PARENTAL ETHNOTHEORIES OF CHILDREN'S LEARNING

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Picture yourself, for a moment, as an American visitor who has the privilege of spending a morning in a pleasant middle-class Dutch home observing the normal routine of a mother and her 6-month-old baby. The mother made sure you got there by 8:30 to witness the morning bath, an opportunity for playful interaction with the baby. The baby has been dressed in cozy warm clothes, her hair brushed and styled with a tiny curlicue atop her head. The mother has given her the mid-morning bottle, then sung to her and played patty-cake for a few minutes before placing her in the playpen to entertain herself with a mobile while the mother attends to other things nearby. Now, about half an hour later, the baby is beginning to get fussy. The mother watches her for a minute, then offers a toy and turns away again. Soon, the baby again begins to fuss. "Seems bored and in need of attention," you think. But the mother looks at the baby sympathetically and in a soft voice says, "Oh, are you tired?" Without further ado, she picks up the baby, carries her upstairs, tucks her into her crib, and pulls down the shades. To your surprise, the baby fusses for a few more moments and then is quiet. The mother looks serene. "She needs plenty of sleep in order to grow," she explains. "When she doesn't have her nap or go to bed on time, we can always tell the difference—she's not so happy and playful."

This scenario—based on an actual observation—illustrates how parents' cultural beliefs, or "parental ethnotheories," are expressed in the daily lives of families. The Dutch mother we observed interpreted her child's behavior in the context of culturally shared beliefs about the nature of infants

(perhaps you, for your part, interpreted the baby's fussiness in an American cultural framework). In the Dutch case, some of these ethnotheories have been encoded as the "three R's" of good parenting, a set of beliefs passed down through generations of parents and formalized in guidelines by the national health care system (Super, Harkness, et al. 1996).

We discovered the "three R's" of Dutch child-rearing—*rust* (rest), *regelmaat* (regularity), and *reinheid* (cleanliness)—while doing research on how Dutch parents in a typical mid-sized town think about the development of their infants and children, and how these ideas guide the way they organize children's lives from day to day. We found that the "three R's" were powerfully represented in differences in the amount that babies slept, as well as how they were cared for while awake. At 6 months, the Dutch babies were sleeping more than a comparison group of American babies—a total of 15 hours per day versus 13 hours for the Americans. While awake at home, the Dutch babies were more often left to play quietly in their playpens or infant seats. A daily ride in the baby carriage provided time for the baby to look around at the passing scene or to doze peacefully. If the mother needed to go out for a time without the baby, she could leave it alone in bed for a short time, or time her outing with the baby's nap time and ask a neighbor to monitor with a "baby phone." Many families also had grandparents or grown siblings nearby who would be glad to baby-sit. The important thing was to protect the baby's regular schedule, especially time for sleeping.

Understanding parents' ethnotheories about their children is key to understanding the strategies parents use to help their children grow up to become successful members of their communities. In particular, parental ethnotheories about children as learners provide a foundation for the ways that parents think about children's environments for learning. These ideas, in turn, are related to parental ethnotheories of children's intelligence and personality, a topic that Harkness and Super first studied in a rural Kipsigis community of western Kenya in the 1970s (Harkness and Super 1992; Harkness, Super, et al. 2009; Super 1983). Mothers in this community identified six different groupings of words used to describe children. The first group referred to children's helpfulness and obedience, and it included phrases denoting a child who is respectful, polite, hospitable to visitors, and responsible. Particularly interesting in this group was the term *kaseit*, derived from the verb *kase*, to understand, describing a

child who understands quickly what needs to be done—and does it. The second group referred specifically to cognitive qualities, including *ng'om* (intelligent), *utat* (clever, or wise and unselfish), and *kwelat* (sharp, clever, sometimes devious). The word *ng'om* was used only in describing children and was typically used to describe intelligent behavior at home. As one mother said:

> For a girl who is *ng'om*, after eating she sweeps the house because she knows it should be done. Then she washes dishes, looks for vegetables [in the garden], and takes good care of the baby. When you come home, you feel pleased and say: "This child is *ng'om*." Another girl may not even clean her own dishes, but just go out and play, leaving the baby to cry. For a boy, if he is *ng'om*, he will watch the cows, and take them to the river without being told. He knows to separate the calves from the cows and he will fix the thorn fence when it is broken. The other boy will let the cows into the maize field and will be found playing while they eat the maize.

