

Child Care in Cross-Cultural Perspectives: Implications for the Future Organization of Child Care in the United States

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In every society care of children is primarily a female responsibility, yet there is still tremendous cross-cultural variation in the organization of child care. Three characteristics of child care in small-scale traditional agrarian societies are discussed: role integration, use of auxiliary caregivers, and the effects of certain ecological patterns on childrearing. Data concerning each of these points is presented, along with implications for the future organization of child care in our own society. These implications are based on, first, the assumption of adaptiveness in forms of child care organization that have evolved over periods of time in these relatively stable societies, and, secondly, on the notion that concepts of child care that work in other societies can, in many cases, be adapted to current conditions in the United States.

In every society care of children is a primarily female responsibility. Yet there is still tremendous cross-cultural variation in the organization of child care. What are the consequences of various modes of organization for the lives of children and adults, especially women? How can this knowledge be applied to improving the conditions of childrearing in America today?

I shall discuss three aspects of child care in small scale traditional (non-industrial) societies, concluding with implications for the organization of new forms of child care in our own society. These conclusions are

Portions of this paper were presented at the meeting of The American Association for the Advancement of Science, San Francisco, February, 1974 and distributed as a cassette tape in Audio Seminars in Education, Teaneck, New Jersey: Sigma Information, 1976. I am grateful to Nancy Stoller Shaw, John Butler, and Charles Nakamura for comments on earlier drafts.

based on the assumption of adaptiveness in forms of child care organization that have evolved over long periods of time in these relatively stable societies, and the notion that concepts of child care that work in other societies can, in many cases, be adapted to current conditions in the United States.

1. *In most traditional societies, there is not extreme role specialization of child care such that it constitutes the major task for a whole group of people—mothers; instead, role integration is the rule.* For example, in the book *Mothers of Six Cultures*, Minturn and Lambert (1964) reported that mothers in all five of the agricultural societies (Nyansonga, Kenya; Tairan, Okinawa; Khalapur, India; Juxtaluaca, Mexico; and Tarong, Philippines) spent a considerable portion of their time in productive activities like gardening, animal care, or spinning, even while their infants were very young. This was in sharp contrast to the exclusive mothering pattern of their sixth culture, a small New England town in the United States. From the point of view of the child, the mother's role multiplicity (or role integration) is made possible by having other people around—older children, aunts and uncles, grandparents—to participate in child care from early infancy on.

Thus, it turns out that role integration is closely related to the presence of extended family members. In fact, the New England sample was the only society of the six in which households consisting of nuclear families—mother, father, and children—were located without reference to grandparents or other relatives.

From the point of view of childbearing women, it is important to note that in the five traditional agricultural societies the concept of child care involves a *central* but *not exclusive* place for the biological mother; and she, in turn, is conceived of as a person who performs a number of different functions, mothering among them.

But let us look at the division of child care labor from the point of view of child development. What are the gains and losses from a system of child care involving auxiliary caregivers? Whiting and Whiting (Note 3) make several interesting points based on detailed naturalistic observation of children from three to twelve in the same six cultures just mentioned. One is that only in the American sample do first born children seek attention (by showing off, boasting, requests to "look at me," etc.) significantly more than later born brothers and sisters.

Their hypothesis is that this attention-seeking of the first born in our society represents a conflict over dependency needs and stems from the inexperience of new parents combined with their isolation from more experienced relatives. The greater attention-seeking behavior of

the first born in the New England sample indicates a negative effect of upbringing in the isolated nuclear family with an inexperienced mother as the more or less sole caregiver from the beginning of life. In all societies but the American one, children were entrusted with the care of infants, providing them with the experience of caring for infants long before becoming parents themselves. Whiting and Whiting (1975) also noted that in societies in which children were more often observed and reported in charge of a younger child, the children acted more for the benefit of others—for example, offering help and support. This experience of caring for infants was rarest in the New England sample where babysitting was considered too difficult and too responsible to be entrusted to young children, and mothers generally shouldered the responsibility alone.

