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Parental Ethnotheories of Child Development: Looking Beyond Independence and Individualism in American Belief Systems

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Indigenous and Cultural Psychology

Understanding People in Context

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Family and Socialization

Parental Ethnotheories of Child Development

Looking Beyond Independence and Individualism in American Belief Systems

Carolyn Pope Edwards, Lisa Knoche,
Vibeke Aukrust, Asiye Kumru, and Misuk Kim

Over the past several decades, the topic of child development in a cultural context has received a great deal of theoretical and empirical investigation. Investigators from the fields of indigenous and cultural psychology have argued that childhood is socially and historically constructed, rather than a universal process with a standard sequence of developmental stages or descriptions. As a result, many psychologists have become doubtful that any stage theory of cognitive or social-emotional development can be found to be valid for all times and places. In placing more theoretical emphasis on contextual processes, they define culture as a complex system of common symbolic action patterns (or scripts) built up through everyday human social interaction by means of which individuals create common meanings and in terms of which they organize experience. Researchers understand culture to be organized and coherent, but not homogenous or static, and realize that the complex dynamic system of culture constantly undergoes transformation as participants (adults and children) negotiate and re-negotiate meanings through social interaction. These negotiations and transactions give rise to unceasing heterogeneity and variability in how different individuals and groups of individuals interpret values and meanings.

However, while many psychologists—both inside and outside the fields of indigenous and cultural psychology–are now willing to give up the idea of a universal path of child development and a universal story of parenting, they have not necessarily foreclosed on the possibility of discovering and describing some universal processes that underlie

socialization and development-in-context. The roots of such universalities would lie in the biological aspects of child development, in the evolutionary processes of *adaptation*, and in the unique symbolic and problem-solving capacities of the human organism as a culture-bearing species. For instance, according to functionalist psychological anthropologists, shared (cultural) processes surround the developing child and promote in the long view the survival of families and groups if they are to demonstrate continuity in the face of ecological change and resource competition, (e.g. Edwards & Whiting, 2004; Gallimore, Goldenberg, & Weisner, 1993; LeVine, Dixon, LeVine, Richman, Leiderman, Keefer, & Brazelton, 1994; LeVine, Miller, & West, 1988; Weisner, 1996, 2002; Whiting & Edwards, 1988; Whiting & Whiting, 1980). As LeVine and colleagues (1994) state:

> *A population tends to <u>share</u> an environment, symbol systems for <u>encoding</u> it, and organizations and codes of conduct for <u>adapting</u> to it (emphasis added). It is through the enactment of these population-specific codes of conduct in locally organized practices that human adaptation occurs. Human adaptation, in other words, is largely attributable to the operation of specific social organizations (e.g. families, communities, empires) following culturally prescribed scripts (normative models) in subsistence, reproduction, and other domains [communication and social regulation].* (p. 12)

It follows, then, that in seeking to understand child development in a cultural context, psychologists need to support collaborative and interdisciplinary developmental science that crosses international borders. Such research can advance cross-cultural psychology, cultural psychology, and indigenous psychology, understood as three sub-disciplines composed of scientists who frequently communicate and debate with one another and mutually inform one another's research programs. For example, to turn to parental belief systems, the particular topic of this chapter, it is clear that collaborative international studies are needed to support the goal of cross-cultural psychologists for findings that go beyond simply describing cultural differences in parental beliefs. Comparative researchers need to shed light on whether parental beliefs are (or are not) systematically related to differences in child outcomes; and they need meta-analyses and reviews to explore between- and within-culture variations in parental beliefs, with a focus on issues of social change (Saraswathi, 2000). Likewise, collaborative research programs can foster the goals of indigenous psychology and cultural psychology and lay out valid descriptions of individual development in their particular cultural contexts and the processes, principles, and critical concepts needed for defining, analyzing, and predicting outcomes of child development-in-context. The project described in this chapter is based on an approach that integrates elements of comparative methodology to serve the aim of describing particular scenarios of child development in unique contexts. The research team of cultural insiders and outsiders

allows for a look at American belief systems based on a dialogue of multiple perspectives.

PARENTAL ETHNOTHEORIES AND THE CHILD'S LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

In every cultural community, human beings form families, raise children, and seek to pass on to them strategies that will promote their future survival and success as well as that of others in their group. Overarching parental goals provide for children the framework of an agenda for development, what Nsamenang (2000) calls the cultural "curriculum." This cultural curriculum has been described in many ways. John and Beatrice Whiting, in founding the contemporary field of comparative child development, coined the term *cultural learning environment* to refer to all of the dimensions (macro and micro) of everyday life that set the stage for child development and socialization (Whiting & Whiting, 1975). At every age period of childhood, distinctively different normative styles of companionship emerge and are influenced by the surrounding context (Whiting & Edwards, 1988). Particularly powerful and influential aspects of the cultural learning environment have been identified: gender, age, status/rank, and kinship relationships of social partners; the ongoing activities of work, play, and rest; and the basic organizing features associated with social structure (subsistence strategies, division of labor between males and females, family and household structure, residential patterns, education, media, technology, and social networks and community institutions). These factors influence what kinds and how much play and work children do, with whom they spend their time, how and where they eat and sleep, what education they receive, and what contact they have with the wider community.