As the Kokwet mothers explained further, the term *ng'om* could also be applied to academic intelligence. However, they stressed that being intelligent in school and at home were two different things: a child might do well in school despite often forgetting to be responsible and helpful at home. In summary, the Kokwet parents' concept of intelligence highlighted aspects of social competence, including responsibility and helpfulness, that have been documented throughout traditional cultures in sub-Saharan Africa (Serpell and Jere-Folotiya 2008), and that have tended to be overlooked in Western formal theories of children's intelligence (Nsamenang and Lamb 1993; Sternberg et al. 1981).

Parental Ethnotheories and the Developmental Niche

As illustrated in these examples, parental ethnotheories are cultural models that parents hold regarding children, families, and themselves as parents. The term *cultural model*, drawn from cognitive anthropology, indicates an organized set of ideas that are shared by members of a cultural group (D'Andrade and Strauss 1992; Quinn and Holland 1987). Like other cultural models related to the self, parental ethnotheories are often implicit,

taken-for-granted ideas about the "natural" or "right" way to think or act, and they have strong motivational properties for parents.

Parental ethnotheories are related to each other both across domains and in hierarchical fashion. The top of the hierarchy contains implicit, linked models of child, family, and parent; further down the hierarchy we find more specific and consciously held ideas about particular aspects of child development, parenting, and family life. These ideas inform parents' perceptions of their own children, as well as providing a basis for evaluating oneself and others as parents. Mediating the relationship between parents' cultural beliefs and behavior are other factors such as the child's own individual characteristics, competing cultural ideas, and situational factors such as parents' work and the composition of the family.

Parental ethnotheories are closely related to other aspects of the child's culturally constructed environment. This environment is not a random collection of unrelated social customs, aesthetic values, interpersonal interactions, physical situations, and beliefs about the world (Harkness and Super 2005). Rather, the various components of the child's environment together constitute a developmental niche (Super and Harkness 1986, 2002), which is conceptualized as three interactive subsystems. First, the physical and social settings provide places and people that constitute the child's learning environment. Second, customs and practices of care offer opportunities to acquire various competencies, from reading to self-regulation, from playing baseball to caring for an infant sibling. Finally, the psychology of the caretakers, particularly parents' ethnotheories of the child and of development, shape the choices that parents make in relation to the settings that their children inhabit and the competencies they acquire; parents' ethnotheories are also evident in parent-child interactions.

Parental Ethnotheories of Infants' Learning and Development

Cultural learning starts early in life, as the universal strands of the infant's developmental agenda are interwoven with the cultural agenda for normative development communicated by the infant's developmental niche (Super and Harkness 2009, see also chapter 12, this volume). A study of parental ethnotheories in five cultures (Harkness, Super, et al. 2007) indicated that mothers' ideas and practices related to infant development

vary substantially, even among middle-class, post-industrial Western communities. The samples for the study were drawn from the International Baby Study (IBS), a longitudinal study of caretaking ideas and practices for infants from the prenatal period to 2 years of age in the United States and the Netherlands, augmented with partial replications in Spain, Italy, and Korea. Study sites in each country were chosen to be broadly representative of a local middle-class population in a city or region. The goal of the study was not to establish national profiles, much less capture intracultural variability within increasingly multicultural populations, but rather to identify shared parental ideas and their relationship to parenting practices and child outcomes within somewhat homogeneous groups in each cultural site.

Semistructured interviews with the mothers when their infants were 2 months old indicated that parental ethnotheories of infant care and development were characterized by a relatively small number of themes and associated practices. Based on detailed coding of the transcribed interviews, a "salience index" of themes and practices was derived for each of the five samples. Cultural variability in the occurrence of these themes and practices suggests that infants in each place were learning distinctive sets of skills.

The themes of cognitive processing and stimulation of cognitive development, for example, were emphasized most by the U.S. mothers. When asked what they thought their baby's most important development need was at this time, the U.S. parents tended overwhelmingly to mention stimulation. As one mother said:

> I think he needs to be warm, to be fed, to be clean, dry, that kind of thing, but I also think he definitely needs some stimulation. There are times when he is in a chair and we're not paying attention to him or, you know . . . he needs some stimulation, something of interest to look at, something to, you know, just for him to play with.

