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Development



Culture

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Synthesis

How Important Is It?

With the emergence of globalization and the growth in multicultural nations, it has become imperative to study the link between child development and culture. Culture broadly refers to a group's shared attitudes, traditions, beliefs and practices that are transmitted across generations. Cultures shape children's experiences, and cross-cultural work attempts to study the processes by which these influences occur.

Two distinct frameworks have been used to explore the connection between culture and child development. The most commonly used is the *etic* framework, where a method used to measure a concept, such as social competence, is assumed to be pertinent to all cultures. One potential risk associated with this framework is a failure to explore other more culturally-relevant definitions of a concept. For instance, *ren*, or forbearance, is used to define social competence in China, and is observed when children detach themselves from confrontation to encourage the opponent to show self-control. Although this construct is different from conceptualizations of social competence in Western countries, the distinction may not be acknowledged through an etic framework. This framework can also be disruptive for the dissemination of local knowledge, practices and traditions that are used to educate children. In contrast, the *emic* framework considers the meaning of a given concept, practice or principle for members of a cultural group, and is a more unbiased approach to understand how culture influences child development.

Broad cultural trends have been categorized through the dimensions of individualism and collectivism. Individualism is related to Western ideologies about independence and competitiveness, whereas collectivism refers to Southern and Eastern dogma about interdependence and group harmony. Although these dimensions coexist within nations, it is assumed that some cultures are more individualistic, or more collectivistic, than others. A more recent concept has been to assess cultures according to tightness or looseness: "tight" cultures encourage strict adherence to social norms, whereas "loose" cultures tolerate a wide range of behaviours and relationships. Either way, these categories allow researchers to understand why the same behaviour or practice carries different meanings across cultures.

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Understanding culture is essential for supporting children and families, as policies and programs are only effective when adapted to local values, beliefs and practices.

What do we know?

Culture influences several spheres of child development. This occurs through physical and social settings, customs and practices of child rearing, and the psychology of the caretakers, particularly parental ethnotheories of child development and parenting. A child's learning experiences in a culture without an official education system are shaped through their participation with or observation of adults engaging in culturally relevant activities (e.g., girls learning how to weave from their mothers in the traditional Mayan peasant culture). Culture also plays a role in socio-emotional development by either promoting or discouraging particular behaviours. Meanings of behaviours may differ across cultures, as will parent and peer reactions. Although most of the existing knowledge about socio-emotional development comes from studies with North American children, there is evidence for cultural variability. For instance, pretend play is far less common in children from Eastern countries, such as Korea, than in Western children. When this form of play does occur in Eastern cultures, children often impersonate a family member but rarely pretend to be a fairy tale character. An exaggerated emphasis on schooling and the targeted cultivation of narrow skills starting in early childhood through specific toys and games, including digital games, is also becoming a feature of today's childhood culture.

Differences in temperament also exist between cultures. Preschool children from Korea and China tend be more anxious, inhibited and withdrawn, and less sociable than their Western European counterparts. Whereas in Western culture, a child's inhibited conduct is associated with a risk of troubled peer relationships and internalizing problems (e.g., loneliness and depression), these difficulties are much less common in inhibited children from Eastern cultures. Longitudinal research in China revealed that early behavioural inhibition positively predicted social competence, school achievement and psychological adjustment in childhood and adolescence. These differences can be explained through the meaning assigned to these behaviours. In Western cultures, an inhibited child is perceived as apprehensive and lacking in social skills. In East Asian cultures where group harmony is valued, an inhibited child is viewed as socially-competent, obedient and polite—although recent findings linking social withdrawal to peer rejection in some East Asian countries suggest that may be changing.

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Children from cultures emphasizing interdependence tend to act less aggressively and more prosocially than children from nations where independence and competitiveness is valued. Compared to European and American mothers, more Chinese mothers believe that their child should act prosocially to conform with group norms (e.g., fitting in) and emphasize self-control as a childrearing practice. Regardless of the culture, one universal trend is that children who are prosocial and nonaggressive are liked by other children.

When families immigrate from a culture emphasizing interdependence into a culture emphasizing independence, children can receive conflicting socialization messages at home and at school. The Bridging Cultures Project was designed to alleviate this cross-cultural value conflict by training teachers to understand both cultural orientations and make a bridge between them in the classroom.

The meaning of friendship also differs across cultures. In some cultures, children rarely engage in non-familial friendships, and their “friends” are mostly siblings or cousins. In nations such as Cuba and Korea where friendships are an index of success, school-age children report closer relationships with peers compared to North American children. Children in Eastern cultures also use detachment to resolve conflicts with friends while Western children prefer to negotiate with their peers.

What can be done?

The importance of culture requires practitioners and policy makers to be knowledgeable about culture and child development. This is a pressing issue in host nations, where addressing the needs of a diverse population of immigrant children who differ in acculturation (changes resulting from the meeting of cultures) extends beyond a linguistic issue. Immigrant families should also be informed about how different ideologies can contribute to their child’s difficulty with peers in the host country. One way to achieve optimal adaptation for these children is to form positive and productive alliances with families and communities.

Culture-sensitive communication, based on mutual appreciation of diverse perspectives, is foundational for programming early childhood education. Training field workers to be culturally sensitive is essential to understand the meaning of a child’s conduct and allow them to identify it as normal or problematic. The Bridging Cultures Project was designed to train teachers at the preschool and elementary level to become aware of the collectivistic or familistic cultural

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orientation that children from Latino immigrant families with roots in Mexico or Central America bring with them from home into their school environments. Bridging Cultures professional development also educates teachers to become aware of the individualistic value orientation engrained in the school environment and of the value conflicts between these two cultural orientations. Teachers trained in the Bridging Cultures paradigm have developed many techniques that make a bridge between the familistic collectivism of a Latino immigrant home and the individualism of a U.S. school.

In some cases, professionals require a completely unique approach that includes goals and conditions that are tailored to local beliefs and traditions. These changes are also likely to encourage the involvement of cultural community members in the education of their young children. For example, Indigenous communities in Canada advocate for a formal education curriculum that teaches children about their history, descendants and cultural roles. They also argue that children's learning can be enhanced through a self-esteem boost, emphasizing strengths rather than deficits.

Caution must be exercised when using standardized methodologies for international comparisons and exporting so-called "best practices" to cultural and national contexts that are fundamentally different from their source. Successful policies and intervention programs are those that have adapted to local beliefs, practices and cultural realities, enabling families to incorporate services smoothly into their lives.

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Culture and Early Socio-Emotional Development

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Introduction

There are considerable individual differences in children's early dispositional characteristics, such as how they react to challenging situations and their ability to regulate behavioural and emotional reactions.[1] These early characteristics serve as a basis for socio-emotional development in childhood and adolescence. It has been found that early dispositional characteristics and socio-emotional functioning have an extensive and prolonged impact on social, school and psychological adjustment. In Western societies, for example, positive emotionality and sociability are predictive of peer acceptance, school achievement and psychological well-being. In contrast, defiance and aggression are associated with later peer rejection, school problems, and other adjustment problems. Finally, negative reactivity, behavioural inhibition and social anxiety in infancy and early childhood may contribute to difficulties in peer relationships and adjustment problems of an internalizing nature such as loneliness and depression.[2,3,4]

Subject

Socio-emotional development is likely to be affected by cultural contexts. Developmental theorists and researchers have long recognized the comprehensive role of culture in children's social development in the early years.5 Culture may promote or constrain the exhibition of specific aspects of socio-emotional functioning through facilitation or suppression processes. Moreover, cultural norms and values may provide guidance for the interpretation and evaluation of social behaviours and thus impart meanings to the behaviours.[6] These arguments have been supported by findings from a number of studies in the past two decades.

Problems

Despite the importance of culture for human development, research on socio-emotional functioning has been conducted mostly with Western, particularly North American, children.

