

Ecocultural Understanding of Children's Developmental Pathways

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Key Words

Activity · Culture · Developmental pathways · Ecocultural theory

Abstract

Every cultural community provides developmental pathways for children within some ecological-cultural (ecocultural) context. Cultural pathways are made up of everyday routines of life, and routines are made up of cultural activities children engage. Activities (bedtime, playing video games, homework, watching TV, cooking dinner, soccer practice, visiting grandma, babysitting for money, algebra class) are useful units for cultural analysis because they are meaningful units for parents and children, and they are amenable to ethnographic fieldwork, systemic observation, and interviewing. Activities crystallize culture directly in everyday experience, because they include values and goals, resources needed to make the activity happen, people in relationships, the tasks the activity is there to accomplish, emotions and motives of those engaged in the activity, and a script defining the appropriate, normative way to engage in that activity. The Ecocultural Family Interview provides a window into children's and families' daily routines and activities.

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¹I studied anthropology at Reed College and then in the interdisciplinary program in the Department of Social Relations (Harvard University, with John and Beatrice Whiting, psychological anthropologists interested in children and families around the world). I did fieldwork among the Abaluyia of Western Kenya, where I explored sibling caretaking of children and the influences of rural-urban migration on child and family life. I've studied the influences of culture, family lifestyles, and poverty on children, ever since. I've always used mixed methods, and often worked in interdisciplinary teams at the interface of the disciplines of human development and psychological anthropology. I have a joint appointment at UCLA in the Department of Psychiatry (Center for Culture and Health) and Department of Anthropology.

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Children grow up in a wonderful and remarkable diversity of cultural communities around the world [Weisner, 2001]. Every cultural community provides developmental pathways for children within some ecological-cultural (ecocultural) context. Cultural pathways are made up of everyday routines of life, and routines are made up of cultural activities (bedtime, playing video games, homework, watching TV, cooking dinner, soccer practice, visiting grandma, babysitting for money). Activities are useful units for cultural analysis because they are meaningful units for parents and children to understand, they are amenable to ethnographic fieldwork, systematic observation, and interviewing methods, they are what children and parents experience, and they crystallize the important aspects of culture. Activities include values and goals, resources needed to make the activity happen, people in relationship, the tasks the activity is there to accomplish, emotions and feelings of those engaged in the activity, and a script defining the appropriate, normative way we expect to do that activity. Imagine cultural pathways themselves as consisting of cultural activities we 'step' into – engage in – and walk alongside throughout life. The proposal about culture for consideration by developmentalists is that the cultural pathways in which human development occurs constitute the most important influences shaping development and developmental outcomes [Gallimore, Goldenberg and Weisner, 1993; Weisner, 1998].

I've used a thought experiment to illustrate the value of keeping cultural pathways in the foreground of our thinking [Weisner, 1996]. Bring up in your mind the thought of an infant, neurologically sound and healthy. What is the single most important thing that one could do to influence the development of that infant? Most people quickly respond with mentions of physical protection and security for the infant, good nutrition, providing love, insuring good attachment, providing a trust fund/financial security, and stimulating the infant. All important in development, all with extensive research literatures, all important things parents do around the world. But, I then propose, none of them are the most important thing you could do according to an ecocultural theory.

The most important would be to decide where on earth – in what human community – that infant is going to grow up. Highland New Guinea? Rural Western Kenya? Tamil Nadu, India? Tahiti? Taiwan? West Los Angeles? How will each of those clearly important functions be carried out in that community? What will the activities in which the functions are embedded look like? What physical protections are needed in each of these communities, and what do people think infants need protection from? What do parents believe about and have the resources for providing child nutrition? How is love expressed by different individuals at different ages? What does trust and attachment look like to parents? What kinds of economic security are possible or in reach? What is 'stimulation' in each community, and when should it happen? Furthermore, towards what ends are parents and others doing these good things for children? What are the goals – the adaptive projects – which organize and give meaning to them [Weisner, 1997]? In other words, with what set of cultural pathways are that infant and its parents about to engage?