Whiting (1976) argued that culture is too often treated as a "packaged variable" by social scientists, who see it as a nebulous but all pervasive explanation for variance left over and unexplained by individual variables (age, gender, social class, intelligence, and so on), and simply packaged as a black box called "ethnicity x" or "culture y." Although Whiting argued that human beings themselves may be ultimately unfathomable and incommensurable, that is not true for human culture (understood as the shared component of everyday beliefs, values, and practices). Whiting (1980) strove to define cultural dimensions that explain important normative characteristics of adult and child behavior that could be observed, measured, manipulated, and summarized by the techniques of science. The best data on the transmission of culture can be obtained using multiple methods, focusing on one domain and a limited set of hypotheses at a time. She argued that researchers need to continue to search for independent

variables at the cultural level that are most powerful for explaining parent and child behavior around the world (Weisner & Edwards, 2001).

Thomas Weisner has advanced this basic perspective using the idea of the *ecocultural niche,* or *activity setting* (Gallimore, Goldenberg, & Weisner, 1993), to retain the functionalist assumption that cultural learning environments evolve continuously over time to promote adaptation to constraints imposed by external factors, changes in the subsistence base, climatic changes, and the political economies of the region. Activity settings are the routine everyday experiences that provide children with opportunities to learn and develop through modeling and interacting with others. They are the instantiation of the ecological and cultural systems surrounding the child and family, and the means by which institutions and prevailing cultural norms make themselves felt in the lives of children and influence their development.

Super and Harkness (1986), focusing on the child as a developing as well as learning organism, have put forward the term *developmental niche* which, building upon the approach of the Whitings, they define in terms of three key features: 1) organization of everyday life, that is, the physical and social settings and daily routines in which and through which the child lives, learns, grows, and develops; 2) parenting practices, that is, the culturally-regulated routines of child-care and child-training that are used by the child's caregivers; 3) cultural belief systems, the cognitive models and folk-theories, or *parental ethnotheories,* that caregivers hold regarding children, families, and themselves, and bring to their interaction with children.

Harkness and Super (1995) believe that cross-cultural studies of well-functioning families illuminate different cultural pathways to successful parenting. They focus their research on the third component, parental ethnotheories, because they believe that ethnotheories are the "nexus through which elements of the larger culture are filtered," and the source of the first two components, daily organization and parental practices (Harkness et al. 2001, p. 9). In this respect, Harkness and Super disagree with the Whitings who believed that values and beliefs (including expressive systems such as the arts and parental beliefs) are consequences that derive from material conditions and dimensions of everyday life, rather than the reverse (Whiting, 1980; Whiting et al., 1966). The Whitings put forward for empirical test the proposition that how families live is primary and predictive of parental values and beliefs, and they hypothesized that changes in parenting are brought about more by socioeconomic and population changes than by the introduction of new ideologies (cf. Goodnow, 2001). As Greenfield, Maynard, and Childs (2003) have put it, "In sum, socialization and development are not fixed but adapt, in a coordinated way, to changing ecological conditions" (p. 455).

An example of findings that are consistent with the Whiting conjecture about childrearing concerns is Kenyan village women's changing

beliefs and values (Edwards, 2002). An international, multidisciplinary team of collaborators (Edwards & Whiting, editors, 2004) has recently published their case study of Ngecha, a Gikuyu community in the Central Province of Kenya undergoing rapid social change from an agrarian to a wage earning economy during a five-year period shortly after national independence (1968–1973). Village women became important protagonists and agents of social change as they experienced the various technological innovations and adjusted to the requisite modifications in their daily routines and living arrangements. As they sought their children's success in formal schooling, the most modernized mothers modified their concept of the "good child" and came to consider the constellation of "clever, inquisitive, confident, brave" more praiseworthy than the traditional Gikuyu constellation of "respectful, obedient, generous, and good-hearted." Mothers rearranged their value priorities and long-term aspirations for their children, leading to conflict between these new values and those of the Gikuyu of earlier generations. They participated in increased importance of nuclear families with more communication and closeness between young husbands and wives and greater autonomy from the authority of elder extended kin. Ngecha women also displayed a new resourcefulness in facing new opportunities to make money through cash cropping and other farming activities, going to secondary school and technical training, and making contact with the new national politics and culture. An overall theme of the volume is family adaptation, and how the change process impacted the daily lives of women and children and was seen through the eyes of the women who were important actors in the process. The volume documents the kaleidoscopic nature of culture change indicating how a change in one aspect of economy, technology, resources, or external opportunities leads to unplanned consequences in another set of cultural beliefs, values, and practices.