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Consequently, little is known about how children behave and perform in social situations in other societies. Our understanding of social behaviours, relationships and psychological adjustment is limited to Euro-American cultures.

Research Context

Over the past 30 years, there has been an increased interest in exploring children's socio-emotional functioning in different regions of the worlds, particularly Asia, Europe and South America. A number of studies have been conducted in diverse societies using both qualitative (e.g., interviewing, ethnographic, observation) and quantitative (e.g., large scale surveys, standardized questionnaires) methods. A major challenge in the cross-cultural study of socio-emotional functioning is the understanding of its cultural meaning. Two strategies to achieve this understanding are (1) to examine how socio-emotional functioning is associated with social interactions and relationships, and (2) to examine how socio-emotional functioning develops in the culture (e.g., what developmental outcomes it leads to).[6] These strategies can be used in both within-cultural and cross-cultural studies. An examination of the social interaction context and the developmental pattern of socio-emotional functioning from the within-cultural perspective is the first step toward understanding its meaning and significance and provides a critical and necessary foundation for cross-cultural comparisons on children's socio-emotional functioning.

Key Research Questions

1. Are there cross-cultural differences in the exhibition of specific aspects of socio-emotional functioning?
2. Are there cross-cultural differences in the antecedents, concomitants and consequences of specific aspects of socio-emotional functioning?
3. Are the developmental processes and patterns of socio-emotional functioning similar or different across cultures?
4. What cultural beliefs and values are associated with socio-emotional functioning and development?
5. What are the processes in which cultural beliefs and values affect socio-emotional functioning and development?

Recent Research Results

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Children across cultures may display similar as well as different socio-emotional characteristics in early childhood. Whereas similarity emerges in pervasive aspects, the distinct patterns of socio-emotional functioning have been revealed in cross-cultural research on children in different societies. For example, Chinese and Korean toddlers exhibited higher fearful, vigilant and anxious reactions than Australian, Canadian and Italian toddlers in novel stressful situations.[7,8] Chinese children also displayed more committed and internalized control or self-regulation on compliance and delay tasks than North American children in the early years.[9,10,11] Similarly, Cameroonian Nso toddlers displayed more regulated behaviours than Costa Rican toddlers who in turn were more regulated than Greek toddlers, as indicated by their compliance with maternal requests and prohibitions.[12]

Cross-cultural differences in early characteristics may be associated with parental socialization expectations, attitudes and practices. Chen et al.[7] found that whereas children's wary and reactive behaviour was associated with parental disappointment and rejection in Canada, this behaviour was associated with warm and accepting parental attitudes in China. Compared with Euro-American parents, Chinese and Korean parents were also more likely to emphasize behavioural control in childrearing.[9] In addition, according to Keller et al.,[12] rural Cameroonian Nso mothers were more likely than Costa Rican mothers, who in turn were more likely than middle-class Greek mothers, to use a proximal parenting style (body contact, body stimulation) which was believed to facilitate child obedience and regulation.

Socio-emotional characteristics in the early years may have implications for the development of social behaviours. Edwards[13] found that children in relatively open communities (e.g., Taira in Okinawa, one of Japan's southern prefectures, and Orchard Town in the U.S.) where peer interactions were encouraged had significantly higher scores on overall social engagement than children in more "close" and agricultural communities (e.g., Nyansongo in Kenya and Khalapur in India). Relatively low social interaction was also found in Chinese and Indonesian children, compared with their North American counterparts.[14,15]

Cross-cultural differences exist not only in overall social engagement but also in the quality of social interaction. A particular form of peer interaction which varies across cultures is socio-dramatic activity in children's play. Western children tend to engage in more socio-dramatic behaviours than children in many other, particularly group-oriented, cultures. Farver, Kim and Lee[16] found that Korean American preschool children displayed less social and pretend play than Anglo-American children. Moreover, when Korean children engaged in pretend play, it contained

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more everyday and family role activities and less fantastic themes (e.g., actions related to legend or fairy tale characters that do not exist). Gosso Lima, Morais and Otta[17] found that rural children in Brazil displayed less pretend or socio-dramatic behaviours than urban children. Furthermore, the urban children's socio-dramatic activities involved more fantastic characters or themes than those of rural children. Also, the prevalent characters in the pretend play of seashore children were domestic animals (dogs and horses), which, according to Gosso et al.[17], was due to the frequent contact of these children with them in daily life.

Children in societies where extended families live together in traditional styles tend to display more prosocial-cooperative behaviour than children in economically complex societies with class structures and occupational division of labour.[13] Early socialization of responsibility is associated with the development of prosocial-cooperative behaviour. Cultures that value competitiveness and the pursuit of personal goals seem to allow for more coercive and aggressive behaviour than cultures that emphasize group harmony. Researchers have reported that North American children tended to exhibit higher levels of aggressive and externalizing behaviour than their counterparts in some Asian countries such as China, Korea, Japan and Thailand, in Australia and in some European nations such as Sweden and the Netherlands.[18,19,20,21]

The role of culture may be reflected not only in the display of specific socio-emotional characteristics, but also in their functional meanings in development in different societies.[22,23] For example, behavioural inhibition in toddlerhood is associated with later social and psychological difficulties in Western countries.[24] However, longitudinal research in China revealed that early behavioural inhibition positively predicted social competence, school achievement, and psychological adjustment in childhood and adolescence.[25,26]

Research Gaps

Several major gaps exist in the study of culture and socio-emotional development. First, there are few systematic cross-cultural longitudinal research programs. As a result, little is known about the developmental processes of socio-emotional functioning in a cultural context. Second, the existing research has relied mostly on cross-cultural comparisons. Although the findings are important in revealing cultural similarities and differences, they provide limited information about what specific cultural beliefs and values are associated with children's social behaviours and emotions and their development. Third, researchers have paid little attention to the processes in which cultural norms and values are involved in socio-emotional development. Chen [23,27]

has recently proposed a contextual-developmental perspective that emphasizes the role of the social evaluation and response processes in mediating the links between culture and socio-emotional development. According to this perspective, during social interactions, peers evaluate and respond to individual characteristics in manners that are consistent with cultural belief systems in the society and express corresponding attitudes (e.g., acceptance, rejection) toward children who display the characteristics. Culturally-directed social evaluations and responses, in turn, regulate children's behaviours and ultimately their developmental patterns. How the peer interaction processes serve to transmit and construct cultures and to regulate children's socio-emotional functioning and development need to be examined thoroughly in future research.

Conclusions

Cross-cultural research has indicated the involvement of cultural factors in virtually all aspects of children's socio-emotional functioning. Cultural norms and values may affect the display and significance of children's socio-emotional functioning. The impact of cultural context on socio-emotional development is likely to occur through parental socialization practices and, in the later years, through peer interactions. Future research should explore the processes in which cultural factors are involved in children's social behaviours and emotions and their development.

Implications

Cross-cultural research helps us understand the role of social and cultural conditions in the development of social competence and problems. The findings also have implications for establishing appropriate policies related to families and children in Canada who have different cultural backgrounds. Moreover, the information about cross-cultural differences in children's socio-emotional characteristics and interaction styles are helpful for professionals to design culturally-sensitive and relevant programs in the community and the school for children of different backgrounds who have social and psychological problems.

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Culture and Social Development

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Introduction

Culture can be defined as "the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people, communicated from one generation to the next."[1] Given that the majority of the world's children do not reside in Westernized countries, and that culture influences development, cross-cultural research on child development requires special attention.