The Whitings suggest that, in general, the more responsible chores given to children, the more oriented toward helping others will the children's behavior be. Responsible chores for children are partly a function of the amount of work the mother does outside the home. The more the mother works, the more she requires the help of her children in doing chores. Consequently, the low frequency of behavior oriented for the benefit of others in the American sample may indirectly result from the presence of mothers who participated in production neither at the level of household subsistence nor at the level of the larger economy. Thus, if responsible and helpful behavior toward others is considered a positive value, then societies in which mothers have greater role integration—that is, less specialization for child care—produce children with a healthier developmental pattern.

Implicit in this description is the fact that, for children as well as adults in these traditional societies, role integration is much greater than in our society. When not eating or sleeping, children participate in household subsistence, care for younger siblings, and play with their agetates. American children, in contrast, "specialize" in play, apparently with negative consequences for the development of behavior in the service of others.

In Africa, urbanization has disrupted the traditional pattern of female role integration. B. B. Whiting (Note 1) discusses the negative consequences for mother *and* child of the mother's loss of a productive economic role:

The mother who has no work or activities away from the house and whose entire work consists of housecleaning, cooking, and child care probably had habits bred from boredom which affect her children. Urban mothers who did not have jobs outside the home spoke nos-

talgically of the country and expressed the desire to return to work on their shambas. (B. B. Whiting, Note 1)

In fact, Leavitt (1972) argues convincingly that European colonialization systematically disrupted indigenous patterns of role integration for women wherever they existed.

The implications of this cross-cultural look at childrearing is that role integration for mothers is not only beneficial for them, but is also beneficial for the development of the child in a number of important respects.

The involvement of older generations and older children is another implication of a movement away from role specialization. We have already seen that responsibility for the care of preschool children is an important childhood task in many societies and have seen how it is associated with a general pattern of activity on behalf of others rather than self. This same process could be put to work in a child care center, leading to a sense of pride and responsibility. A number of curricula combining child care experience with child development instruction for preadolescents and adolescents are beginning to test out this principle (e.g., Exploring Childhood, Education Development Corporation, Cambridge, Mass).

One goal of child care planning should be to achieve a healthy pattern of role integration to replace the current pattern of role specialization in which age groups are isolated one from another, while family and occupational roles operate as mutually exclusive and conflicting forces in women's lives.

2. *In traditional societies parents are at the center of all child care arrangements in a directive role; mothers delegate responsibility to auxiliary caregivers with whom they share a common set of values.* These caregivers extend the nuclear family; they do not replace it. But what empirical evidence relating to the value of parental responsibility and participation—parent power—can we bring to bear on this issue? An excellent cross-cultural study of urbanization by Graves (Note 2) indicates that when poor mothers—be they Mexican-American or Ugandan—move to the city they develop a realistically based sense of powerlessness in their role as mothers. This powerlessness must, in turn, have adverse effects on the development of their children.

At the time of Graves' study the general cultural norms for child-rearing were not different from country to city among either the Baganda in Uganda or Chicanos in Colorado. Yet, in the urban groups, mothers had a lowered belief in their own efficacy as mothers, less confi-

dence in their ability to produce the kind of child they desired. Interviews with mothers also revealed that urban mothers were far less likely than rural mothers to believe that their preschool children were capable of understanding or being taught various principles or skills. The city mothers rated their children lower in potentialities for independence, self reliance, and ability to help within the family. This potential vicious circle is, in fact, reinforced by actual conditions, for Graves has found that urbanization *per se* profoundly affects the pattern of enterprises to which a preschool child is exposed. In both Uganda and the United States household tasks for the preschool child are missing in the city. Furthermore, many exploratory activities of which the child is capable become too dangerous in the urban environment. In the Mexican-American group the factor of acculturation to a dominant culture is added to the process of urbanization. A comparison of the urban Chicanos with the urban Bagandans shows that this added source of powerlessness reduces further the mother's view of her child's potential. Acculturation is also associated with an increase in the use of power-assertive techniques—command, demand, and threat—on the part of the mother. Thus it seems that mothers react to their own powerlessness, ironically, by making their children all the more powerless through the use of power-assertive techniques of control.