PARENTAL ETHNOTHEORIES IN THE UNITED STATES: INDEPENDENCE/INTERDEPENDENCE AND INDIVIDUALISM/COLLECTIVISM

Having presented the basic assumptions underlying this chapter, we now narrow the focus to one particular society and its cultural belief systems. We begin with a look at recent thinking about some domains of parental beliefs of deepest and most abiding interest to North American psychologists—that interest presumably stemming from the closeness of those domains to core values of American mainstream culture: *independence* (versus *dependence*, or versus *interdependence*) and *individualism* (versus *collectivism*) (Stewart & Bennett, 1991). Contemporary researchers have come to question these old dichotomies and have complicated the

characterization of American core beliefs about independence and individualism.

The broadest possible review of literature on American parental ethnotheories about independence and individualism would conceivably draw from the great body of past research on American childrearing and socialization. However, since parental beliefs about childrearing have not been empirically linked to values and behaviors in any definitive way, this review is limited to the much smaller body of research in which investigators have looked at parental beliefs from an explicitly cultural framework and seen them as evidence of cultural socialization. This more limited body of research allows for an examination of the role of American culture in the construction of parental thinking about children's development, based on the assumption that parental ideas are culturally shared sets of meaning constructed within broader cultural belief systems (Goodnow & Collins, 1990; Lightfoot & Valsiner, 1992).

Several concepts have been used in the literature to capture parental ideas about young children. Some approaches have favored the concept of *folk theories* (Bruner, 1996) when referring to the cognitive models that parents hold regarding child development, socialization, and family interaction. Goodnow and Collins (1990) preferred the concept of *parental ideas*, questioning the extent to which parental thinking about everyday life can be regarded as a "theory." Because there is considerable overlap in usage of this terminology throughout the literature, however, we use the concepts of *parental belief systems* and *ethnotheories* interchangeably to capture the notion of parental cognitive models.

The most widely studied set of American parental beliefs concerns *independence*. For many years, the dichotomy of interest was *independence/dependence*, based on the theoretical notion that *dependency* is a learned motivational system, the manifestations of which are help-seeking, approval-seeking, and proximity-seeking behaviors, all of which serve to promote the survival of the developing child until their purpose is outgrown as the child matures toward autonomous adulthood (Gewirtz, 1972). In recent years, however, many researchers have come to believe that independence is a culturally specific goal of childrearing and that many cultures favor *interdependence* rather than independence as a developmental outcome. This debate positions both independence and interdependence as alternative endpoints of maturity. Independence and interdependence are polar opposites–either the two ends of a continuum, or else mutually exclusive categories (Raeff, 2000). Researchers such as Greenfield and Suzuki (1998) note that both independence and interdependence are manifest in a culturally diverse society such as the United States, but independence is differentially preferred by mainstream Americans while interdependence is preferred by many American minority and new immigrant populations. Along the

same vein, others claim that European-American parents place greater emphasis on the fostering of individual achievement in their children than do members of many other cultures, whose people may place greater value on family or community identification and on achievement conceived of as familial or group success (Harkness, Super, and Keefer, 1992; Lynch and Hanson, 1998).

However, in recent years, more researchers are starting to criticize the independence-interdependence dichotomy as too simplistic. Moreover, they have sought to describe what may actually be a complex relationship between, on the one hand, independence/interdependence and on the other hand, *individualism/collectivism*. Individualism and collectivism are usually defined as overarching value systems that can be used to characterized groups of people at the societal level (Kim, Triandis, Kagitcibasi, Choi & Yoon, 1994). In their meta-analysis of empirical studies of individualism/collectivism outside and inside the United States, Oyserman, Coon, and Kemmelmeier (2002) suggest that individualism in all of its variations is commonly associated with valuing personal independence, with facilitating interactions with strangers and with fostering "a willingness to leave relationships that are not beneficial to the person" (p. 36). Conversely, collectivism implicates obligation and duty to an in-group and "willingness to remain permanently in relationships, even in personally costly ones" (p. 36). They concluded that even though the diverse research literature related to this topic does not lend itself to simple summary, individualism seems to promote ease of interacting with strangers while collectivity promotes in-group preferences in relationships. Individualism and collectivism are independent value dimensions, and a society can score high or low in either individualism or collectivism. Their review suggests that American samples generally score high on individualism but moderately on collectivism. Americans generally interact with more people more easily, than do the groups they were compared to, but at the same time Americans still feel obliged to certain groups–the difference being that these obligations are perceived as voluntary rather than compulsory.