Subject and Problems

The focus of this essay is on the role of culture on children's *social* development, which comprises their social behaviors and peer experiences, including their friendships. Importantly, any consideration of the cultural meanings of children's social behaviors requires that one consider the distinction between the *form* that behaviors take (what the behaviors look like) and the *functions* of those behaviors (the reasons for the behaviors). For example, some social behaviors may *appear* identical (or have the same form) across cultures, but they may differ from culture to culture in these behaviors are interpreted vis-à-vis their underlying reasons or motivations (or their functions). Importantly, cultures vary in their customs and belief systems, and thus regardless of their form or function, social behaviors may also be interpreted differently across cultures.

Put another way, the psychological "meaning" attributed to any given social behavior (or social interaction) is, in large part, a function of the ecological niche in which it is produced and exhibited.[2] It is likely that any behavior that is viewed, *within a culture*, as adaptive will lead to its encouragement by significant others including parents and peers. In contrast, if a behavior is perceived to be maladaptive, it will be discouraged. Moreover, the means by which the given behavior is encouraged or discouraged may be culturally determined and defined. For example, in some cultures, the response to an aggressive act may be to explain to the child why the behavior is unacceptable; in others, physical discipline may be the accepted norm; in yet others, aggression may be ignored or perhaps even reinforced.[3] In some cultures, parents and adult

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figures remain the most important judges of acceptable behaviors throughout childhood; in other cultures, the peer group becomes an increasingly important adjudicator of acceptable behavior and relationships with increasing age.

Most cross-cultural research on children's social development has been dominated by an *etic* framework, which assumes that the constructs measured have relevance across *all* cultures.[4] On the other hand, an *emic* framework focuses on the specific ideas, behaviors, and values that are viewed as meaningful by members of a particular culture. The etic perspective may cause researchers to operationally define (and thus assess) constructs in the same ways (with the same methods and measures) across cultures. Thus, the etic approach may result in overlooking culturally-specific definitions of given constructs. For example, researchers may assume that social competence, as a construct, is universally relevant and that it can be measured by assessments created in, for example, North American laboratories. This etic assumption may be entirely correct; however, one would clearly need to empirically test this assumption. It is likely that, to some extent, the study of social competence would require an emic belief requiring within-culture conceptualization and measurement. Indeed, some aspects of competence may be universally held and others not.

Theoretical Frameworks in the Research Context

In addition to culture, other significant constructs need to be addressed. For example, broadly, researchers typically discuss two cultural phenomena: 1) independent, individualistic, or Western ideologies (e.g., United States, Canada, the Netherlands), and 2) interdependent, collectivistic, or Eastern (e.g., China) and Southern (e.g., Central and South American) ideologies. Western cultures are often described as those for whom members value assertiveness, expressiveness and competitiveness. Eastern and Southern cultures are often described as those for whom members value group harmony and cooperation. Notably, such differences are used to explain the "meaning" of social behaviors, and child development more generally, in different cultures.[5] Recently, there has been agreement that most countries are a fine mix of both of these constructs, with some being relatively more individualistic and others relatively more collectivistic. Significantly, in the research area reviewed herein, there is relatively little known of Southern cultures (or differences between Northern and Southern cultures); thus, the review is focused mainly on comparisons between Western and Eastern cultures.

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In accord with Inglehart and Welzel's *World Values Survey*,[6] it has also been argued that countries can be further distinguished by their acceptance of traditional versus secular-rational values. Countries with more traditional values emphasize parent–child relationships, deference to authority (power distance; filial piety), and adherence to well-established and -recognized cultural norms. Alternatively, countries with more secular-rational values place less emphasis on authority and the primacy of parent–child relationships, and more tolerance of diversity in thought, opinion, and behavior. In these regards, the dimensions outlined in the *World Values Survey* appear to be associated, conceptually, with Hofstede's distinction between collectivistic-leaning cultures and individualistic-leaning cultures.

More recently, it has been proposed that cultures can be conceptualized along a continuum of *tightness* and *looseness*.[7] Cultures characterized as "tight" encourage strict adherence to social norms with respect to social behavior and relationships, whereas "loose" cultures tolerate broad socialization practices allowing a wide range of behavior and relationships to be acceptable. In some regards, tightness is associated with maintenance of order; loose countries are more open. Assessments of the tightness-looseness continuum[7]reveal that countries that cluster in the Confucian-Asian grouping on the World Values Survey (e.g., South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, China) have high tightness scores. Countries that cluster in the Catholic Europe grouping (e.g., Portugal, Italy, Spain, France) fall somewhere in the middle range; and those that fall in the English-Speaking cluster (e.g., United States, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand) have relatively low tightness scores. In this regard, the tightness-looseness continuum helps to distinguish countries that have been traditionally grouped together, such as Confucian-Asian and Catholic European countries.

Key Research Questions

1. What defines social competence in Confucian-Asian, Catholic European, and English-Speaking clusters of cultures?
2. How do peers react to children and adolescents who conform and fail to conform to cultural norms of social competence?
3. How do children's social behaviors and culture interact to influence social development?

Recent Research Results

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Social competence refers to the ability to achieve personal goals in social interaction while simultaneously maintaining positive relationships with others over time and across situations.[8] Whereas the specific social behaviors that facilitate successful and positive peer experiences are, for the most part, similar across cultures, the social goals that children wish to accomplish, and the frequency (or prevalence) in which specific social behaviors are displayed, do differ.

Prosocial behavior. In general, prosocial behaviors (helping, sharing, caring behaviors) increase during the course of childhood and are consistently associated with both positive peer responses and positive peer experiences such as peer acceptance. Prosocial behaviors also tend to be related negatively to peer rejection (or active peer dislike) in most cultures, although the development and prevalence of prosocial behaviors varies across cultures.[9] For example, researchers have reported that prosocial behavior, as observed among peers and in parent-child interaction, is more prevalent among young East Asian children than among Western children.[10] Researchers suggest that this difference results from the collectivist-leaning, Confucian, and tight ideologies prevalent in East Asian cultures.[11] In support of this contention, researchers have reported that Chinese mothers of preschoolers are more likely than European and American mothers to emphasize social norm adherence and to believe that their preschool children should share and help other children for social conventional reasons (e.g., to fit in with the group and function well in Chinese society).[12,13]

Cooperation/competition. Whereas competition can damage group harmony and threaten close relationships, cooperation is necessary for positive peer interactions and is often studied as an index of social competence across cultures.[14,15] In general, peers respond positively to those who are cooperative. Children from collectivist-leaning and tight cultures, however, are more cooperative and less competitive than those from more individualistic-leaning and loose cultures. That said, competition and cooperation do appear to co-exist regardless of culture. For example, in East Asian nations, most children engage in both cooperative and competitive behaviors, but most children tend to be more cooperative with friends and family and more competitive in educational contexts.[15] Further, generational differences appear to exist within cultures. For example, third-generation Mexican American children are more competitive than their second-generation counterparts.[16,17]

Aggression. Physical, verbal, and relational aggression have been identified as distinct entities in many cultures and countries.[18] Typically, physical aggression (which involves hitting, kicking, and pushing others) is viewed as unacceptable by parents and peers, and is associated with peer

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rejection, in most countries.[19,20,21,22,23] Similarly, relational aggression, which typically includes relationship-damaging, gossip, and rumor-spreading behaviors, also tends to be associated with peer rejection in many countries.[24] And yet, relational aggression is also related positively with popularity in many countries, especially as children move into adolescence. This may be because such behaviors are both admired (for their adult-defying and assertive nature) and disapproved of by youth across cultures.[25] Nevertheless, meta-analyses have demonstrated that children in cultures characterized by collectivistic and Confucian values generally show *lower* levels of physical aggression, and *higher* levels of relational aggression, towards peers than their Western counterparts.[26,27] This may be because collectivistic-leaning and tight societies do not tolerate physical aggression and, consequently, aggressive acts are more covert or indirect in nature.