These mothers had plenty of resources that could be incorporated into the baby's settings of daily life in order to provide stimulation, as one mother described:

> Somebody got us a video. It's Baby Einstein. It works a lot with colors and music and just stimulating, so we play that for him. Not every day, but almost every day. Just, there's a whole different range of things. One of

them is colors. One is language. The other one is just, you know, shapes and . . . it's stimulating to him. We try to stimulate him in some way.

The mothers also had strong direction from professional, "expert" sources of advice about the importance of stimulation, as one mother commented:

> You hear about studies of brain development and having the brain make certain connections at certain points so early on, and if they're not exposed to music or things like that, that certain parts of their brain won't develop as well . . . things in my baby magazines that they give you in the OB/GYN office, books that you buy that tell you how to raise your kids. Experts, I guess.

The Korean mothers were also concerned about stimulating their babies' cognitive development, and they approached this task in terms of early academic training. As one mother said:

> I play music to her or I play tapes with a recorded story so she can listen to them. The stories are recorded in Korean and in English. The earlier she starts the better.

Like the U.S. mothers, the Korean mothers also added special sources of stimulation to the baby's settings of daily life; as one mother observed:

> My baby looks at new things very intensively for a long time. I think he recognizes things and he is thinking . . . I like it. It is his brain development. I would like to show him lots of things to help and encourage his brain development. . . . I put some pictures on the wall to show him things. . . . I would like to do more for him.

In contrast to both the U.S. and Korean mothers, the Italian mothers spoke about stimulation more in terms of social relationships and socio-emotional intelligence, both related to the theme of emotional closeness. In response to the interviewer's question about stimulating the baby, one mother responded:

> Yes, we stimulate him. . . . Actually, my husband makes him jump, he is the "baby skier," the "baby pilot." His father makes him do all these

things and he is crazy about that, I mean he seems to understand, it sounds impossible, but he really gets crazy, as soon as he sees his dad he really brightens up. He smiles at me when I talk to him, if he hears my voice or I stand in front of him and say "Marco!" then he smiles.

For these Italian mothers, the most important opportunities for the baby's learning and development seemed to be through social interaction with others:

In my opinion he is a demanding little boy, I mean he wants to see, to do things. I don't think he likes being alone, at least now, maybe because he gets bored . . . and also because he is used to having me or other people around talking to him: aunt, grandpa or this woman who takes care of my father. There's always somebody talking to him, perhaps he's more used to seeing faces than to playing. . . . He has so much fun when somebody talks to him, puts him on the couch, plays with him, or on his bed. . . . When he's in the mood, he has more fun than with his toys!

Among the Spanish mothers, the themes of socio-emotional closeness and social intelligence were also frequently expressed. For these mothers, stimulation was described as available from the wider social and physical environment:

I believe that it is important for the baby to go out to get some fresh air and sunshine and . . . so that she relates to her environment. . . . There are some things that she doesn't see in the house. The trees, the branches, she looks at them and she likes looking at the children in the street. . . . All these are different kinds of stimulation that she doesn't see in the house.

Finally, the Dutch mothers were unique in their emphasis on the importance of rest and regularity of routines as a necessary foundation for all aspects of development. Taking the baby out for a walk in the carriage, for example, could either stimulate or calm the baby, as one mother described:

Now, I have the idea that it's healthy to be outside and he really likes it . . . also when he's restless like yesterday evening . . . and then I just go about a block with him . . . and then often he just goes to sleep.

In contrast to their concern with the baby's healthy development through rest and regularity, two cornerstones of the traditional Dutch "three R's of child-rearing (see Super, Harkness, et al. 1996), these mothers had relatively low expectations for stimulating early cognitive development, instead emphasizing the importance of maintaining a calm, positive state of arousal in the baby. As one mother responded to a question about what activities or experiences she wanted her baby to have:

> It's not that I take him to baby swimming lessons [a typical activity in this community], but we have little outings with my husband, the three of us go out and have a nice time. When he's had his bath, I give him a little massage with lotion. You know, I do what he enjoys. Or I read books with him, or he likes pictures, showing him pictures, that kind of thing. . . . You notice that he likes it, and it makes him calm.