Taking an extreme stand against the entire line of research, Killen and Wainryb (2000) have argued that cultural communities do not actually provide coherent and integrated systems of meanings and practices that can be characterized as either individualistic or collectivistic. Instead, Killen and Wainryb state that "individualistic concerns with independence and collectivistic concerns with interdependence coexist in Western and non-Western cultures" (Killen & Wainryb, 2000, p. 7). Individuals acquire multiple social orientations as they grow up, and cultures make available to them multiple orientations for use in different situations.

Taking a somewhat different approach, Raeff, Greenfield, and Quiroz (2000) have argued that both individualism and collectivism are complex

and multifaceted value systems. In spite of being complex, however, these systems are still useful for understanding different cultural values about relationships. In their view, individualism and collectivism are value orientations at the societal or *cultural level*, while independence/interdependence are value orientations at the *individual level*. A society can be characterized as collectivistic or individualistic, but not as independent or interdependent in its value orientation. Rather, all societies, whether collectivistic or individualistic, must provide viable pathways to both independence and interdependence for their citizens, because both orientations are required for individuals to function in a mature way as part of a social group (Raeff, 1997). The European-American assumptions of freedom and equality include positive valuations of both independence and interdependence, defined in relation to each other. To support this point of view, Raeff (2000) found that American parents of toddlers defined independence in terms of separateness from others and uniqueness, and interdependence in terms of friendly engagement and prosocial behavior such as sharing, and they valued both kinds of behaviors in their babies.

Weisner (2001) also presents a complicating view of the American predilection for independence, but in a different way that centers on intrapsychic conflict. In a special issue devoted to the contributions of Beatrice Whiting to psychological anthropology, Weisner (2001) noted that Whiting liked to caricature what she saw as the American preoccupation with independence by calling it a "dependency hang-up." Whiting assumed that passionate arguments about a particular value often point to deep-seated conflicts and underlying contradictions. As evidence of a fundamental conflict about dependency underneath the American rhetoric about independence, she used data from the Six Culture Study (Whiting & Whiting, 1975). The data comparing the observed behavior of children aged 2 to 10 years showed that those from Orchard Town, New England were especially high in the dependency behaviors of seeking attention, resources and recognition from their parents. At the same time, they were frequently rewarded for a more egoistic self expression and pushed towards self-reliance in dressing, eating, toileting, sleeping, and other self-help skills (Whiting & Edwards, 1998). Weisner (2001) analyzed data from a longitudinal study of California countercultural and nonconventional families from the 1970s who were trying to challenge and counter American family practices and put new values into practice in raising their own children, including questioning the dependency conflicts they had experienced growing up. Weisner's observational data showed that these families had high levels of children seeking attention from parents, verbal negotiations, and dependency interactions, suggesting that these parents and children were reproducing the characteristic American "dependency/autonomy" conflict. This behavioral pattern occurred whether or not parents were strongly countercultural in their

values. At the same time, there was significant intergenerational transmission of values from parents to children, a process revealing intergenerational as well as intrapsychic conflicts.

To conclude this section, the contemporary picture of American parents' ethnotheories has complicated considerably the characterization of American beliefs about independence/interdependence and individualism/collectivism. This viewpoint suggests the active and somewhat unpredictable role that developing individuals take in negotiating personal meanings to guide their lives. Participating in social groups that are significant to them, they co-construct complex and multifaceted belief systems that allow them to function in a dynamic and fluid society. Put more simply, people hold many ideas in mind, sometimes overlapping, sometimes contradictory, in their cultural toolkits, which they can pull out and use when needed.

However, generalized patterns can still be identified, and perhaps now is the time to move beyond the preoccupation with concepts of independence/interdependence (and individualism/collectivism) and instead study other constellations of American parental belief systems in their complexity. Looking at groups of American parents and children living in communities that interact dynamically and change over time, we can see how people's identifications, affiliations, and short- and long-term goals lead them to use their various conceptual tools in patterned and recognizable ways and to argue and act more on the basis of some belief systems rather than others. The belief systems that can be identified turn out to be configurations of ideas that cannot be described in simple dichotomies but that can still be understood as coherent and organized, and that are instantiated or grounded in their everyday social relationships and interactions with institutions.

AMERICAN PARENTAL ETHNOTHEORIES INVOLVING YOUNG CHILDREN'S BELIEFS ABOUT CHILDREN'S NEEDS FOR CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS OUTSIDE THE FAMILY

This final section of the paper draws on collaborative research (Aukrust, Edwards, Kumru, Knoche, & Kim, 2003). The original source and inspiration for this work was experience with intellectuals from European countries (especially Italy, Norway, and Scotland) who raised questions about how the social relational value priorities of their countries contrasted with the United States version of the Western mind. These Europeans raised questions about whether there is any single Westernized mentality.