Social withdrawal. There is increasing evidence that fearful, wary, inhibited behavior among toddlers predicts early childhood social reticence and anxiety.[28,29] Social reticence in early childhood, in turn, predicts social withdrawal (defined as the behavioral tendency to remove oneself from familiar and unfamiliar peers) during middle childhood and early adolescence. It merits noting that these findings derive from studies conducted in research laboratories. There remains little information pertaining to the developmental progression from inhibition-to-reticence-to-social withdrawal in more naturalistic settings.[30] Beginning in early childhood, socially withdrawn behaviors, as assessed in school settings, are related to such negative peer experiences as peer rejection and peer exclusion, likely because they are perceived negatively by many youth, in most cultures and countries, all of whom tend to value peer interactions, relationships, and group involvement.[31,32] Significantly, however, researchers have found significant differences in the extent to which wary, inhibited behavior is displayed among East Asian (e.g., China, South Korea) versus Western children (e.g., Western Europe, Canada and the United States). The former group has demonstrated a higher prevalence of wary, inhibited behavior than the latter.[33,34,35] In Western cultures, which value independence and assertiveness, socially-inhibited and reticent behavior are viewed as reflecting shyness, fearfulness and social incompetence. In East Asian cultures, which are dominated historically by Confucian and Taoist philosophies, socially wary and inhibited behaviors are viewed as reflecting compliance, obedience, being well-mannered, and thus, social maturity and accomplishment. However, recent findings linking social withdrawal to peer rejection in China (and other East Asian countries) suggest that the cultural meaning of social withdrawal in this region of the world may be changing.[36]

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Peer relationships: Friendships. The peer experiences described in the previous sections, including peer rejection and popularity, reflect how children fare with the larger peer group (usually assessed within a school classroom or a school grade). Another aspect of children's peer relationship experiences comprises their friendship experiences. Friendship is often referred to as a close, mutual, and voluntary dyadic relationship. The voluntary nature of friendships means that children are able to initiate, maintain and relinquish friendships that meet their expectations and/or needs. From an early age, most children form friendships with those who are similar to themselves in observable characteristics, such as age, sex, ethnicity, and behavioral proclivities. Even children of preschool age are more likely to choose play partners who are similar to them in age, sex, ethnicity and behavior.[37,38,39] Across cultures, many of the same social behaviors appear to facilitate the formation of friendships and the development of high-quality and supportive friendships (e.g., prosocial and cooperative behavior). Perhaps surprisingly, neither aggression nor social withdrawal appear to interfere with the formation of friendships. However, such behaviors may prevent friendships from enabling positive relationship experiences across cultures.[39,40] It is also the case that across cultures, friends spend more time together than non-friends and are often observed to engage in more conflict with each other than non-friends.[41] If appropriately resolved, conflict can positively affect developmental growth.[42] However, conflict is resolved differently across cultures. Researchers have reported that negotiation is often used to resolve conflict among Western children. Disengagement appears to be favored among Eastern cultures.[43]

Another important cultural difference pertains to the notion that friendship is a voluntary, freely-chosen relationship. This notion is not supported by extant research across cultures.[39] To begin with, in some cultures, children rarely engage in non-familial friendships. For example, children in traditional Yucatec Mayan communities spend most of their time with their immediate and extended family.[44] In such cultures, "friends" are oftentimes siblings or cousins or the children of close friends of the family. Moreover, the functions and nature of friendship appear to vary across cultures. For example, in cultures within which having many friendships is considered to guarantee societal success, both intimacy and exclusivity are regarded as the most important aspects of a friendship. Reflecting this idea, researchers have reported that intimacy is more important in the friendships of children in Korea and Cuba than in those of North American children.[45,46] Finally, findings from a recent study suggest potential differences in the *protective power* of high-quality friendships in tight versus loose countries, especially when low-quality parent-child relationships occur.[47]

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Research Gaps

As aforementioned, a salient problem in cross-cultural work is the belief that an etic approach is superior to an emic approach. In many respects, such a belief may result from the accompanying belief that measures created in Western countries can be "parachuted," in valid and reliable ways, into different countries and cultures. To demonstrate the fallacy of this argument, we refer to a social competence construct specific to China: *Ren* or forbearance. Ren is a construct that encourages group harmony. When young Chinese children use *ren* in response to peer animosity, they disengage from, rather than do battle with, their peers.[49] This strategy is unlike problem-focused avoidance because it does not reflect the goal to escape or avoid the social situation. Instead, the goal of *ren* is to elicit restraint and tolerance from the peers with whom they are interacting. Western researchers may neglect the social convention of *ren* and thus, may inaccurately construe and assess the construct of social competence in Chinese culture as involving only those social behaviors described previously. Such a study, however, would be incomplete and not culturally-sensitive. Therefore, it would behoove researchers to first consider their cultures of interest, and then collaborate with members of those cultures to conceptualize and operationally define social competence. Along the way, investigators should consider how the given construct may be defined at different developmental periods and how it evolves both in the short and long term. They would also do well to specifically assess cultural values and norms, including tightness and looseness, as many countries are diverse in religion, ethnicity, geography (e.g., rural versus urban versus suburban areas, climate), and socioeconomic status, and all of these factors likely impact cultural values and norms, and adherence to them.

A related consideration is the study of ethnic subpopulations within multicultural societies. For example, in the United States, the East Asian American and the Latino American populations are continually rising in numbers. There is some indication that immigrant populations in the Unites States hold similar values to their Asian and Latin mainland counterparts.[15,49] Yet, for some youth, there appear to be generational and acculturation effects, whereby later generations are more acculturated to mainstream Westernized culture than previous generations. Ethnic discrimination and victimization, however, can challenge the acculturation *and* social development of immigrant children.[50] Thus, it would benefit researchers to examine the effects of both acculturation and discrimination (and in their interplay) in their studies of cross-cultural or cross-ethnic variability.

Conclusion

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In summary, Western researchers who have interests in cross-cultural studies of young children's social development (and development in general) would do well to incorporate into their research programs the expertise of collaborators from other cultures. Only through conversations with their collaborators will they develop a better understanding of the constructs that truly matter in the lives of children and their peers.

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

Given that the majority of the world's inhabitants do not reside in culturally "Westernized" countries, cross-cultural work on the study of social development bears careful note. From our example of social inhibition or reticence, one can begin to understand that behaviors, when exhibited across cultural settings may take the same *form*; however, the *function* of these behaviors varies from culture-to-culture. Within any culture, children are shaped by the physical and social settings within which they live; culturally-regulated customs and childrearing practices; and culturally-based belief systems. The bottom line is that the psychological "meaning" attributed to any given social behavior is, in large part, a function of the ecological niche within which it is produced. All-in-all then, it would appear most sensible for the international community of child development researchers to not generalize to other cultures, their own culture-specific theories of normal and abnormal social development.

These statements are also relevant insofar as policy and "translation" are concerned. Practitioners, such as psychologists, social workers, and teachers must begin to understand that normalcy is culturally defined. Criteria for psychiatric and psychological diagnoses must begin to take into account different cultural values. If criteria are not culturally sensitive, then a child who is reinforced to behave in *X*-manner by his or her immigrant parents, when *X* is viewed, within the larger cultural community, as inappropriate or reflective of abnormality, all manner of difficulty may arise. Thus, policy makers and practitioners must be educated to understand the significance of cultural norms when interpreting the meanings of social behavior. Further, an understanding that social development is influenced by culture may aid host communities to develop sources of information (and possibly intervention) for parents (and children) whose belief systems may place children at risk for rejection, exclusion, discrimination, and victimization by members of the host community or country.

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Culture and Early Childhood Learning

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Introduction

During the period from birth to 5 years of age, children undergo massive transformations in size, biological organization, behavioral capacities, and the social organization of experience that greatly complicate our understanding of the relation between culture and their learning processes.