One way to break a circle of powerlessness like that created by the urbanization of the poor is to create conditions where the mother is *not* powerless vis-a-vis her child's educational environment. An active role in the establishment and administration of educationally oriented child care is clearly one way out of this vicious circle.

For groups who have been fortunate enough to experience control over the socialization of their own children, it is equally important that this not be lost in the future. When parents are actively involved in formal child care arrangements taking place outside the home, such care is truly an extension of the family, not a substitute for it. Graves' cross-cultural study of urbanization indicates that urban conditions make a conscious effort to achieve this kind of cooperative enterprise in the education and care of young children all the more necessary.

But there is another side to the matter of auxiliary caregivers. In traditional societies these people are either children or adults belonging to the same group as the parents. Although the child may have a number of caregivers, common values lead to a consistent set of practices in relation to childrearing. Under these conditions, education—that is, acquisition of skills and socialization into a culture—is very much a part of everyday life. There is no possibility of purely custodial care, for education and life in the extended family are one and the same thing (Green-

field, 1972; Scribner & Cole, 1973). There is also no possibility of conflicting child rearing values. The implications for a heterogeneous society like the United States is that child care arrangements should be diverse, reflecting the values of various groups of parents. Parental participation and administration become particularly important in a society like ours in which it can not be assumed that educators hold the same values as a particular group of parents. The problem is especially acute for relatively powerless groups; the poor, ethnic and racial minorities, whose values are not generally represented in educational institutions. In terms of future planning, local control at the community level where persons share relatively similar values is the only way to avoid the oppression of one group by another (Roby, 1973).

While parents and teachers are the *minimum* community responsible for the care of children, this community is often more inclusive in scope. When this is the case, as, for example, in work-related childcare, then representatives of this broader community should also take their part in collective decision making and future planning of child care.

A measure of parental control helps to foster common childrearing values insofar as staff can be selected who agree with the philosophy of a particular group of parents. But this may not always be possible. In addition, a community of parents may be inherently diverse, as in work-related child care centers. Harmony between parents and teachers may often have to be forged through active participation in policy formation by both groups. Indeed, an active, directive role in the educational program on the part of teachers turns out to be an important factor in the effectiveness of early education programs (Weikart, 1970). Thus the process of child care planning and administration should include important roles for both parents and teachers.

How appropriate is the extended family as a model for child care planning in the United States? Surveys of the needs and desires of parents show that every characteristic favored by parents constitutes a feature of an extended family milieu. For example, two surveys done in the United States show that parents place a premium on care near home (Low & Spindler, 1968; Rowe, Note 4). This allows older and younger siblings to stay together, as the older ones may participate in the program after school. All children are thus in familiar surroundings where they are more likely to have an opportunity to play with neighborhood friends; nonparental childcare becomes an extension of the home. A survey of working mothers done by the International Labor Office (Note 5) shows that mothers also favor centers with a family atmosphere and a warm human approach, and that they want to have an active daily interchange with center staff so as to develop a harmonious and uniform

approach to childrearing at home and at the center. Thus, it seems that the extended family model is a natural approach to organizing child care institutions in industrial societies, and future planning should reflect this fact.

3. *Cross-cultural evidence indicates that certain ecological patterns of space and numbers provide optimal childrearing conditions.* The study of children in six cultures mentioned earlier showed that a mother's childrearing behavior is very much affected by the presence or absence of open space. In societies where children have free access to open space and regularly do tasks which take them out of doors, mothers show less irritable punitiveness; and less irritable mothers tend to have more confident children (Whiting & Whiting, Note 3). Clearly safe open space is one of the losses of urban life. When poor rural families move to the city, outdoor chores and safe open space vanish. Closely correlated with this effect is an increase in irritable punitiveness (Graves, Note 2).