In earlier research addressing the question of contrasts between U.S. and European approaches to childrearing, it was found that American

and Italian parents and preschool teachers hold different assumptions about the depth and quality of close relationships that young children can form in the preschool, as well as for how important peer-peer and adult-child attachments are for learning and development (Edwards & Gandini, 1989; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993, 1998; Edwards, Gandini, & Giovannini, 1996; Gandini & Edwards, 2001). Samples of parents from both societies say that they put young children in preschool or childcare so they can make friends and develop cognitive and social skills that will get them ready for primary school. However, relative to parents from Italian samples (as well as parents from Japanese and Australian samples), parents from U.S. samples have very early expectations for their children acquiring certain kinds of verbal skills for getting along and negotiating with peers, independently of direct adult supervision and intervention. For example, these American samples are found to state that by age 4, children should have substantial capacities to take initiative, negotiate, stand up for their rights, ask questions, state their own needs, and explain their ideas—skills all clearly related to getting along in an assertive and self-directed way with one's peers at preschool (Edwards et al.; Hess et al., 1980).

Building on this work, the purpose of our project was to discover whether and how parents differ between and within cultures in their ethnotheories as related to young children's social relationships in childcare, preschool, and primary school. In contemporary societies throughout the world, parents must mediate and bridge their young children's transitions to a wider world. But how best to do so raises many questions for parents. For example, should they focus on giving children experiences that help them learn to form and maintain close ties with a few particular people? Or, instead, should they provide experiences that foster connecting in a friendly, less intimate way with a diverse succession of new people? The answers that parents construct may depend at least partly on their beliefs about what kind of preschool their child attends, as well as what kind of society their children will need to deal with as they grow older.

Our hypothesis was that some parents (perhaps those in residentially stable and culturally homogeneous societies) might expect that their children will benefit most if the children develop intimate and long-term ties with particular peers and teachers in preschools and primary schools, because these children are going to continue to live in close proximity to and interact with these same people for years to come. In contrast, other parents might expect that their children most need to develop skills for communicating and relating to people with whom they do not share a continuing relationship history, because residential or educational mobility in a mobile, fluid, diverse society is their likely destiny.

In mainstream United States culture today, relationships and communications both inside and outside the family have been found to be

fostered when individuals use an *explicit* style of expression that allows their views and goals to be clearly recognized by others whether familiar or unfamiliar. This style of communication goes well with an assumption that over their lifetime, children will need to form relationships, interact, negotiate, and exchange resources with many people whom they do not know and with whom they will have only limited, short-term contact (Stewart & Bennett, 1991). Such a way of organizing relationships and communications has been found to differ from the structuring of relationships and communications in varied Asian, African, and South American cultural groups. For example, in some Asian and Latino cultures, relationships within the extended family are often prioritized over relationships outside the family (Lynch & Hanson, 1998). People are expected to fulfill implicit social obligations toward one another through unspoken emotional intimacy, based on long-term relationships and an *implicit* or indirect communication style.

Parents from four communities participated in the study. Two of these communities, Oslo (national capital of Norway) and Lincoln (state capital of Nebraska) are typical cities from Western Europe and the United States. Norway has been found to be distinctive in its emphasis on *equality* and *local belongingness* (Kiel, 1993), giving rise to a particular "egalitarian individualism" different from the more competitive American individualism. The other two communities, Ankara (national capital of Turkey) and Seoul (national capital of South Korea) provide contrasts from Middle East and Far East Asia. Compared to the communities of Lincoln and Oslo, our lead investigators from these countries (Kumru and Kim) expected parents in Ankara and Seoul to value familism and social-relational continuity with extended kin. However, because success in these societies is so dependent on educational achievement, the investigators also predicted that parental beliefs about their children's needs would reflect values favoring skills necessary for getting along in school.

The social organization of preschools and schools in these four communities differs in interesting ways. Two of them (United States and South Korea) feature preschool and primary school systems oriented toward change because every year it is usual for children to be placed with a new set of teachers and classmates (Shim & Herwig, 1997). We wondered, does this method of organizing schools serve to prepare children to succeed in a society oriented to residential and/or educational mobility and capacity to deal with newcomers and strangers? In contrast, the other two countries (Norway and Turkey) feature preschool and primary systems fostering continuity, because children stay with the same teachers and classmates for several years (Bo, 1993; Kapci & Guler; 1999). We wondered, does this way of organizing schools serve to maximize children's opportunities for developing multi-year extended relationships with peers and teachers?

We assumed that the macro features of educational organization–products of history and sociological forces–might be expected to reflect parents' ideas about how children should learn to deal with people outside the extended family. The Norwegian and Turkish school systems would seem to orient parents to focus on child experiences that help them learn to form and maintain close ties with a few particular people, and to develop a continuing relationship history. The American and South Korean school systems would seem to orient parents to focus on experiences that foster connecting with a diverse succession of new people. The full results are presented in a journal publication (Aukrust et al., 2003), but here the focus is what the findings may tell us about American parental models of close relationships for young children and sense of belonging in preschool.