Examination of this complex topic requires provisional definitions of our basic terms. We adopt the following definitions:

Culture consists of the historically accumulated knowledge, tools and attitudes that pervade the child's proximal ecology, including the cultural “practices” of nuclear family members and other kin. These enculturated members of society are themselves subject to a variety of forces in both the natural ecology and society as they carry out their roles, such as care giving and earning a living.

Learning is understood as a relatively permanent change in behavior and understanding brought about by the child's experience.

Development entails qualitative changes in the functional organization of children’s intra-individual brain, body and behavior and in accompanying changes in the relationship between children and their socio-culturally organized experiences. The *developmental* niche framework[1,2] is relevant when discussing the child's early development and cultural learning. The developmental niche comprises three interacting subsystems: *physical* and *social settings*, *customs* and *practices of child rearing*, and the *psychology of the caretakers*, particularly parental ethnotheories of child development and parenting.

Subject

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Culture plays an essential role in how children make sense of the world. A decisive difference between children's learning and any intelligent technical system is that technical systems can recognize and organize information but cannot grasp its meaning. Development of signification and adoption of the appropriate cultural tools (symbols, meanings, scripts, goals etc.) of human activity are basic challenges of early learning.

Problems

1. How are enculturation and individuation related in early learning? Each cultural context has unifying tendencies, but individuals are unique. What are the universal and the specific cultural niches of learning in each society?
2. What is the unit of learning? Early stages of human development demonstrate dependence of the child on adults and the reverse influence of infant on adults. Mother–child dyads are important units. How are dyads replaced as units of learning in later development?
3. How does the role of culture in learning change during early childhood?[3,4]

Research context

Learning mediated by culture requires consideration of a cultural context that cannot be reduced to laboratory conditions. "Natural experiments" are frequently used to take advantage of naturally occurring variations in different cultural groups. Such studies are often supplemented by collecting comparative data from several cultures.[5] Michael Cole has elaborated a specially-designed form of activity, called the "Fifth Dimension" environment, as a sustainable subculture for learning. Its principles are used to research cultural learning in play settings[6,7] Play research laboratories were established in Finland and later in Lithuania to study child development and learning in play settings.[8,9,10] Research carried out in university research laboratories does not always reach the public discourse and is not always appropriately interpreted. Several centers are being created in countries (e.g., The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University[11], The MEHRIT Centre[12], etc.) to initiate, disseminate, and communicate research on early development reliably and constructively to the public, thereby increasing the understanding of children's development and education, which can be used as a basis for making informed decisions about changes in policy and practice.

Recent research with very young babies often includes family members as co-researchers for data collection from their baby's activities at home and in research laboratories equipped with

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modern technologies.[3,14,15] Increasingly, researchers tend to conduct research projects in playgrounds, Children's Centres, and other environments where children and families spend a large part of their time. Digital technologies allow researchers to capture children in a variety of settings.[16]

Key research questions

- What kinds of environmental organization promote children's learning of their cultural heritage?
- How do different cultural traditions shape children's learning?
- How are different modes of learning related in different cultural circumstances?
- Are there "qualitative leaps" in early childhood related to culturally-related changes in modes of learning?

Recent research results

Universal features of culture

It is necessary to remember that young children do not make sense of the world consciously and analytically at this age. Meanings are grounded in bodily connections with things and are constantly bound up with the process of acting.[17,18] Children are extremely sensitive to contingencies among all kinds of environmental events from birth or shortly thereafter. These range from learning characteristic patterns of activity to the differential responses of people in their environment to the contingencies among the phonemes in the language they hear that will form the basis of the grammar of their native language.[19] Children are born already knowing the characteristic "tune" of their native language, learning that is displayed when different attention is given to vocalizations in that language.[20,21]

From birth onwards, children's learning of a variety of universal concepts in such "privileged domains" as arithmetic, physics, and psychology are present in a "skeletal" form that subsequent, culturally-mediated learning builds upon according to local circumstances.[3] For example, infants appear to recognize basic physical concepts associated with such phenomena as gravity (they are surprised if an object appears to fall through a solid barrier) and mathematical concepts such as 1+1=2 (they are surprised if two objects are hidden behind a screen and when the screen is removed, only one object is to be seen), and are able to distinguish between

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intentional and mechanical causation, providing the scaffolding for learning the distinction between animate and inanimate objects.

Children also start to create their own “cultures” by about nine months and before the age of five the need for, and organization of, adult and peer cooperation radically change.[22,23,24] Early in development, children are incapable of regulating the social organization of their interaction, but as middle childhood approaches, greater autonomy of child groups becomes possible.

Cultural constraints

Many psychologists believe that children from different cultural groups learn a basic “cognitive style” characterized in somewhat different, but overlapping terms depending upon different scholarly traditions. One such “cognitive style” is said to privilege an initial attention to the context in which events occur followed by attention to the objects that participate in the event; a similar formulation is between cultures that foster individualism or collectivism.[25] It has been demonstrated, for example, that Japanese mothers asked to engage their 5-month-old child in an interaction involving an object, systematically orient the child to themselves first and to the object secondarily, whereas American mothers orient the child to the object first and themselves secondarily. At 5 months there is no difference discernable in the behavior of the children, but several months later, the children orient in the manner that has been shaped by repeated (differently-oriented) interactions with their parents in a wide variety of everyday events.[26]

Cultural practices

Different forms of play (object play, symbolic play, pretend role play) create different kinds of cultural environments for learning. However, there are wide cultural variations in the extent to which adults sanction different forms of play during early childhood.[27] In societies where play is a valued cultural practice at this age, Poddiakov[28] demonstrated how children carry out social experimentation with other persons in play and everyday life. Vygotsky[29] and other play researchers[30,31,32,33,34,35] emphasize the importance of mutuality and transcending the present situation in play by creating other (imaginative) worlds. Lotman pointed out that through playing, the child doubles their life and tries to comprehend it emotionally, ethically, and cognitively.[36] Vygotsky argued that distorting reality in play paradoxically reinforces learning applied to real life by changing children’s understanding of the relation between objects and meanings. Similarly, El’konin pointed out that through pretend role play, children assimilate the

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content of human moral norms and social relations.[37]

Greenfield and her colleagues have documented a pattern of learning among traditional Mayan peasants girls learning to weave, in which mothers organize the girls' learning by having them participate in changing roles from very early childhood to middle childhood and beyond.[38] Such learning involves very little verbal interaction. Similarly, Barbara Rogoff and her colleagues have shown that children from societies where schooling is either absent or very brief learn through a process of intent observation.[39]

There has been a historical, world-wide shift from local parenting traditions (ethnotheories) of child development and learning to globalized/universal culture in raising young children. The of deliberate instruction during the preschool years is one of the defining features of this universality. This approach to early learning is realized through deliberately designed instructional toys and games and the social networks often imposing 'educational' activities for families with young children much earlier before entering ECEC institutions. Early childhood is no longer imaginable without digital/modern technologies embedded in the cultural contexts of today's childhood through everyday practices transforming and reorganizing them.[40]

Research gaps

The "whole child approach" to studying culture and early learning is an ongoing challenge. Political and cultural constraints in countries often guide decisions on the central problems in studying culture and early learning. Pragmatic and formal adherence to the methodological requirements of disciplinary research cannot encompass all the contexts of the child's cultural development. As a result, much research remains within the framework of separate scientific/disciplinary fields. It must be acknowledged that there is a constant search for new research tools and methods, but above all, for an overarching theoretical approach/framework that can interpret and explain the wide range of interdisciplinary and cross-cultural data researchers generate today.