Life in a day care center is similarly affected by physical conditions. A Los Angeles study of many day care centers found that teacher and child behavior was highly related to the quality of outdoor space. Under conditions of high quality, (e.g., clear paths, absence of dead space) teachers gave more non-routine encouragement, did more teaching and were more sensitive to the needs of children. They also found it necessary to guide and restrict children less (Kritchevsky, Note 6). As in the natural family setting, varied space results in reduced irritability and punitiveness.

If we shift our attention from space to numbers, other interesting findings emerge from cross-cultural data. B. B. Whiting (Note 1) reports that when groups of children start to congregate there is an automatic increase in two characteristics, aggression and distractibility. She reports that when more than six children get together in one place (without an adult), the rate of assault and other aggressive behavior increases. This is the result of the attempt of each child to influence the others. Also, in larger unstructured play groups the constant social interaction cuts down on individual behavior requiring a prolonged attention span.

Although Whiting's evidence comes from natural settings in the same six cultures mentioned earlier, a parallel finding has emerged from the systematic study of child care centers in Vienna, Austria. There we found that, given comparable child care centers with different spatial layouts, divided space (i.e., separate rooms) was associated with fewer incidents of prematurely interrupted play (Larson & Greenfield, Note 7). What the division of space does essentially, is to reduce the absolute number of children playing in a face-to-face group without changing the

amount of space per child. Thus the finding is similar to Whiting's where absolute group size increased distractibility independent of the amount of space available.

But number of people, as this factor affects the conditions of child-rearing and child behavior, is also a question of the ratio of adults to children. Leiderman and Leiderman (1974) found that extensive use of auxiliary caregivers among the Kikuyu in Kenya was associated with a more rapid rate of cognitive development of infants in the poor families of the community. This effect seemed attributable to the high rate of purely social interaction maintained by auxiliary caregivers in comparison with mothers (Leiderman & Leiderman, 1977). Typically, an auxiliary caregiver is introduced gradually by the Kikuyu mother starting when the infant is about two months old (Leiderman & Leiderman, 1977). The youngest age reported by Whiting and Whiting (1975) for use of an auxiliary caregiver in the six cultures study is also two months. In accord with practice in other cultures, Caldwell, Hersher, Lipton, Richmond, Stern, Eddy, Drachman, and Rothman (1963) found in Syracuse, New York, that most mothers who used auxiliary caregivers in the first year of life did so after the baby was three months old. Gradual introduction of auxiliary caregivers is another aspect of Kikuyu child care practice which might well be considered in future planning in the United States.

In each culture of the six culture study, a mother's "emotional stability" was greater—her tendency to "blow hot or cold" to her children for no reason was lessened—when there were more adults around to help and when she had fewer of her own children around to handle. The mother's warmth towards her children was also greater under these conditions (Lambert, 1971).

In a cross-cultural study of 55 societies, J. W. M. Whiting (1961) found that infants were given more indulgent care in societies typically having extended family households than in those typically having nuclear family or mother-child households. Munroe and Munroe (1971) explored the same question by looking at the effect of variations in household density within one group, the Logoli of East Africa. Their findings agree with those of Whiting (1961): Among the Logoli, infants are held more frequently and attended to more rapidly when they cry when they live in extended family households comprising more than two adults. Research in Zambia extends this point by indicating that in terms of maternal attention for infants, the worst conditions obtain in the large nuclear family (Goldberg, Note 8). Thus, if one is going to have nuclear families, a smaller number of children is optimal, whereas expanding a family in terms of adding more adults benefits the child. In the six

cultures of the Whiting study it was the case that, where grandparents were living in the household, the children engaged in less attention seeking (B. B. Whiting, Note 1). On the other hand, children from cultures in which nuclear families predominate are less aggressive than children in various sorts of extended families (Whiting & Whiting, 1975). This may well have more to do with the increased number of children generally associated with extended family households than with the greater number of adults.