As these examples suggest, the mothers in our five samples viewed the development of their young infants through distinctively different cultural lenses. Their ethnotheories of early care and development assigned differential importance to the acquisition of various kinds of competence, including cognitive competence, socio-emotional intelligence, and self-regulation of state of arousal. "Learning" according to these mothers could be accomplished through various different means; this in turn implied different roles for mothers.

For the U.S. mothers in our study, "stimulation" was considered the basis for learning, and it could be provided through objects in the environment, including the latest video technology. The mother's role, according to this implicit parental ethnotheory, was primarily to provide "stimulation" by making sure that the infant's immediate environment included plenty of interesting objects that would stimulate the baby's "brain development," thus equipping him for a successful transition to school and beyond.

The Korean mothers were also concerned about their babies' early brain development but they assigned themselves a more proximal role in providing stimulation. This is evident in the quotes: "*I* play music to her or *I* play tapes with a recorded story" and "*I* would like to show him lots of things to help and encourage his brain development." The mothers' proximal role was also evident in the ways that they set up the baby's

environment: for example, in one home, pictures for the baby to look at were put on the wall over the sofa, where the baby could only see them while being held by the mother or other caretaker.

The Italian mothers also saw themselves as direct providers of stimulation for the baby. But in their implicit model, "stimulation" meant social interaction, not providing interesting objects or instructional materials. Speaking within the framework of this model, the mother points to social expressiveness—a smile—as evidence that the baby "understands" (exactly what he understands is not made explicit). According to this ethnotheory, it would appear that no amount of social stimulation is too much—the baby is accustomed to having people around talking to him all the time, and thrives on it.

Similarly for the Spanish mothers, the baby was perceived as an essentially social creature who demanded attention and interaction. Taking the baby outside to "the street," as it was often expressed, was a way to vary the baby's environment, thus providing various kinds of stimulation—sensory, visual, auditory, as well as social. The importance of the daily walk was emphasized by doctors, relatives—"everyone" (as one mother said)—as beneficial to both baby and mother.

Finally, the Dutch mothers' talk about their babies recalls the emphasis on rest and regularity seen in our opening vignette. We have dubbed this ethnotheory, with its focus on maintaining health and well-being through a regular and restful routine, the "horticultural model" of child-rearing, in an allusion to the flower bulb fields surrounding this community. Just provide the right conditions and monitor the child's state carefully, according to this model, and the child will develop nicely and learn what she needs along the way. Showing pictures to the baby, in this framework, was an activity intended to calm, not to educate.

Thematicity in Parental Ethnotheories of the Child

As the above examples illustrate, parental ethnotheories about their children are apparent from early on in the ways that parents talk about their infants. Indeed, some parental ethnotheories are already in evidence during pregnancy: as one American mother recounted to us, "Of course, I read to him before he was born." A striking aspect of these ethnotheories

is their consistency across domains as well as across developmental time. As with cultural models more generally (Quinn and Holland 1987), it appears that parental ethnotheories are characterized by a small number of themes that can be used for many different purposes. This quality of thematicity is captured by a study of parents' descriptions of their children, a component of the International Study of Parents, Children, and Schools (ISPCS) (Harkness, Blom, et al. 2007; Harkness and Super 2005). In each of the seven cultural sites for this study, researchers recruited a sample of 60 families with target children divided evenly into five age groups balanced for birth order and sex: 6 months, 18 months, 3 years, 4.5 years, and 7–8 years. The sample families again were broadly middle-class, with one or both parents employed and no major health problems; most of them were nuclear families with both parents present in the home; and parents in each sample were all native-born to that culture. The study sites were located in communities in Sweden, Poland, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, Australia, and the United States. The samples of children did not overlap with those of the later International Baby Study; in addition, they were older. Nevertheless, there is remarkable continuity in the cultural themes expressed by parents from the same cultural communities that were represented in both studies (Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, and the United States).

