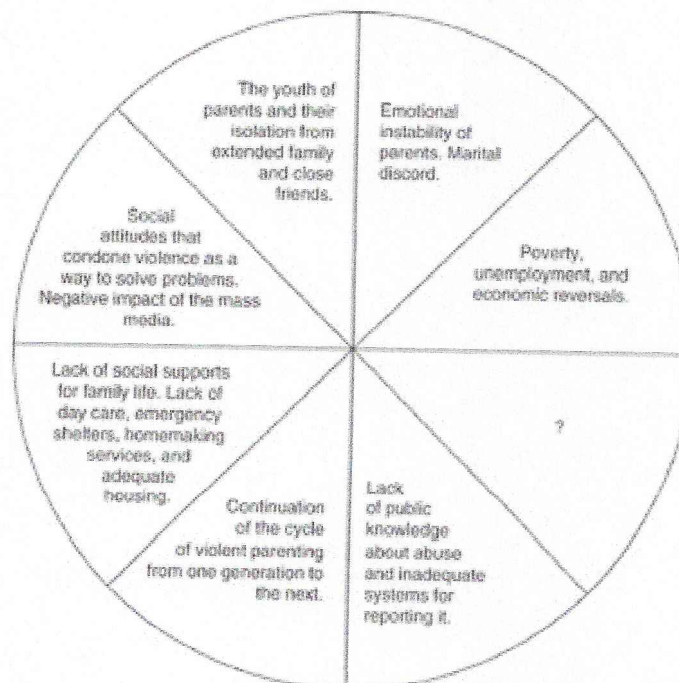


Figure 3.1
Possible causes of child abuse

We know, for example, that during periods of economic recession, there seems to be a rise in family violence. Yet we can do little to stop job layoffs in the automobile factories or recapture the market from foreign competitors. However, by recognizing the social costs of unemployment, we can work to establish more job-retraining programs. We can also lobby the federal government for extended unemployment benefits and organize support groups that help families deal with the upheaval in their lives without taking it out on their children and one another. And we can work for political candidates who share our values.

Exploring root causes, like everything else connected with causality, is a matter of action and reflection, trial and error. For example, a woman enters counseling convinced that her constant depression is a result of her husband's infidelity. Her husband complains that she is no longer willing to go out with him or entertain their friends as they used to. He feels rejected by her and has sought companionship in a series of brief affairs. After meeting with the couple together and separately, the counselor suggests that she visit yet one more physician. Although her family doctor had given her a clean bill of health, the specialist diagnoses her constant lack of energy as chronic fatigue syndrome. Unfortunately, there is no quick cure for this biological condition. Perhaps the couple's situation will remain the same for a while, but the definition of the root causes of their problem is now very different. They might still need supportive therapy. He might still be unhappy with her inactivity, but he is likely to feel less rejected. Now, perhaps, he can be more understanding. If he is less angry, her mood is likely to improve. And if the basic commitment to each other is still strong, perhaps they can find new, more sedentary ways to enjoy being together.

5. *Although many people appear to have the same problem, they may have it for a different set of reasons.* If one were to visit a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), it would be easy to assume that the participants were all there for the same major reasons. True, they all have problems with alcohol. But what constellation of causes has led them to become alcoholics? There are many subgroups within this seemingly homogeneous assembly:

- Subgroup A includes people who were raised in an alcoholic family.
- Subgroup B includes people who are in a relationship with an alcoholic lover or spouse.
- Subgroup C includes people who have an undiagnosed and untreated biological condition such as anxiety disorder (<http://content.thuzelearning.com/books/Mandell.7875.17.1/sections/p70004791360000000000000000000021ef#P70004791360000000000000000000021FD>) or attention deficit/hyperactivity (ADHD) (<http://content.thuzelearning.com/books/Mandell.7875.17.1/sections/p70004791360000000000000000000021ef#P70004791360000000000000000000021FF>) disorder.

anxiety disorder

A biological condition in which feelings of extreme fear, tension, and dread often overwhelm the person, even when there is no apparent threat to their well-being.

attention deficit/ hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

A biological condition with early onset and often long duration that interferes with a person's capacity to focus and sustain interest, especially when the agenda is set by an outside authority, as in a school or work setting.

- Subgroup D includes people who are in a profession that requires a great deal of social drinking.
- Subgroup E includes people who have recently experienced a major life trauma, such as death, divorce, job loss, or diminished physical capacity.

