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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

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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

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

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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 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:

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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?

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

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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 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]

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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 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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