

Understanding Home-Based Care as a Culturally Organized Ecological Niche: Cultural Models and the Organization of Daily Routines

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Introduction and Background

An often neglected sector of the child care work force is Family Child Care (FCC): regulated programs that provide child care services in a provider's home. Although estimates of how many children are in FCC at a given point in time vary from 6 to 16% (Porter et al., 2010), one-quarter of children are in family child care at some point during their first five years of life where they spend an average 31 hours per week (Morrissey, 2007).

The research that does examine FCC in the U.S. documents difficult working conditions, but we know little about how providers in FCC organize their daily routines. In particular, little, if any, research documents how providers organize their entire day navigating the many demands of multi-age children, regulating agencies, government programs, children's families, assistants, and their own families.

Cultural approaches to human development suggest that ideas about child care likely mediate adults' daily child caring activity (Gallimore, Goldenberg, & Weisner, 1993; Vygotsky, 1978; Weisner, 2002). Eco-cultural theory provides a theoretical framework for documenting the cultural models adults use to guide their everyday life. Gallimore and Lopez (2002) defined cultural models as "the mental schema into which people code their interpretations of the environment and events, what is valued and ideal, which activities should be enacted and which avoided, who should participate, how people should interact, and so forth" (p. 725) and Weisner (2002) highlighted the nature of cultural models as "connected, schematized, shared knowledge" (p. 277).

Such work is essential for workforce development because efforts to improve the quality of environments young children experience in family child care settings may prove superficial or short-lived if they are not grounded in descriptions of what child care providers actually do and think about their complex daily lives.

Specific Aims

- ❖ The overarching purpose of the research is to identify factors that allow family child care providers to organize a sustainable daily routine (The Ecocultural Scale Project, 1997): one that fits with resources, balances competing interest, provides stability and predictability, and provides personal meaning (in progress).
- ❖ Using a grounded approach starting from providers' own descriptions of their work, we are documenting the cultural models underpinning providers' descriptions of their daily life.

Methods

Participants. Snowball sampling was used. This poster presents preliminary results for 9 providers. Participants were offered a \$100.00 gift card for participating. Comparisons with the most recently published report of child care providers within the region suggest that these providers were more experienced and better educated than is typical in the region.

Initial Interviews. The eco-cultural family interview, previously validated for use with families (The Ecocultural Scale Project, 1997) was adapted by us for use with family child care providers with input from Weisner, one of the original authors. This adaptation was necessary because family child care involves multiple families and operates as a small business. The EFI adopts an ethnographic style that is semi-structured and comparable to a conversation. Daily routines are a topic that people can easily talk about, and describing what, how, and why daily activities are structured as they are provides a window into individuals' values, beliefs, resources, and constraints. The interview begins when interviewers ask providers to walk us through their day. As they describe their daily activity, highly trained interviewers probe for a specific list of details, ranging from common activities like meals and snacks to division of domestic labor, to resources available to assist in completing the work. Rather than asking about values and ideals directly, we use prompts like, "Tell me about an ideal – what would an ideal day be like?" and compare that with responses to a prompt about the worst day they can remember.

Follow-Up Interview. Follow-up interviews with providers were conducted several weeks later using a photo-stimulated interview. Providers were left with a digital camera at the initial interview and were asked to take up to ten photos that they felt were meaningful or important to them or their care. We ask them to describe the people present, whether it is a typical activity or an unusual one, and we probe for children's levels of participation in the activities as well as the roles of any adults present.

Developing Codes

- ❖ Interviews were transcribed and coding was completed using Dedoose mixed-method software. Each code was developed by a leader in consultation with the team (two graduate-student interviewers and two Principle Investigators) by:
 - ❖ reading all materials (transcripts of both interviews and any fieldnotes or memos written by interviewers) for each provider. While reading, we identified quotes that we thought represented ideals of care, what the providers described themselves as striving toward.
 - ❖ writing initial coding memos. For cultural model codes, we initially identified two models (labels for these have been drawn from providers' own words):
 - ❖ Striving for children to experience Love, Affection, and Fun.
 - ❖ Striving to provide children with School Readiness.
- ❖ Providers varied in how much each model fit their descriptions of their work. Therefore, we then classified our first 10 providers according to fit with each of these two models as low, moderate, or high (for each model) and articulated what differentiated these providers from each other.
 - ❖ HIGH: (a) Indicated a **value** for this aspect of their work; (b) **Enacted** that value in daily activity (opportunities to practice); and (c) **Looked** for and **saw** the results in children (assessment).
 - ❖ MODERATE: Indicated a value for, enacted OR saw; often faced barriers or prioritized other things over the cultural model
 - ❖ LOW: little or no evidence for valuing, enacting, or seeing
- ❖ Thus we used a process of abduction in which we began from ideas grounded in the participants' own descriptions, formalized those descriptions into two codes, each with three levels, and are now in the process of formulating and testing hypotheses about those codes.
- ❖ The final step will be to have new coders apply our codes to new transcripts. In a mixed-method tradition, coders must identify specific quotes from the transcripts to justify each holistic classification.