Likewise, if one were to observe a group of eighteen third-grade students in a town-wide tutoring program, it would be easy to assume that they all have the same problems. Even though they are all labeled learning disabled and their scores on a standardized reading test place them two years behind their peers, we may discover after getting to know them that:

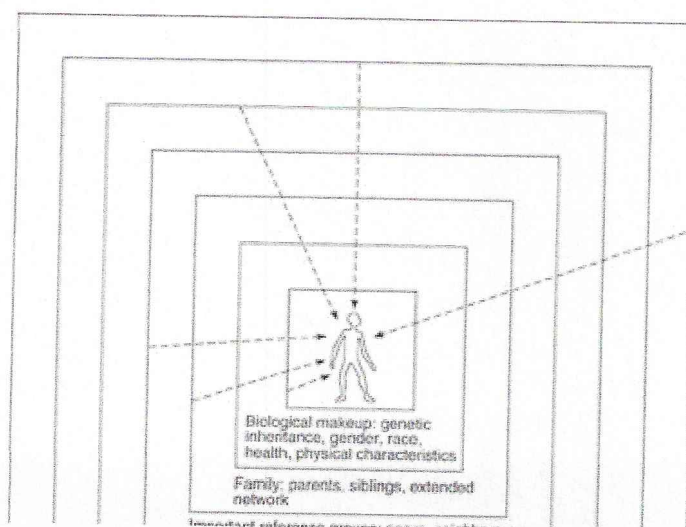
- Three need eyeglasses and one needs a hearing aid.
- Two are very bright but have short attention spans.
- Three have a specific learning disorder, such as dyslexia.
- Five are attending a school that has large classes, inexperienced teachers, and high staff turnover.
- Two have serious problems at home that divert their energy.
- One frequently comes to school hungry, cold, or physically ill.
- For two, we can find no reasons at all. (Maybe they are just late bloomers.)

Of course, each of the causal factors just described is filtered through the screen of the child's unique personality and habitual way of coping. Just as there are no two identical faces in the world (except for identical twins), there are no two identical psychological profiles.

6. *Even when people encounter similar experiences, they do not necessarily react in similar ways.* In a very personal account of his internment in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II, the late psychologist **Bruno Bettelheim (1950)** (<http://content.thuzelearning.com/books/Mandell.7875.17.1/sections/p7000479136000000000000000000000022b4#P700047913600000000000000000000002310>) wrote about being both victim and professional observer. He described the ways inmates adjusted to life under intolerable circumstances. Many died resisting the guards, others acquiesced almost humbly, some escaped, some collaborated, some took leadership roles for the first time in their lives. Differences among the prisoners seemed to be based on their life experiences before their internment and their personal characteristics, occupations, and skills, as well as on large doses of luck and chance.

It was impossible to predict in advance how concentration camp survivors would fare in the future. Some, like Bettelheim, gained strength from adversity and went on to have outstanding careers. Some became bitter, withdrawn, and distrustful. Still others became profoundly more appreciative of the basic pleasures of family and friends. Likewise, children who are too bright or creative for the class they are placed in do not all act alike. One simply grins and bears it, another withdraws into daydreams, another becomes the class clown, and another becomes the star pupil.

The concept of multicausality also helps to explain why siblings are often so different. Even though they grow up with the same set of parents, go to the same school, live in the same neighborhood, perhaps even have the same type of physical disability, we can never predict precisely how each one of them will think or act. Surprisingly, the reverse is also true. Scientists have identified cases in which identical twins, reared apart from birth, displayed remarkable similarities in adulthood. Although their environments were very



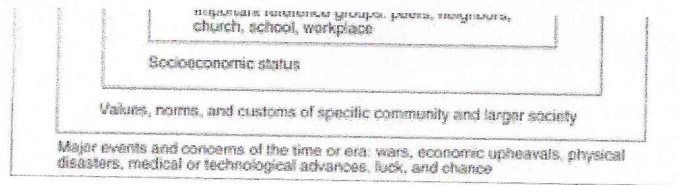


Figure 3.2

Six sets of forces that shape our actions and attitudes dissimilar, their DNA—their genes—exerted a remarkable impact on their abilities and personalities.

Learning about the concept of multicausality helps us to understand why so many different strategies are needed to alleviate personal and social problems. It also helps us understand why so much experimentation accompanies any effort to intervene in a social problem. As our understanding of a problem deepens and the world changes, our strategies expand and change.

For example, those who believed that the availability of alcohol was the root cause of alcohol abuse lobbied long and hard to get it outlawed. They succeeded in passing the Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The Prohibition Act banned the sale of alcoholic beverages all across the United States. Although it appeared to be a logical strategy of intervention, the act was a disaster. Criminals quickly took the place of the alcohol producers, and we had a situation that looked very much like the drug wars that are being fought in the streets of many U.S. towns today. The Prohibition Act was repealed in 1933, and liquor again became widely available. And, once again, it wreaks havoc on family life. Should we try to decriminalize drugs in the same way? What are the pros and cons of doing that? The debate rages on.

Some people are working to make alcohol less available by banning alcohol advertisements, raising the minimum drinking age, and banishing alcohol from campus events. Can you think of five other strategies that might be used in the battle against alcohol abuse?