Conclusions

The study of culture and early learning involves the interweaving of biological and cultural factors over time. A promising approach is the active development of new forms of educational activities designed to expand and enhance learning. But there is disagreement about what such forms of activity include. For example, independent children's play is constantly questioned as a

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legitimate and vital developmental and learning activity in early years.[41,42,43,44,45]

Very important to organize instruction that considers the kinds of prior, home-based learning that each child comes to school with. It is a routine finding in research across many content domains that children learn more rapidly when asked to learn or solve problems based upon materials with which they are familiar or in ways that make “human sense”.[46]
These relations between culture and learning do not fade but become even more pronounced as children move from early into middle childhood and adolescence. Consequently, those concerned with leveraging the power of culture to promote learning should take care to pay as much attention to the cultural enrichment of children as to their health and physical well-being, all of which play an especially important role during this period of extraordinarily rapid developmental change.

Implications

Misunderstanding the cultural character of early childhood learning has resulted in a situation where effective forms of learning and sense making that take place in a play context are eliminated from children’s life. The exaggerated emphasis on schooling and the targeted cultivation of narrow skills starting in early childhood through specific toys and games, including digital games, is also becoming a feature of today's childhood culture. When learning is defined in terms of analytic understanding, children’s own subcultures and play forms are excluded. A negative consequence of such an approach can be that the child's natural motivation for learning is reduced or even eliminated, and the child's further development might be disrupted/hindered/impaired.[47,48,49]

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Culture and Early Childhood Education

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Introduction

"Cultural sensitivity" is common advice in the field of early childhood learning and development, and few would argue with it. But are we willing to take this advice to the point of yielding to culturally based understandings of how children learn and how to promote optimal developmental outcomes? On the contrary, there is a great deal more rhetoric about responding to cultural diversity than evidence that we really mean it when we say, as most developmental psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists and many educators do, that culture is embodied in the ways that children are raised and the environments where they grow and develop.[1,2,3,4,5,6] Many educators, researchers and international development specialists acknowledge the geographic and cultural limitations of the research base that informs current child development theory, learning assessment tools, and program models. However, this recognition has not prevented the proliferation of brand-name programs touted as "best practices" based on the authority of Euro-western science or simply on persuasive marketing of training, toys, tools and teaching techniques.[7,8,9] Standardized tools, such as the Early Childhood Environment Ratings Scales,[10] used to characterize the adequacy of early learning environments, and the Early Development Inventory,[11] used to characterize the school readiness of groups of children, are playing an increasingly instrumental role to set government agendas, shape policy, and justify the transfer of early learning program goals and models from more to less developed countries.[12,13,14] Expediency, along with assumptions that theory and research on child development developed from Euro-western perspectives are universally valid, tends to be used to justify the transport of "best practices." It is common to hear that where there are no readily available, locally developed tools or programs, there is no need to "re-invent the wheel" when an existing tool or program can be imported. While there are many commonalities across cultures in goals for children's early learning, researchers and educators must work to identify cultural distinctiveness in developmental trajectories and expectations.[15,16,17,18]

Research Context

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The concept of “best practices” may once have been meaningful, designating early learning measurement approaches or program models identified through experimental and quasi-experimental research as capable of delivering, comparatively, the best outcomes with respect to a particular aspect of development within a particular population of children. Today, however, declaring an approach a “best practice” often signifies little more than that a measurement tool or program model is favoured by a particular stakeholder group, such as the originators of the tool or program, and that a government agency, program advisory board or funding/donor agency would like to promote the practice based on its intuitive, theoretical, or financial appeal, or the fact that the practice worked well in one particular setting. All too often there is a lack of peer-reviewed research reports substantiating the claim of “best” through comparative studies that have established the predictive validity of standardized early learning measurement tools or the effectiveness of curricula for culturally diverse young children.

Key Questions

What developmental norms and goals for children’s learning and development and whose cultural values and methods for socializing children and transmitting knowledge drive the creation and choice of curricula for early learning programs exported from a (usually Western) source country to a receiver country or cultural setting? And what is at stake?

Exporting early learning measurement tools and programs created in Euro-western countries where European-heritage norms and approaches to development predominate can interrupt the transmission of locally-valued cultural knowledge and practices and undermine the diversity of voices, knowledge sources, ways of life and supports for raising children in local conditions in receiver countries and communities.[19,20,21,22,23,24] Cultural knowledge and positive parenting practices constitute the very resources that community development programs such as those operated by many non-governmental organizations aim to preserve and capitalize in order to promote community-based, culturally resonant supports for children’s learning and development.[25] Programs built on these local assets are likely to garner high demand and participation from parents, grandparents, and local leaders and are most likely to be adapted to local conditions and sustainable.[26,27]

Relevant Research Results

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Four examples from the author's program of research, Early Childhood Development Intercultural Partnerships,[28] illustrate the usefulness of "re-inventing the wheel" to ensure an approach tailored to local conditions and destinations for children's early learning. In a study of the views of Indigenous parents, Elders and early childhood practitioners about assessing young children's cognitive development and readiness for school, participants emphasized the importance of building self-esteem as a foundation for learning.[29] In addition to opportunities to enhance oral language, emergent literacy and numeracy, they described key curriculum content focusing on community history (how children are related to the land), genealogy (who children are related to), and cultural participation (preparing for roles in ceremonies and sustenance using natural resources). They disagreed with mainstream definitions and standardized measures of school readiness promoted by public schools, arguing that schools need to be ready to receive children who have a rich understanding of who they are and their cultural identity, even if they are not acculturated to the forms of teaching and learning emphasized in dominant culture classrooms.

In a second study exploring early identification of learning difficulties, Indigenous parents and Elders asked why standardized and globally disseminated early learning tools, such as the Early Development Inventory,[30] do not assess young children's strengths, but seem more focused on identifying deficits.[31] One Elder in the study commented: "They don't ask whether children know their Indigenous language or what children know about how to behave in different social settings or in ceremony. Schools aren't interested in children learning their culture so they don't ask about it." A First Nations community leader in the study asked: "Has anything changed since the government first designed their education systems to take the Indian out of the child?"[32]

In a third study focused on roles for speech language pathologists, 49 out of 70 speech language pathologists who had worked with First Nations children for two or more years reported that their standardized measurement tools did not yield valid or useful information and their best practices for early intervention were not helpful in their practice. They overwhelmingly called for "an altogether different approach" – one that is responsive to local goals and conditions for young children speech-language development and that actively involves parents and other caregivers as primary supports for children's early learning.[33]

A fourth study found that many Indigenous parents and some non-Indigenous teachers were concerned that standardized tools for measuring speech and language development and school readiness may lead to misinterpretations of speech and language differences such as First

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Nations English dialects or vernaculars as evidence of deficits. Low scores on tools assumed to be universally valid likely contribute to the alarmingly high rates of diagnosis of First Nations children as cognitively and linguistically delayed or impaired.[34] There is ongoing debate about the possibility of developing standardized tests for First Nations languages and for Indigenous child development overall. The extreme diversity among First Nations and other Indigenous children, families, and communities in Canada, with over 60 language groups and over 600 culturally distinct, registered First Nations, has been raised repeatedly as an obstacle to creating tools that would be valid or meaningful across more than a handful of communities.