The result of this recasting of our initial, implicit assumptions about the thought experiment of imagining the infant is that, if asked the question again, we would now imagine the community and pathways and activities around the infant – not only the infant floating all alone in our mind's eye. If developmentalists, as part of their own implicit way of thinking about children, always brought the child into

mind as already situated in some human community, we would be well along on the research pathway of bringing culture into developmental research.

Our task for the commentaries for this special issue of *Human Development*, as I understand it, is to sketch how we can use the concept of culture in research, rather than consider history, definitions, epistemology, methods questions generally, political issues, and so forth. Our focus is on the 'child's eye' view and family cultural world. With that task in mind, here is a useful window into developmental pathways in cultural communities that affect children and parents: ecocultural theory to understand why the pathways children are in are constituted as they are, and the Ecocultural Family Interview (EFI) to understand how families organize the daily routine of activities children engage in.

An ecocultural perspective takes account of ecological and institutional forces that impinge on the everyday activities of families by focusing on their impacts on the developmental niche and psychocultural worlds of parents and children [Super and Harkness, 1997; Whiting and Edwards, 1988; LeVine et al., 1994]. The features of cultural ecology that seem to be particularly important for children's development around the world include: the subsistence and work cycles of the family and community; health and demographic characteristics; threats to safety; the nature of the division of labor by age and sex; children's tasks and work, including domestic, child care and school work; roles of fathers and older siblings; children's play and play groups; roles of women and girls in the community and supports for them; the varied sources of cultural influence and information available and the extent of community heterogeneity in models of care and child activities [Weisner, 1984].

Ecocultural theory is based on the idea of locally rational action [D'Andrade, 1986; Gellner, 1982; Shore, 1996; Shweder, 1991; Strauss and Quinn, 1997]. The 'local situation' consists of everyday routines and activities. Actors use connected, schematized, shared knowledge of this everyday cultural world to adapt and make complex decisions to survive in their local community. In this sense, culture is the preeminent tool that children learn for adaptation to life. The local context, scripts, plans, and intentions of the actor are central to this analysis. The model of the mind and of the human inferences leading to action depend on many cognitive processes, including psychodynamic, social inference, meaning-centered, a variety of memory processes, and the events and scripts stored in mind and available for directing action [Dawes, 1988; Garro, 2001; Glovich, 1991; Mattingly and Garro, 2000; Nisbett and Ross, 1980; Schacter, 1999].

One way to enter children's and families' cultural pathways is to ask parents and children directly about their daily routines and activities, and observe them. This is the EFI [Weisner, Bernheimer, and Coots, 1997]. The family 'project' of organizing, adapting, and sustaining their daily routine, and the activities that constitute the routine, is the focus. The EFI is an open-ended, semistructured conversation that covers a broad range of topics related to a family's daily routines (such as meals, school, work, time together). Respondents are encouraged to 'tell their story' about raising their children and dealing with all the many problems in and supports for maintaining their daily routine of life. The interview format ('Walk me through your day; Why are these important activities? What concerns you about your family routine nowadays? How do you keep your routines going? Which activities are you trying to encourage or change?') allows family members to discuss

topics that are of greatest concern to them. Parents sometimes see this as a chance for a 'life review', or at least 'multiple-week review', encouraging them to reflect on what they are doing and where they are going.

The EFI is a conversation, not a question-response interview for the most part, although the fieldworker does frame and guide the conversation towards the activities that make up the daily routine and what constitutes them. Both the efforts needed to create the activities, and the nature of the activities themselves, are considered. The EFI is also influenced by the researcher's interests and focus. A study of children with disabilities will focus on impacts of that child on the family routine. A study of infant care will focus on the infant. A study of literacy and numeracy will focus more on home activities promotive of those skills. But the EFI is open to surprising, serendipitous findings around those general topics.

Our experience is that parents readily and easily grasp the frame of the EFI, and provide rich material. This frame seems to fit with how parents remember material about ecocultural context (they remember it in terms of sequences of events and activities organizing their days). The fieldworker insures that all the topics about activities are covered [such as the *script* for an activity, *feelings* and motives, *goals/values* for them, the *people* who are or should be involved, and the *tasks* that activities are there to get done; Gallimore et al., 1993]. The fieldworker brings up topics that parents may not for whatever reason bring up spontaneously (e.g., mothers may not mention roles of the father, siblings, financial resources needed, supports, play), but which are important for the researcher to cover. Hence there are no 'false negatives' in the EFI data.