The Lincoln, Nebraska, parents ($n = 95$, 90% mothers) were recruited through 7 preschools or childcare centers. The class sizes varied from 10–15 children, with commonly 2 teachers per classroom. Each preschool had its own curriculum and was supported mostly by parental tuition (with subsidies for some qualified children). The children did not necessarily live close to their school but were driven by parents. The mean age of the parents was 32.8 years, and their preschool child had a mean age of 4 years 3 months. Most parents (74%) were married or living together with the target child's other parent. Mean number of children in the family was 1.9. (The samples from the other communities were similar in size and parental age and social class).

Residential stability was of particular interest to the investigators because of the study focus on parental embeddedness in their local community as a predictor of their ideas and beliefs. Most Lincoln sample families (72%) lived in proximity to one or more close relatives, such as the child's grandparents, aunts, uncles, or cousins. The Lincoln sample was the most geographically mobile in our study, but perhaps not so very mobile by American standards. Lincoln is a medium-sized city of the American Midwest with many families living within driving distance of kin. Nebraska is one of the U.S. states with highest residential stability: in most counties, including Lincoln/Lancaster County, at least 60% of residents were born in-state (New York Times, September 30, 2002, p. A16). The percentage of families in our sample who had moved within the past 2 years was 51%. Parents were asked where they had grown up, and 65% had grown up in the community in which they were presently living. Asked about their plans to leave their city, 50% of the parents in the Lincoln sample reported that they would expect to move away at some point.

Findings from only two sections of our results are discussed here. The first concerns the subscale called Parental Beliefs about Social and Communication skills. It consisted of 6 paired sets of items that assessed beliefs that parents might hold concerning the communication skills their own young child needs most. One item in each set reflected preference for

Table 1. Ethnotheories of Parents in Lincoln, Nebraska, USA, Concerning Young Children's Communication Skills

The following 6 statements reflect ideas that parents may think about young children. Participants rated pairs of alternatives (1 = fully agree with A, 2 = mostly agree with A, 3 = mostly agree with B, 4 = fully agree with B), considering their own child as they answered.	$N = 95$
Higher scores indicate greater agreement with the second alternatives, indicating preference for intensive, long-term relationships and communication. A mean score of 2.5 indicates equal balance in parental preference for the A and B alternatives.	*M (SD)*
1. What young children today most need is	
—confidence to meet and communicate with new people, in new situations, *vs.* —capacity to form deep, meaningful relationships that provide security and continuity.	2.53 (.10)
2. Communication skill comes from	
—learning to make oneself understood to people who do not understand immediately, *vs.* —having many conversations with people the child knows well.	2.55 (.10)
3. Young children should have attachment relationships with adults	
—at preschool as a basis for secure learning, *vs.* —only at home, not at preschool or child care.	1.61 (.07)
4. Young children need	
—time together with a variety of people from different backgrounds and cultures, *vs.* —to get to know a few people well and become part of a close group.	1.60 (.08)
5. Young children need	
—playmates, but at this age it is not important whether they develop into close friends, *vs.* —friendships that will last and continue into the years to come.	2.33 (.09)
6. At any age, it is important and useful to	
—make friends quickly and easily, *vs.* —hold onto close friends and have a few people you can really trust.	2.70 (.10)

intensive, long-term relationships and communication style. The other reflected preference for more short-term, immediate relationships and communication style. Parents were asked to report their agreement with one statement or the other (using a 4-point scale).

The findings (see Table 1) show that the Lincoln parents were fairly close to the midpoint on four of the six choices (mean = 2.5). They were more likely to favor the A versus B alternative when it came to believing that young children should form attachment relationships with adults at the preschool or childcare (versus only at home). They also favored the proposal that young children need time together with a variety of people from different backgrounds and cultures (versus getting to know a few people well and become part of a close group). Thus, these parents wanted their children to get along with diverse people and to be able to

attach quickly and readily to new caregivers as a basis for secure learning at preschool. In general, they put almost equal weight on both the A and B styles of communicating and relating though leaning toward the A alternative for two questions. If we return to Oyserman et al.'s (2002) definition of individualism as an orientation promoting ease of interacting with strangers while collectivism as one promoting in-group preferences in relationships, then this sample of Lincoln parents appears to not strongly favor one orientation over the other.

The second set of findings to be presented focuses on the subscale of Parental Values About Dimensions of Preschool Quality. Thirteen items allowed parental rating of dimensions along which preschool programs might vary. Parents were asked to rate the items by selecting the 4 they thought most important and the 4 to be least important, again thinking about their own child as they answered. The items addressed children's groups (e.g. "children play with the same friends every day"), curriculum (e.g. "activities build on children's expressed ideas and interests"), group size (e.g. "class group small enough so that teachers can give individual attention"), parent-teacher relationships (e.g. "parent-teacher relationships become close over time"), school reputation (e.g. "school has a history known to families and a special identity"), and administration (e.g. "school leadership is stable and provides direction, is not chaotic").