Parents' descriptions of their children were elicited in the semi-structured interviews carried out in the ISPCS; in addition, the parents' perceptions of their children's characteristics were interwoven throughout the interviews. As we listened to these accounts, we came to recognize them as not only individual perceptions but also cultural constructions that framed parents' experiences of their own child. In these constructions, we could see evidence for a cultural model of "the child," to which a particular child was implicitly compared. Although such cultural models are by definition as unique as the culture to which they belong, they can be indexed by patterns of descriptive words or phrases found to varying extents in parents' descriptions in various settings. Parents from all six samples described their children as sociable, loving, active, and strong willed: frequencies of each of these descriptors varied from at least 5 percent to over 14 percent of all descriptors and were among the top 10 most frequently used. Beyond this common core of parental perceptions

of young children, however, group differences emerged in the particular kinds of qualities that engaged parents' attention.

Among the American parents, the attention to cognitive abilities seen in the IBS was typical: the highest frequency American descriptors included "intelligent" and "cognitively advanced" as well as "asks questions." Along with these qualities, the American parents described their children as "independent" and even "rebellious." At the opposite extreme were the Italian parents, who rarely described their children as intelligent and never characterized them as cognitively advanced. Instead, these parents talked about their children as being even tempered, well balanced, and *simpatico*—a group of characteristics suggesting social and emotional competence further supported by the characterization "asks questions," which for these families was an aspect of being sociable and communicative (see also chapter 10, this volume). The Italian parents also described their children as "knowing what they want," a less aggressive version of strong will than the American "rebellious." Like the Italian parents, the Dutch parents also focused more on their children's social qualities, describing them as "agreeable" and "enjoying life." The attribution of having a "long attention span" is a high-frequency descriptor only for the Dutch parents, as is being "regular"—not surprisingly given these parents' concern with rest and regularity and its benefits. For the Dutch parents, the descriptor "asks questions" may be linked with "seeks attention," two aspects of dependent behavior. The profile of descriptors for these parents, then, indicates a child who is positive in mood, regular in habits, and able to entertain himself for periods of time although needing attention every so often. The Swedish parents were similar to the Dutch parents in describing their children as "persistent," a quality closely related to having a long attention span. However, the most frequently used descriptors of the Swedish parents—agreeable, well balanced, even tempered, secure, and (most frequently of all) happy—indicated what may be a cultural ideal for these parents. The Spanish parents' descriptions again focus on social qualities, indexed by terms for social maturity and "good character"; these descriptions suggest a cultural model of the child centered on an ideal of the good citizen and family member. This conceptual cluster of attributes was balanced by attention to the child's cognitive abilities as expressed by the descriptors "intelligent" and "alert."

The Australian parents appeared similar to the U.S. parents in their focus on cognitive competence as indicated by the descriptors "intelligent" and "asks questions." For these parents, "happy" was also a frequent descriptor. Unlike all other samples, however, the Australian parents seemed to focus more on the child's emotional state and reactivity, as suggested by the descriptors "calm" and "sensitive."

In summary, the patterns of both cross-cultural similarity and difference in parents' descriptions of their own children suggest that these descriptions are culturally constructed in the sense that there are locally shared ideas about what child qualities are most important, most worthy of note. Comparing across the six cultural samples, there is evidence of commonality in the group of descriptors that were among the most frequent in all of the samples. At the same time, the particular ways that these are combined with other, more culture-specific profiles of descriptors suggests that each community has its own unique perspective on the nature of the child. Within the four cultural communities that were sampled for both the ISPCS and the IBS, there is evident continuity of themes: from a focus on cognitive stimulation through toys and videos to "remarkable" intelligence in the U.S. samples, from social stimulation to socio-emotional competence in the Italian studies, from the "three R's" of rest, regularity, and good hygiene to the calm, happy and well-regulated child in the Dutch studies, and from social creature to good citizen in the Spanish studies.

Parental Ethnotheories and Children's Learning: Three Challenges

The developmental niche framework makes evident the kind of systematic regularity that culture provides—environmental organization that emphasizes repeatedly or with singular salience the culture's core "messages." As Super and Harkness have suggested elsewhere (Super and Harkness 1999), it is through such cultural thematicity that the environment works its most profound influences on development. This quality of "contemporary redundancy" is important for the acquisition of skills and competencies, as it offers multiple opportunities for learning the same thing, whether that "thing" is reading, sibling caretaking, or the communication of emotions. Similarly, the elaboration of themes across

stages, over the course of developmental time, reinforces lessons learned earlier and recasts them in a more adequate format for meeting the challenges of increasing maturity.

