



## Culture and Policy in Early Childhood Development

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*(Published online July 28, 2010)*

### **Topic** *Culture*

#### **Introduction**

Policies are cultural products. They are generated using concepts shared by members of a cultural group and implemented through culturally-based institutions. Their effects play out in the natural laboratory of everyday life in a particular cultural place. The relationship between culture and policy in early childhood development is therefore intimate, complex and multi-faceted. Understanding the ways in which culture and policy reflect and influence each other should be part of the theoretical toolkit of educators, health care providers and policy makers; but in fact, culture and policy are rarely considered in the same context. Examining the cultural context of policy is of particular importance in the current era of rapid culture change and globalization.

#### **Subject**

Cultural effects on early childhood development are the focus of a burgeoning research literature; using either culture-specific “emic” constructs or proposed “etic” universal typologies, cross-cultural researchers have sought to describe and understand the ways in which children’s daily experiences are culturally shaped. A separate literature has addressed the effects of particular policies on children and their families. Nevertheless, there are several ways in which culture and policy intersect. Like cultures, policies exist at many levels, from national and international organizations to local groups. Similar to cultural beliefs (“cultural models” or “ethnotheories”), policies also vary in terms of how formalized they are: some can be found in handbooks or legislation, whereas others are simply shared understandings of what is expected of individuals in particular circumstances. Policies usually reflect shared values, and in that sense they are part of a culture - or more particularly the dominant culture in any given social entity. Policies can also be instigators of culture change, in which case they may be controversial. Policies are expressed through specific programs, just as cultural beliefs are instantiated in practices. Finally, when policies are not consistent with the culture of families or individuals affected by them, they often do not work as intended.

#### **Problems**

The most general issue arising from the intersection of these two broad-ranging concepts, as in “culture and policy in early childhood development,” concerns how the actions that

follow from a particular policy fit into and shape – or fail to shape – family decision making and the daily lives of affected children in particular cultural contexts. Research on the effects of policies on child outcomes is typically carried out in a single culture with little attention to mediating mechanisms – that is, to the child and family behaviours that connect the policy actions to developmental processes. These mechanisms, however, involve culturally-organized beliefs, values and customs, leaving the key to policy success in the unexamined “black box” of culture.

### **Research Context**

Ecological frameworks are helpful for understanding the influence of policy on children’s development. In Bronfenbrenner’s<sup>1</sup> classical formulation, the child’s environment consists of a series of nested “systems” from the most proximal “microsystems” through the intermediary “mesosystems” and “exosystems,” to the overarching “macrosystem.” As Garbarino and colleagues suggest, recognition that multiple systems link the individual to society is fundamental, because “it focuses attention on the crucial role of policy in stimulating, guiding and enhancing these intermediary systems [the meso- and exosystems] on behalf of more effective parenting.”<sup>2</sup>

Weisner’s<sup>3</sup> concept of the “ecocultural niche” also considers the child and family as they are affected by social institutions such as welfare, schools and provisions for the care of children.<sup>4,5</sup> This model highlights the central issue of family adaptation, including the family’s ability to build and sustain culturally-meaningful daily routines. The “developmental niche” framework elaborated by Super and Harkness<sup>6,7</sup> conceptualizes the child’s environment of daily life as consisting of three subsystems: the physical and social settings of the child’s daily life; customs and practices of care; and the psychology of the caretakers, especially parental ethnotheories concerning children’s development, parenting, and the family.<sup>8</sup> The subsystems interact with each other, and with the wider culture and characteristics of the individual child. Both the Weisner<sup>3</sup> and the Super and Harkness<sup>6,7</sup> frameworks lend themselves readily to the analysis of how policies affect the everyday settings of children’s lives and the practices of care they experience.

### **Key Research Questions**

From the perspective of these ecological frameworks, four key research questions can be asked in relation to any given policy:

- 1) What is the socio-cultural background of the policy? What cultural beliefs – explicit or implicit – does the policy reflect?
- 2) Through which specific pathways does a policy influence the family ecology or the child’s developmental niche? Which aspects of family routines and of the niche are affected by new programs?
- 3) How can knowledge about the family ecology or the child’s developmental niche be used to assess the likely impact of a new policy across diverse populations?
- 4) After a policy has been implemented, how can understanding the cultural context of its application help to understand why it has succeeded or failed?

### **Recent Research Results**

Policy-oriented research on young children in the U.S. often describes cultural patterns in

the environments of young children, but they tend not to be recognized as such. For example, a recent report on “the family dinner table” documents the brevity and infrequency of family meals, and urges that “Communities should . . . launch public information campaigns to promote the importance of family mealtime and work with schools to promote the idea of at least one night a week when families eat together.”<sup>9</sup> An ecological approach would lead one to consider such questions as how family dinnertime fits into the child’s daily routines, what the importance of family dinnertime may be for parents, or how features of the larger environment – including children’s extra-curricular activities, parental work schedules and other social priorities – may affect family dinnertime as a cultural practice. Another recent policy-oriented report shows that home visiting programs seem to be more effective for Latino than non-Latino families.<sup>10</sup> This interesting finding could be further explored using an ecological approach to learn more about the ways that home visiting may be differentially perceived by various cultural groups.

The growing cultural diversity of children living in the U.S. is frequently cited as a reason for culturally-competent policies and service delivery,<sup>11</sup> and there is a growing literature on the need for early childhood education and care among immigrant groups. Nevertheless, recommendations often focus on linguistic rather than cultural obstacles to fuller integration of immigrant children, and their families, into successful partnerships.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, Garcia and Jensen<sup>13</sup> have proposed a multi-dimensional model including culture as well as socio-cultural institutions for understanding Latino children’s involvement in child welfare.