The findings show that the Lincoln parents were most likely to choose the following four variables as the most important elements of quality. These four variables seem to relate to qualities of the immediate present, the here and now of a child-centered classroom and curriculum:

Table 2. Ethnotheories of Parents in Lincoln, Nebraska, USA, Concerning Dimensions of Preschool Quality

Parents' beliefs about what dimensions of quality are most important for a preschool or childcare program. Parents selected their 4 most important dimensions, and 4 least important dimensions. For analysis, these were weighted as 3 = most important, 2 = not selected, 1 = least important.	*M* (*SD*)
1. Class groups are stable because few children come and go	1.66 (.07)
2. Class groups small enough that teachers can give individual attention	2.68 (.06)
3. Children play with same few friends every day	1.53 (.07)
4. Friendship groups stay together from one year to the next	1.52 (.07)
5. Parent-teacher relationships become close over time	2.18 (.07)
6. Children experience a sense of belonging in the classroom	2.74 (.06)
7. Parents get to know each other well and become a group	1.50 (.08)
8. School has enough teachers and space	2.29 (.07)
9. Many experienced teachers stay at school for a long time	2.20 (.07)
10. School leadership is stable and provides direction—is not chaotic	2.29 (.07)
11. Activities build on children's expressed ideas and interests	2.47 (.06)
12. Activities connect and develop into long-term projects or themes	1.97 (.08)
13. School has a history known to families and a special identity	1.51 (.07)

- ♦ Children experience a sense of belonging in the classroom
- ♦ Class groups small enough that teachers can give children individual attention
- ♦ Activities build on children's expressed ideas and interests
- ♦ School has enough teachers and space.

The Lincoln parents also rated four variables as least important. These variables seem to relate to relationships that involve continuity over time:

- ♦ Children play with the same few friends every day
- ♦ Friendship groups stay together from one year to the next
- ♦ Parents get to know one another well and become a group
- ♦ School has a history known to families and a special identity.

These findings are consistent with a prediction that a sample of American parents would put strong emphasis on their children getting along well with peers (not being excluded or left out), but at the same time, put relatively less emphasis on their children having close and enduring relationships with either adults or children in the nonfamilial setting of preschool.

Multidimensional scalings of these data were performed by Knoche (2001). This kind of analysis provides a statistical way of analyzing the
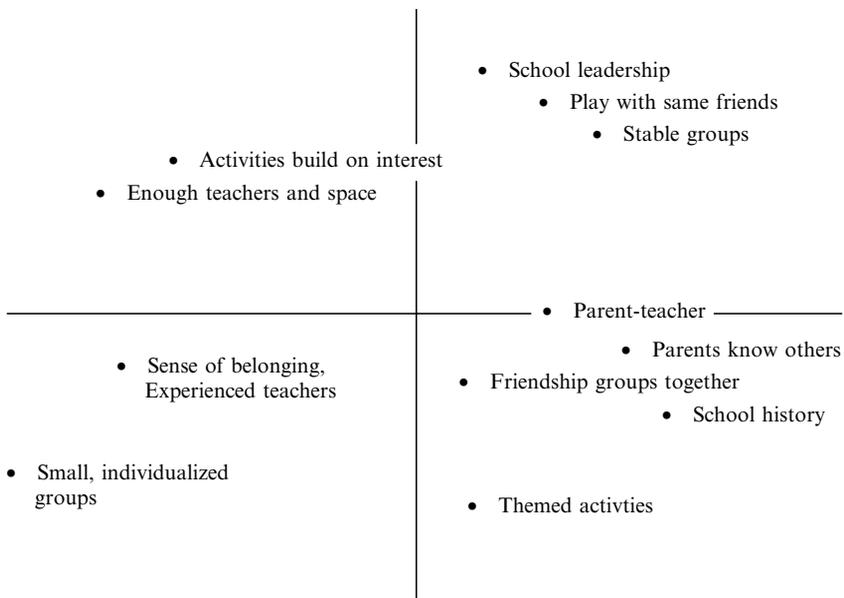

Figure 1. Multidimensional Scaling of Ratings by Parents from Lincoln, Nebraska, USA, on Dimensions of Preschool Quality