Despite its qualities of redundancy and thematicity across development, however, parental ethnotheories are not always easily translated into action. Other factors mediate the relationship between ideas and behavior and contribute to the challenges of parenting in any culture. One frequent dilemma for American parents, for example, is the issue of competing cultural models related to family time and time for children's activities. In one such situation, the two senior authors of this paper were confronted with their daughter's invitation to join a prestigious indoor soccer team. There was only one drawback—the team would practice on Saturday evenings from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m., exactly the time when the family would otherwise be sitting down to dinner together. Fortunately for the parents, the issue was easily settled since the family was about to leave for a period of research in the Netherlands. More typically, however, parents must prioritize the importance of various cultural models, often derived from different sources, as they choose which one to instantiate.

Individual qualities of the child also may alter the ways that parental ethnotheories are used in practice. Research about parents' perceptions of their children's temperaments in the seven cultural samples of the ISPCS, however, suggests that even this adaptation to individual variability is culturally structured (Super, Axia, et al. 2007). Parents of children aged 3 years, 4.5 years, and 7–8 years in each of the seven cultural samples filled out the Behavioral Style Questionnaire (McDevitt and Carey 1978) to assess their children's temperaments in the framework of the nine-dimensional model developed by Thomas and Chess (Thomas and Chess 1977). They also made a global rating of their child's overall "difficultness." Although parents in most of the cultural samples tended to associate difficultness with low adaptability and negative mood, there were important exceptions. The Italian parents, for example, did not associate negative mood with difficultness; on the other hand, they did find being slow to warm up in new social situations to be a difficult aspect of young children's temperament. As they explained in interviews, the ability to move quickly and gracefully into new social situations was considered an important skill for navigating various gatherings of family and friends from a young age. This emphasis on the importance of social competence,

as we have seen previously with regard to Italian mothers' talk about their infants and Italian parents' descriptions of their children, underlines the point that "difficult" behavior—behavior that requires an uncomfortable change of parenting practices—varies across cultures.

When families move from their culture of origin to a new environment, parents face a different kind of challenge: how to preserve the most meaningful aspects of the children's developmental niches while incorporating necessary changes. Research on Asian immigrant families in the United States suggests that parental ethnotheories travel relatively well, and that they are at least partially instantiated in parenting practices in the new environment. For example, Parmar, Harkness, and Super (2004, 2008) found that Asian immigrant parents of preschoolers thought that they should be teachers rather than playmates to their young children, and that they actually did engage in more educational activities with their children than did a Euro-American comparison group. Likewise, Raghavan, Harkness, and Super (2009) found that Asian Indian mothers focused more on qualities such as being hospitable and responsible when describing their daughters, in contrast to the Euro-American comparison group of mothers who described their daughters more in terms of independence and being athletic. Relatedly, the Indian immigrant daughters spent more time at home with their families and entertaining guests, whereas the Euro-American girls spent more time in sports.

Parenting Ethnotheories and Children's Successful Development

As our beloved friend and colleague the late Harry McGurk used to say, there are many ways to bring up children successfully. Nevertheless, as Harry noted, the literature on parenting is replete with studies of parents "at risk" and failures of parenting; there is little research to be found on successful parenting. Perhaps it was Harry's energetic and optimistic approach to life that led him to suggest there is something important to be learned by focusing on the positive, and his own experiences working closely with colleagues from other countries that directed him to cross-cultural interests. It was his opinion that cross-cultural studies of normal, well-functioning families can illuminate different pathways to successful

parenting, thereby making it possible to see our own culturally designated routes in a new light as well.

Parental ethnotheories provide a framework for understanding the ways that parents think about their children, their families, and themselves, and the mostly implicit choices that parents make about how to bring up the next generation. Parents' cultural beliefs about children's learning, as we have seen in this chapter, vary widely even within the Western world, both in terms of what children need to learn and how parents can help them in this process. Likewise, cultural models of children's successful development—as reflected in the qualities parents implicitly choose to highlight when they describe their children—also vary in subtle but profound ways. Understanding these ideas, and their instantiation in the child's developmental niche of everyday life, can yield new perspectives on children's learning for the benefit of both research scientists and children's most ardent fans—their parents.

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Part II
LEARNING AS A SOCIAL PROCESS