We have seen that the physical presence or availability of more than one caregiving adult provides the most attention, warmth, and consistency. At the same time, we have also seen that large groups of children are associated with increases in aggressiveness and distractibility. Extrapolating these facts to institutionalized child care, we could say that an ideal child care center should contain enough adults for the caregiver to enjoy adult company and help, and not so many children that aggressive and distractible behavior is promoted. Findings from two surveys of actual behavior in child care centers in the United States (Abt Associates, Note 9; Prescott, Jones, & Kritchevsky, Note 10) confirm this extrapolation from cross-cultural data. Both studies confirmed the superiority of the medium-sized center containing from 30 to 60 children. Such a center would, of course, be subdivided into smaller groups, but the research indicates that the size of the total center still affects behavior of children and teachers. The average number of adults in a medium sized center seemed to be about nine, the maximum size of an effectively interacting face-to-face small group. Difficulty in staff communication may be one factor preventing high quality care in larger centers.

One study (Abt Associates, Note 9) of quality day care centers across the country found that in larger centers (1) teachers were less likely to respond warmly to the children, (2) there was less informal talk (an important kind of language training), and (3) children were more withdrawn from the flow of the group activity.

In very small centers in Los Angeles County (Prescott et al., Note 10), in contrast, it was found that teachers often had to switch activities in the middle because of interruptions. Frequent interruption of adult activity in small centers seems analogous to what happens at home to a mother-cook-housekeeper: the absence of other adults results in the fragmentation of time, a frustrating inability to sustain tasks from start to finish (White, Note 11). Thus, while family day care, in which a woman cares for a small number of children in her home, has the ecological advantage of small numbers of children, it has the ecological *disadvantage* of the single adult caretaker responsible for everything and lacking the companionship of peers. This problem can be partially solved by

integrated systems of home day care which offer the home care provider professional support and peer contact (e.g., Abt Associates, Note 9). This is an important problem to solve if home day care is to meet the criteria of a natural institutional form of child care and figure prominently in child care arrangements of the future.

Closely related to this problem is a basic limitation of child care centers or any system of extrafamilial child care: what happens when the child comes home? In order to gain, at home, the same benefits of adult-adult interaction and cooperation, integration of age groups, and opportunity for sustained activity possible in a medium-sized child care center, the household must contain more than the two adult members of the nuclear family. Even if a mother and father share all roles including child care equally, the fact that there are only two of them has inherent limitations: if one or the other parent is always caring for the child or children, there is never the possibility of uninterrupted interaction between the two parents. Furthermore, if one parent leaves the house, the other is always left with the total responsibility, opening the remaining parent to constant interruption. The formation of living groups which include people in addition to the child's parents can resolve this inherent limitation of the nuclear family.

BEYOND THE EXTENDED FAMILY

Children by Choice

The rest of this article discusses changes which are needed in order to adapt the child care model of traditional societies to our present and future society. In considering the extended family of traditional agrarian societies as a functional model for future child care in the United States, it is important to discuss important differences which need to be taken into account. One is that child bearing and caring used to be automatic, ascribed by birth rather than achieved by choice. Now there is the possibility for women and men to choose *not* to have children. Similarly, people can choose child care and early education as an occupational role. The future organization of child care must take into account this transition of child care from ascribed to achieved role.

Sociologists point out that achieved roles are rewarded for good performance, whereas ascribed roles are never rewarded, only punished for poor performance. The transition away from child care by ascription

therefore demands the development of a new reward structure. One element of such a structure might be to pay families for raising children, enabling them to choose varying combinations of assigning responsibility to self and others.

Ideally childrearing, like other roles, will become a chosen rather than assigned job, with status and rewards commensurate with effort expended and success achieved. The importance of paying child care workers fairly and well is something that is often forgotten. Clearly the priority parents place on *inexpensive* child care is a holdover from the view that child care is an ascribed role of the biological mother, to be done automatically without reward. Thus workers in home day care, who are even closer than child care center teachers to the traditional ascribed role of mother, often fare the worst when it comes to economic remuneration.