Results

- ❖ **Love, Affection, and Fun:**
A number of providers make it a priority to ensure that children feel **loved, special, belonging**, and enjoy their time with the provider and other children as a goal *in and of itself* (and not just as

a means to other goals). We found that this could be displayed through interactions with children through play and conversation, really seeing and knowing children as whole beings, and/or through an emphasis on the rewards of strong relationships that result when children have been in their care.

❖ **Example of Love, Affection, & Fun:**

❖ *The rewards are when your child that was here three years ago and they call you that they want to come say hi to you its like "Oh My God." Like the other day I had this child that stop coming uhmm 2 years ago she was here for 5 years and now she's big and she, the mom, call me, "Oh I'm sorry that I'm calling you but my daughter is always bugging me that she wants to come and say hi to you." I say, "Please bring her let her stay for one day I want to see your daughter too." And we talk about so many memories, the times and all those things like, "oh my child tell me about this," and I feel really really good. Like I was talking to my husband about it and say I feel so good that you know I know those children have these memories about me and it's a good memory you know. I put something good on them because if they wanna come to see me is because they have something good about me. That's the reward*

❖ **School Readiness:**

A second cultural model we identified involves **preparing children for school and seeing changes in what children know and can do**. This can include **literacy and numeracy** as well as **social and emotional development** (e.g., taking turns, waiting in line), but the focus is on being ready for school. This can also include organizing traditional activities where a teacher instructs (e.g., circle time or "learning time") or embedding learning throughout the day and into other activities (e.g., believing that children learn through play and so providing lots of opportunities for exploration and child-led play).

❖ **Example of School Readiness:**

❖ *So the parents do sign in, and, I do assign a simple work for the children on a daily basis so they're obligated to do that, at least three per week. And its primarily to get the parent and the child um, you know talking specifically about um what we're doing here together. For example if we're trying to use markers I want them to use markers at home that evening just to reiterate what we did. So the child does turn in an assignment for that day and, and the parent-the parent knows that they are obligated... Um so they sign in, put their homework in the box put their things in the cubby, and we have free time. Um, because we want to the kids excited to be here and if I kinda just put them into to do what I want then they're not going to be happy about being here. So I, and I want them to be an easy transition from home to ch-child care so, its free time, I usually put things out on the table that we're going to, ya know, do that day and um I rotate that you know probably da-on a daily basis of what the teacher initiated um, project is. And usually these two tables here, you know one will be set up here one will be set up here and-and they're welcome to join.*

Discussion

Conclusions

- ❖ We found evidence for two cultural models that reflect shared, often widely held ideas about how to organize family child care.
- ❖ However, providers varied in the ability to articulate their cultural models as well as in the congruence between stated beliefs and their enacted and described daily routines (see "Levels").
- ❖ Thus, our results suggest that cultural models can contain identifiable shared elements, but that individuals appropriate and enact these shared cultural models in different ways.

- ❖ As we move forward, we will be looking to see whether and how these cultural models may mediate family child care providers' daily interactions with children, impacting what they see as desired and possible in a day.
- ❖ Not surprisingly, tensions in the field between discourses of early childhood care and education are visible in these providers' ideas about daily life. However, even providers who prioritized being together, feeling love and affection, and having fun often also strove toward school readiness. Indeed, in some ways, the more providers were connected to the field of early childhood education, the more they seemed to either prioritize education over being together, feeling love and affection, and having fun or explicitly reject that seemingly dominant idea. We need more research to understand the role of cultural models in early childhood, including observations of daily routine activities as related to interviews to better understand object-mediated action, articulating more cultural models, and understanding the dynamics of how cultural models are appropriated and change.
- ❖ Implications for practice and professional development.
 - ❖ Helping providers find ways to articulate what they do can help them communicate with parents.
 - ❖ Professional development efforts that start from providers' own ideas about what they do are likely to be more successful.

Limitations & Future Research

- ❖ These are only partially articulated and just two of many cultural models providers may use to mediate their daily activity.
- ❖ Because this was an exploratory, pilot study to discover patterns rather than to establish reliability of patterns, no efforts were made to assess inter-rater reliability, and results are not generalizable.

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