Rather than relying on standardized tools, the most useful and culturally appropriate approach may be for educators and other practitioners to rely upon members of cultural communities to describe and explain optimal and normative development and developmental supports and to identify indicators and exemplars of development that represent deviations from normative expectations within the child's cultural context.[35,36,37,38] These within-community standards can be discussed with reference to developmental norms based on research, and decisions about the goals for early learning programs and interventions can be guided through a negotiation of culturally based reference points and by external considerations, including considerations of the task demands that children will face in the school they will attend, as well as child rights.[39]

Research Gaps

Examples of co-generated, culturally situated understandings of young children's early learning and development are valuable contributions to theory and practice. In particular, research is needed to develop and pilot test measures of early learning and program effectiveness that are culturally relevant but that also are not entirely idiosyncratic and reliant upon unwieldy phenomenological or public opinion, survey type research. There is a continuing recognition of the value of collaborative approaches to research whereby investigators, policy makers, and program designers can compensate for their cultural blinders by collaborating at every step with skilled members of cultural communities to develop the research base for culturally appropriate policies, tools, and interventions (e.g., Community Based Research Canada,[40] Community Campus Partnerships for Health,[41] Living Knowledge Network,[42] Society for Participatory Research in Asia [43]). In Canada, for example, a federally funded research project involved more than 20 community-university partnerships over five years to examine environmental impacts on young children's development.[44,45,46,47]

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Conclusion

This article calls for caution in using standardized methodologies for international comparisons and exporting so-called “best practices” to cultural and national contexts that are fundamentally different from their source. Development of regionally specific norms for development requires a long-term, high-cost investment, but can yield understandings of children that are likely to be more relevant and accurate.[48] Co-constructed interpretation of development and early learning action plans has the potential to avoid the imposition of a singular, dominant cultural lens and insistence upon unidirectional assimilation that has been the hallmark of colonialism.

Implications

What roles can we play in supporting children’s development in ways that protect and build upon culturally based assets and goals? Governments should ensure quality early learning opportunities for all children whose caregivers seek support, but funding need not be tied to one-size-fits-all curricula or learning goals.[49] In Canada, the federal government’s investment in Aboriginal Head Start is a powerful example of a program mandated to stimulate children’s development across six domains, including culture and home language, using methods and curriculum content that are chosen, elaborated and delivered by each host community.[50]

Open-ended, dialogical engagement with communities can illuminate how to bring knowledge and tools from research together with local knowledge and approaches to address culturally defined goals for children’s early learning and development. There are many examples of participatory, co-scripted approaches to early learning program development.[51,52,53,54,55] In addition to supporting early learning and preparation for success in school, these programs are working to protect cultural heterogeneity in the face of the overwhelmingly homogenizing forces of globalization.

Cultures are always changing: goals and approaches to children’s early learning and how we measure it change over time. As investigators, policy makers and practitioners, we need to leave room for culturally diverse families to re-invent themselves in their own image and not, through the absence of choice, in the image of English-speaking North American middle class cultural constructions of the child.[56,57]

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Bridging Cultures in Early Childhood Education

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Introduction

In this entry, we describe the relevance of the value systems of individualism and collectivism. The articulation of these two value systems led to research demonstrating that the home culture of collectivistic children often opposes the individualistic culture of schools in the United States.[1,2] The roots of this cross-cultural value conflict lie in the poverty and lack of opportunity for formal education experienced by new immigrant parents from Mexico and Central America – a sociodemographic environment in which collectivism is functional.[3] Because of the conflict between the collectivism of the home environment and the individualism of the school, this situation creates the need for educational intervention. The Bridging Cultures Project™ is just such an intervention. It was designed to alleviate the cross-cultural value conflict experienced by most immigrant families from Mexico and Central America when they send their children to U.S. schools. The project can also be applied to other minority cultures with familistic or collectivistic cultural roots.

Research context: Applying the two cultural pathways of development to formal education

Empirical research documents cross-cultural value conflict between the more collectivistic pathway of development assumed by Latino immigrant families and the individualistic pathway taken for granted by the schools.[1,2] These differences in cultural values coalesced into five major themes; in each case, the teacher assumed the relatively greater importance of the first element in the dichotomy, while the Latino immigrant parent assumed the importance of the second element: 1) individual versus family accomplishment; 2) praise versus criticism; 3) cognitive versus social skills; 4) verbal expression versus respectful communication with authority; and 5)

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parent's role in teaching versus socializing the child.

Key Research Question

Based on ethnographic observation and other research,[1,2] four researchers (Patricia M. Greenfield, Blanca Quiroz, Carrie Rothstein-Fisch and Elise Trumbull) posed the question: How might knowledge of the cultural pathways of individualism and collectivism impact teachers' ability to work with collectivistic students and families?

Our research for the Bridging Cultures Project was based on Latino immigrant families and their school experience, and thus we recruited seven bilingual (Spanish-English) elementary school teachers serving large numbers of immigrant Latino students from the greater Los Angeles area.[4] Four of the teachers were Latino, three were European-American; six were female, one was male; all grade levels of elementary school were represented, kindergarten through fifth grade. In a pre-test, the teachers' responses to home-school scenarios revealed that they were strongly individualistic in their problem solving strategies (86% individualistic). After three workshops, we conducted a post-test that showed the teachers had shifted to a more balanced perspective (57% collectivistic, 21% individualistic and 21% both individualistic and collectivistic). Thereafter we conducted classroom observations, interviews and semi-monthly meetings, documenting how teachers developed, implemented and evaluated new strategies for their collectivistic students.

How Bridging Cultures changed classroom practices and home-school relations

The teachers' experimentation in their own classrooms and schools has proven the framework of individualism and collectivism to be more generative than we ever dreamed possible, resulting in vast numbers of innovations to support student learning. We have identified many of these classroom practices elsewhere.[5,6,7] The innovations we highlight in this entry include parent relations, language arts and classroom management.

Changed practices with families

Bridging Cultures teachers almost immediately initiated changes in how they communicated with and supported families.[8] One teacher substituted small-group parent conferences for the usual individual conferences, a change that resulted in a new parent-teacher dynamic and a group voice for the parents rather than individual voices. After one hour, parents could sign up for a private conference or ask a few questions privately.[9 (p. 69)] As a result of this teacher's success, her

principal asked her to conduct a workshop at her school to encourage other teachers to try the group conference approach. Other Bridging Cultures soon began experimenting with the same approach.

Another teacher decided she would try to increase the number of parent volunteers. Although the teacher is Latina and her first language is Spanish, she reported, “Both the parents and I had difficulty approaching each other for help. Most parents had little formal education and probably did not know they could actually assist in the classroom: only a few had attended junior high or high school. I had to conduct my own informal ethnographic research about my families and began to build relationships with parents in the process… Although I was now averaging five parent volunteers a week, I still felt like there was something missing. Many parents would stay but were uncomfortable [interrupting me] while I was teaching a lesson to ask what they could do…”[5]

To support parents, the teacher compiled a notebook with an introductory paragraph describing why parental help would be so useful in the class. She also described an array of different ways parents could help in the classroom, from preparing materials to helping with reading. She also indicated that younger siblings were welcome in the class and that their presence might actually help them transition to school later on. Ultimately, the teacher more than doubled her volunteers from 5 to 12, including 10 who worked over 100 volunteer hours during the school year.[8]

Cultural knowledge facilitates learning in language arts

Bridging Cultures teachers were also successful in promoting language development, particularly important because many of their students are English learners. Frequent use of choral reading activities allowed students to practice their burgeoning English skills without fear of errors because their voices could blend in with the group.[6] In other cases, children normally very fearful of speaking in front of the whole class or not wanting to be isolated from the group, were assigned to groups who came to the front of the class together as each one took turns describing an object brought from home. In this way, learning to “speak out,” an individualistic goal of the school, was shaped by the teacher’s knowledge that initial group support would assist students to meet that goal.

Classroom management

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One constellation of issues that seemed to be affected early on and most dramatically were related to classroom management, such as classroom rules, monitors and rewards.[8] The physical aspects of the classroom and the way it was arranged also came to reflect a collectivistic perspective in the classes participating in Bridging Cultures. In the early-elementary grades, children sat very close to each other during rug time, not on individual carpet squares as is often the case in classroom practice. The children were observed touching each other's hair or shoes in a completely non-disruptive way, much as they might do in their homes with siblings or cousins. Because the teachers now understood this to be natural and nondisruptive, they did not have to take away from lesson time to say, "Keep your hands to yourself," but let the children behave as they would naturally – allowing them to stay comfortable and focused, rather than potentially miserable and befuddled by a rule counter to their own inclinations.[6]

It is critical to point out that all of the teachers' innovations were their own construction. Energized by their new understanding of the differences between the individualistic and collectivistic value perspective, teachers made changes in their classroom practices in an effort to solve problems as they encountered them.