Child care as a role achieved by virtue of choice, talent, and training can have important benefits for the happiness and development of children. As Holter, a Swedish sociologist points out,

As long as one is committed to ascription in the allocation of responsibility for childrearing, one must act as though the people best suited to rear children are mothers, regardless of whether they are fit or unfit, motivated or unmotivated for the task. (1970, pp. 218-219).

Role Integration for Men

Auxiliary caretakers in traditional agrarian societies are generally not fathers. Thus, integration of parental and economic roles in these societies is achieved by women but not by men. On the one hand, this characteristic makes the model applicable to single mothers in the United States as well as married ones. But on the other hand, under modern American conditions it is as desirable for men to integrate a parental role in their lives as for women to integrate an occupational one. One reason is that many American parents are separated or divorced. If fathers are to retain meaningful contact with their young children, they must be able to carry out a parental role. Moreover, even when parents are together, potential auxiliary caregivers—child care workers, neighbors, friends, and relatives—are much more geographically mobile than the auxiliary caregivers of the traditional extended family. The father differs from these other caregivers in that he has a lifelong relationship to his children, even if he and the mother have separated; he is thus in the unique position of being able to provide

continuity over time. Furthermore, role integration on the part of the father is necessary to avoid an empirically determined drawback of the extended family household—less interaction between father and children than in the average nuclear family household (Whiting & Whiting, 1975). Also, for infants in the first year of life a secondary attachment to the father seems to increase the security of the infant (a study in the U. S. by Spelke, Zelazo, Kagan, & Kotelchuck, 1973), whereas a secondary attachment to a child serving as caregiver may decrease it (a study in Kenya by Leiderman & Leiderman, 1974). Ainsworth (1967) also found some evidence that multiple caregivers in the first year of life were associated with less secure attachments among the Ganda of Uganda. In accord with this trend, a study in Syracuse, N. Y., by Caldwell et al. (1963) found a slight behavioral disadvantage (greater irritability at 6 months) among babies raised by several caregiving figures in the first year, vs. those cared for by the mother alone. In no case, however, was the caregiving responsibility shared by the father. Thus preliminary evidence indicates a certain cost to the infant of auxiliary caregiving by people other than the father, whereas limited evidence indicates that the father in this role produces only benefits. This indicates that the father should be given a key place in the group of people with whom the mother shares child care responsibilities.

Clearly a pattern of integration of family and work for both men and women depends on the organization of work as well as child care: paternity (as well as maternity) leave, the availability of part-time jobs, and jobs with flexible hours. Child care organization can facilitate role integration for parents by offering part-time care and flexible hours for children, as well as by welcoming parents in the child care center itself, either as workers or visitors. One implication of the involvement of parents in the group care of their own young children is a less compartmentalized life style in which children and work are intertwined in the day's schedule. One important measure in this direction would be child care centers located in factories and other work sites. Again this condition is typical of simple agrarian societies where both men and women often work at home and can go in and out of the house very frequently as chores demand.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, consistencies in child care and child development across cultures hold three major implications for developing a "natural"

approach to the planning of child care in the United States. First, such an approach must involve a shift away from age segregation and role specialization for adults and children. Second, all forms of child care should involve parents in a key role, harmoniously extending their family situation through collaboration with auxiliary caregivers. While the company of other adults is beneficial for mother and child throughout childhood, evidence so far indicates that extensive caregiving in the first year of life by people other than the mother can have certain negative consequences unless the father is highly involved in the care of his infant. Still, we really do not yet know if other adults as stable as the biological mother and father could fill the caregiving roles as well.

Finally, the environment adults provide for children is very much affected by the conditions in which they find themselves. Therefore, child care arrangements should involve ecologically optimal characteristics of space and numbers, conditions which preclude the establishment of individual child care centers of massive proportions. To apply these principles at the present stage of social and economic development in the United States, we must further the transition from a society based on ascription to one based on achievement, by making child care more a matter of choice, with rewards commensurate to its crucial role in shaping our next generation.

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