The EFI was originally developed to understand family adaptation in families with children with disabilities. Versions of the EFI have been developed a number of times already in a number of cultures. For instance, versions are available for Chinese-American, Japanese-American, and Asian immigrant families, Navajo and Japanese families, Italian families with infants, working poor families facing welfare reforms, and Mexican immigrant families in California [Axia and Weisner, in press; Begay, Roberts, Weisner, and Matheson, 1999; Nihira, 1997; Nihira, Sakagami, Kanenaga, Koga, and Suzuki, 1995; Raghavan, Weisner, and Patel, 1999; Reese, Goldenberg, and Loucky, 1995; Weisner et al., 2000].

Fieldworkers write up their notes from the EFI using the topics identified as important for that community based on prior pilot work or ethnographic work, and from ecocultural and developmental theory. The notes can be used directly for description, understanding and further analysis of pathways and activities.

The EFI also is used to create scored items describing the family routine and how it gets created and sustained (such as the extent of the role of the father in child care, supports for mother from kin, resources necessary to sustain a stable routine, or help from social services). Each item in an EFI includes fieldworker scores for that family, as well as a 'cue' or reason for why that score was given. The EFI generates a context summarizing that family's situation, and meaning for why a score was given, not only a number. Our experience has been that interrater agreement is high. When another rater is given only the notes from the interview, he/she can reliably rate a family within one scale point on a nine-point scale (average 83–92% agreement). The scores for a family on their daily routine concerns and activities then can be used for longitudinal studies of a child and family over time, comparisons across families in a study, and can be linked to other quan-

titative data on the child and family from questionnaires, surveys, or child assessments. The fieldnotes also can be analyzed for themes, for specific activities, and used for interpretation of quantitative results [Nihira, Weisner, and Bernheimer, 1994; Weisner, Matheson, and Bernheimer, 1996; Gallimore, Weisner, Guthrie, Bernheimer, and Nihira 1993].

The EFI is a very useful window into cultural activities meaningful to families, but other methods can be used as well. Of course ethnographic fieldwork and systematic observation complement methods like the EFI. The qualitative and ethnographic data from the EFI can be used to generate everyday terms and keywords that capture the important features of activities, or descriptions of children [Ryan and Weisner, 1996]. Experience or event sampling, using pagers, phone calls or other ways to directly sample children's activities and experience, provide frequencies of child engagement in activities of special interest, such as literacy events, as well as the child's and parent's immediate experience [Weisner, Ryan, Reese, Kroesen, Bernheimer, and Gallimore, 2001]. Methods for assessing the extent of shared cultural knowledge about children's activities and behaviors are also useful complements to the EFI [e.g. Romney and Batchelder, 2002; Weller and Romney, 1988]. The extent to which cultural activities and beliefs are shared of course varies at all levels (within families, communities, ethnic groups, and nations). The extent of shared belief and practice should be an empirical question to be ascertained as part of a cultural analysis.

The ecocultural/activity approach suggests outcome criteria for what is good for children that fits with communities' own concerns and goals, yet does clearly differentiate better and worse circumstances for children and families. The family routine itself and the activities in it can be examined for its *resource and ecological fit* in a particular cultural ecology, its *meaningfulness* and value for the family, its balancing of *competing* interests and conflicts among family and community members, and its predictability and *stability* for children. Better ecological and resource fit, more meaningfulness, less conflict, and more predictability and stability jointly influence the *sustainability* of a family daily routine in a particular cultural place.

Ecocultural theory is based on the idea that children's engagement in more sustainable routines and activities is good for children, and produces well-being. Well-being, in ecocultural theory, consists of engaged participation in cultural activities deemed desirable by a cultural community (e.g., kinds of play, work for the family, prayer), and the psychological experiences produced thereby (such as efficacy, happiness, and trust) [Weisner, 1998]. This is a universal developmental outcome, explicitly embedded in the cultural community the child develops in, that can be used in evaluating children's development across cultures, but without predetermining the content and context that has meaning in that community. A cultural approach to development can and should offer these kinds of outcome measures for comparative developmental research across cultural communities, as a complement to other kinds of outcomes important for children and their families.

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