Conclusions

There is no recommended ratio of individualism to collectivism in a given classroom, although most of the innovations in Bridging Cultures classrooms have, quite naturally, been in the direction of making uniformly individualistic classrooms more collectivistic. However, it is equally important to note that the Bridging Cultures teachers have not rejected individualism. From the beginning, they were very aware that eventually their students would have to learn how to succeed in an individualistic world – likely beginning with their next classroom. For them, the bridge to individualism was as important as the introduction of more collectivistic practices.

We want to emphasize that the Bridging Cultures method is nonprescriptive. We provide the paradigm; the teachers use the paradigm to generate their own ideas, which vary greatly not only from teacher to teacher, but also from grade level to grade level, and from school to school.

The outcomes of the Bridging Cultures Project are causes for optimism about the potential for educational change. Note that it is highly unusual for relatively short professional development efforts to have a documented long-term impact on teacher practice beyond the training itself. In contrast, we have documented an enduring transformation in the Bridging Cultures teachers'

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ability to learn from and build successful strategies for their students and their families.

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WestEd holds the Bridging Cultures™ trademark and has licensed its use to the four core Bridging Cultures researchers: Patricia M. Greenfield, Blanca Quiroz, Carrie Rothstein-Fisch, and Elise Trumbull.

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Culture and Policy in Early Childhood Development

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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 understand the ways in which children’s daily experiences are culturally shaped.[1,2-5] A separate literature has addressed the effects of particular policies on children and their families.[6-9] Like cultures, policies exist at many levels, from national and international organizations to local groups. 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 place. 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

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The most general issue arising from the intersection of culture and policy in the context of 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 various cultural places. 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. As Granger[10, p.8] has pointed out, 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."[10]

A related problem is that policy-oriented research on early childhood development in the U.S. often describes cultural patterns in the children's environments, but they tend not to be recognized as such. For example, a 2008 report on "the family dinner table" documents the brevity and infrequency of family meals in the U.S. 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."[11, p. 1] A culturally informed 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.

Research Context

Ecological frameworks are helpful for understanding the influence of policy on children's development in particular cultural places. In Bronfenbrenner's[12] 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

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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.”[13]

Weisner’s[14] 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.[15,16] 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[3,17] conceptualizes the child’s culturally constructed 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.[18] The subsystems interact with each other, and with the wider culture and characteristics of the individual child. As Worthman notes in her review of ecocultural theory, both the Weisner[14] and the Super and Harkness[3,17] 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. Worthman’s own conceptualization of ecocultural theory incorporates biological measures at the individual level as they relate to socially constructed experience.[19]

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 such knowledge about the cultural context of its application help to understand why it has succeeded or failed?

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Recent Research Results

The growing cultural diversity of children living in the U.S. is frequently cited as a reason for culturally-competent policies and service delivery.[20-22] In addition, studies of early childhood development and programs in other parts of the world – primarily low- and middle-income countries – inescapably draw attention to the need for adaptation to local values, beliefs, and practices.[23,24] *The Handbook of early childhood development research and its impact on global policy*23 captures a wide range of observations and thinking about the developmental, economic, educational, socio-cultural, and political contexts of policies and programs to benefit young children around the world.

In the U.S., Duncan and colleagues[8] 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. Using the classic anthropological method of ethnography, the researchers 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.

Harkness and Super[25] describe two intervention programs with contrasting methodologies to illustrate “why understanding culture is essential for supporting children and families.” In the massive U.S. federally funded Moving to Opportunity program, lack of knowledge about the cultural context of the target families deprived the researchers of understanding both the successes and failures of the intervention. In contrast, a nutrition intervention program in Bangladesh included building a knowledge base of families’ beliefs and practices using the Developmental Niche framework, as well as involving local community members in a successful intervention to reduce childhood diarrhea.

Like the Bangladesh project, the Madrasa Resource Centers in East Africa integrated Euro-American ideas and practices with local cultural realities to construct and maintain a successful ECD intervention in low resource areas.[26] Similarly, 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.27 In such adaptations, teachers’ concepts of early childhood development are crucial, as illustrated by a study of early

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childhood educators in Kenya and Nepal, who expressed “hybrid” concepts of early socio-emotional development. The authors cautioned that ECD teachers in the Majority World should avoid appropriating Euro-American developmental expectations, and instead ground their practice in locally understood cultural norms.[28-30]

Gaps

As these examples illustrate, success in early childhood programs is critically dependent on adapting content and policies to local needs and practices.[31] It is thus surprising to find that the preponderance of international policies and programs directed to low and middle-income countries continue to feature Western-based concepts of what entails good parenting and good educational practice for young children. Robert Serpell, a British psychologist who has spent most of his academic career in Zambia, argues that culture-sensitive communication, based on mutual appreciation of diverse perspectives, is foundational for programming early childhood education.[32] In contrast, he asserts, “Western cultural hegemony persists in many international fora under the guise of ‘globalization,’ giving rise to systematically distorted communication in ways that do epistemological violence to indigenous cultural models in Africa.” (p. 222). As a specific example of this disjunction in culturally based assumptions, Karasik and Robinson[33] argue that motor development in infancy and early childhood should not be judged by “universal” (i.e. Western-based) timing of milestones, given that the cultural context for development of skills such as crawling and walking varies widely. There is a strong cross-cultural research base illustrating this point, which provides a template for considering the influence of culture on universal human potentials.[34-36]

The most dramatic example of ethnocentrism in policies for parenting and education of young children comes, ironically, from UNICEF, WHO, the World Bank Group, and other international organizations that have promulgated a new policy paper entitled *Nurturing care for early childhood development: A framework for helping children survive and thrive to transform health and human potential*.37 The Foreword of the paper explains (p. 6) that the rationale for focusing national development efforts on early childhood rests on the assumption that “We now understand that the period from pregnancy to age 3 is the most critical, when the brain grows faster that at any other time.” Although no one doubts the importance of a healthy and supportive environment during these (or any other) years of life, neuroscience does not support the wide-ranging policy implications many have drawn from this simple observation.[38] The UNICEF paper promotes specific parenting practices such as playing one-on-one with full

attention on the child, talking with the child, and following the child's lead and assisting the child's interest in exploring and learning.

Although this advice would sound familiar to many middle-class American parents, the particular recommended practices would sound strange, perhaps comical, and certainly impractical to many parents in Majority World communities. Mothers in a Kipsigis community of western Kenya, for example, asserted that there's no point in talking to babies because they can't yet understand.[39] Likewise, a mother in Senegal reported that her family was laughing at her for talking to her newborn infant, as she had been coached to do in a local parenting class.[40] For many mothers, and other caregivers in such cultural places, sustained individual attention to a young child is simply not possible given the many other demands on their time and energy.[41]

Advice from UNICEF and other international agencies is, of course, not simply an expression of ideas: it is the foundation for national and international policies and programs to promote early childhood development worldwide. The ideas behind this initiative, however, have been challenged on the grounds that they fail to include multiple aspects of intelligence and development that are crucial for success in a variety of cultural contexts. A particularly powerful argument is put forth by Scheidecker, Chaudhary, Keller, Mezzenzana, and Lancy[42]– all experienced researchers of child development across cultures – who criticize international attributions of "poor brain development" to children who do not receive the supposed benefits of Western middle-class parenting and pre-school education. Unfortunately, the voices of these international researchers are not likely to be heard above the din of current public discourse about how to promote a more just and equitable world where all children can develop to their full potential in skills assumed to be most important for success. In contrast, success in local terms may be more complex.[43]

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

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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.[44,45] 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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