Duncan and colleagues<sup>4</sup> provide an example of integrating culture and policy in their study of the impact of Project Hope, an experimental intervention to help poor working families transition to better employment and improved quality of life. The project included providing a package of benefits – tailored to each family’s own needs –intended to fill the gaps in family support left by standard social welfare systems. Using the classic anthropological method of ethnography, the researchers traced the ups and downs of families over the course of the three-year intervention in order to understand the pathways leading to success or failure of the program for particular families. They found that it was the families who were neither relatively well-off at the beginning of the project nor truly overwhelmed by multiple challenges - that is, the families in the middle - who benefitted the most from the program. They concluded that these families were successful because they were able to integrate the new services into their existing daily routines. Similar to this work, some “action research” projects integrate attention to cultural issues with programmatic interventions.<sup>14,15</sup>

Research on children and policies in other countries sheds light on the relationships between culture and policy. International variation in childrearing practices and policies can provide a wider array of possible options for study than are available in the U.S. (or any other single nation). For example, policies related to childbirth in the Netherlands include universal availability of a postpartum care provider who spends a total of about 80 hours at the home of the new mother during the immediate post-partum period in order to carry out basic health checks on mother and baby, coach the mother in basic infant

care, and help with whatever else is needed around the house. Research on the possible influences of this policy on maternal and child health and well-being could lead to consideration of similar policies in the U.S.<sup>16</sup>

Research in other countries has also documented the importance of cultural adaptations of early intervention programs.<sup>17</sup> For example, the Home Intervention Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY)<sup>17</sup> was originally developed in Israel for improving the school readiness of children from low-income families. In Turkey, Kağıtçıbaşı<sup>17</sup> added to the relatively structured cognitive curriculum a “mother enrichment” component that reinforced traditional Turkish values of “relatedness,” and also introduced a focus on “autonomy,” believed by the authors to be essential for success in the rapidly changing modern environment. After four years, the child results replicated advances noted in Israel, and the mothers increased their competence and confidence. On the other hand, a Dutch implementation of the program, not so finely tuned to the multiple minority-culture groups involved, had no overall effects on children and mothers.<sup>18</sup>

Close attention to the mechanisms of change underlines the importance of cultural sophistication in instituting policies and programs. For example, a three-year Colombian adaptation of the original Perry Preschool cognitive development curriculum was unexpectedly found to be nearly as powerful as nutritional supplementation over the same period in reducing long-term growth stunting.<sup>19</sup> Post-hoc analysis of this effect, which was not part of the original U.S. project, points to aspects of the developmental niche that mediated the physical growth result. More recently, a Senegalese program successfully improved the school readiness of three-year-olds by deliberately drawing on local parent beliefs and practices about early learning to promote particularly relevant skills.<sup>20</sup>

These examples illustrate two key points. First, success in early childhood programs is critically dependent on adapting content and policies to local needs and practices. Second, specific pathways of influence, culturally mediated as they are, may vary in unexpected ways from group to group.

A final example illustrates a further point: As programs and policies are cultural products, not only their outward gloss, but even their ultimate purpose may be transformed. The television program *Sesame Street* was developed with the specific goal of boosting school readiness among children from economically deprived households in the U.S. Following its well-documented success,<sup>21,22</sup> it has been replicated in nearly 20 other countries. Most of the adaptations involve obvious changes in language, names, and characters; but as the work went farther afield, especially to high-conflict areas, the focus and orientation of the programs were adapted as well. The Northern Irish *Sesame Tree*, for example, emphasizes cooperation and sharing as much as counting and reading, and the Israeli *Rehov Sumsum* aims to foster inter-group respect and understanding.

### **Research Gaps**

The importance of “culture,” “cultural competence” or “cultural sensitivity” is often invoked in policy discussions without further elaboration on how a cultural perspective could be integrated into research or policy development. This stems at least in part from

the fact that psychologists, who carry out much of the research, are trained to work at the individual level. As Granger notes, “We give an almost automatic nod to the ecology of development, but our models, measurement, and research are uniformly weak at the level of social settings. Because policies are usually assumed to influence individuals in ways mediated by settings, this is a major limitation”.<sup>23</sup>

### **Conclusions**

Policies are cultural productions from their conceptualization through implementation and evaluation, yet this is not commonly recognized in research or public discourse. Globalization and the increasing cultural diversity of many societies have raised concerns about how to adapt policies to a variety of client populations. Ecological frameworks for the study of the child’s Culturally-constructed environment can inform efforts to understand why and how policies succeed or fail in particular instances. The use of a cultural lens for looking at policies can also help in sorting out distinctions between universally positive aspects of child development, and those that are simply the current focus in a given society. Likewise, cross-cultural research on policies and their effects on child development and families can point to a wider array of policy options than are available in one’s own society.

### **Implications for Parents, Services, and Policy**

Parents’ ideas and practices related to child care and development are naturally shaped by culturally constituted “received wisdom.” These assumptions are further embodied in public policies and practices across a wide array of institutions including health, social services and education. A greater awareness of cultural variability in parenting practices and developmental agendas may be liberating for parents within the dominant culture of a society, as well as for immigrants. Service providers will benefit from cultural awareness that goes beyond learning a few often inaccurate generalizations, to becoming ethnographers of the families they encounter.<sup>24</sup> Finally, research on policy related to children should integrate several disciplinary perspectives in order to match expertise on individual development with knowledge about culture and how to study it.

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To cite this document:

Harkness S, Super CM. Culture and policy in early childhood development. In: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, Boivin M, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development; 2010:1-7. Available at: <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/Harkness-SuperANGxp.pdf>. Accessed [insert date].

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**This article is funded by the Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development (CEECD) and the Strategic Knowledge Cluster on ECD (SKC-ECD).**



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