Abbreviated Label	Full Item Description
• *School Leadership*	School leadership is stable and provides direction
• *Play same friends*	Children play with same friends every day
• *Stable groups*	Class groups are stable
• *Activities build on interest*	Activities build on children's expressed interest
• *Enough teachers and space*	School has enough teachers and space
• *Parent-teacher*	Parent-teacher relationships close
• *Parents know others*	Parents get to know each other well and become a group
• *School history*	School has known history and identity to families
• *Friendship groups together*	Friendship groups stay together year to year
• *Themed activities*	Activities connect and develop into themes
• *Small, individualized groups*	Class groups are small enough for individual attention
• *Sense of belonging*	Children experience sense of belonging,
• *Experienced teachers*	Experienced teachers at school long time

configuration underlying how a set of variables relate one to another for a set of research participants. Thus, it provides a window into their underlying meaning system as they responded to the questionnaire, thinking about their own child as they answered. The Lincoln, Nebraska data were susceptible to a 2-dimensional solution with acceptable stress (.15) and explaining a high percentage of variance (.89). The visual rendering of this solution is provided in Figure 1. It is quite easy to interpret this solution as having a horizontal axis representing focus on *quality in the immediate present* versus *quality dependent on long term relationships*. The vertical dimension appears to represent *adult quality variables* versus *child and activity quality variables*

Of special interest is variable 6 "sense of belonging in the classroom." In fact, across all four samples, this was a very highly ranked variable (Aukrust et al., 2003). Figure 1 indicates that for the Lincoln parents, this variable was positioned within a little cluster off by itself along with variable 2 "class groups small enough that teachers can give individual attention." In other words, children's sense of belonging was believed by Lincoln parents to be closely related to their children being in small classroom groups where they received sufficient individualized attention from teachers. In contrast, in the multidimensional scalings for the other three communities, variable 6 "sense of belonging" took different positions in the visual configuration. In the data from Oslo, Norway (Figure 2) for example, "sense of belonging" was in a cluster with variable 2 "class groups small enough" (as in Lincoln) but also containing variable 9 "experienced teachers stay at school a long time," a variable not at all close to variable 6 for the Lincoln parents. In the data from Ankara, Turkey (Figure 3), "sense of belonging" was part of a tight cluster containing 6 other variables (variables 2, 5, 8, 9, 11, and 12), but was far from variable 3 "children play with the same few friends every day." In the data from Seoul, Korea (Figure 4), "sense of belonging" mapped closest to

- Experienced teachers
- Parent-teacher

- Stable groups

- Sense of belonging • School leadership

- Small, individualized groups
  - Enough teachers and space
- Parents know others
  - School history
  - Play same friends
- Activities build on interest
- Themed activities
  - Friendship groups together
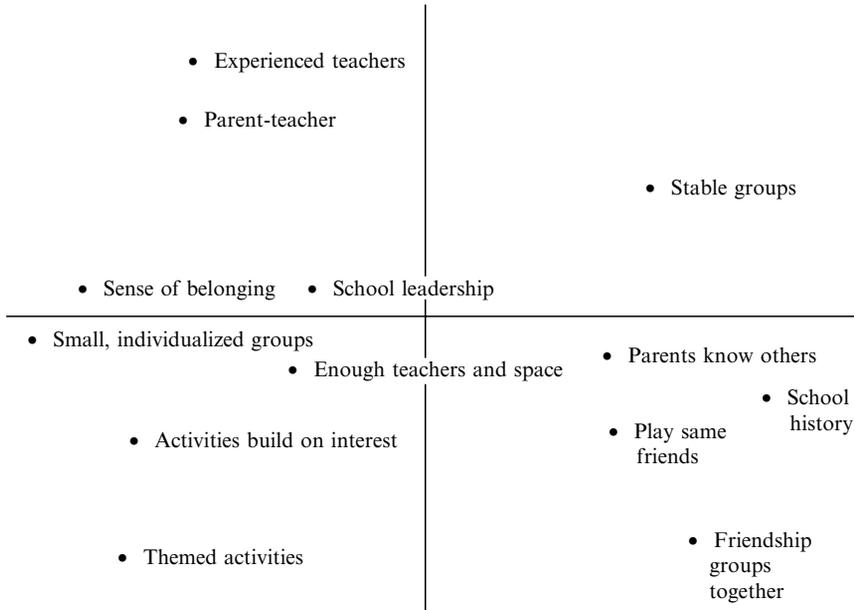
Figure 2. Multidimensional Scaling of Ratings by Parents from Oslo, Norway, on Dimensions of Preschool Quality

- Stable groups
  - Play same friends
- Small, individualized groups
  - Parent-teacher
  - Sense of belonging
  - Enough teachers and
  - Themed activities
  - Experienced teachers
- Activities build on interest
  - School leadership
  - Friendship groups together
  - School history
  - Parents know others

Figure 3. Multidimensional Scaling of Ratings by Parents from Ankara, Turkey, on Dimensions of Preschool Quality

- Small, individualized groups
- Experienced teachers
- School history
- Themed activities
- Parents know others
- Activities build on interest
- Enough teachers and space
- Stable groups

- Sense of belonging
- School leadership
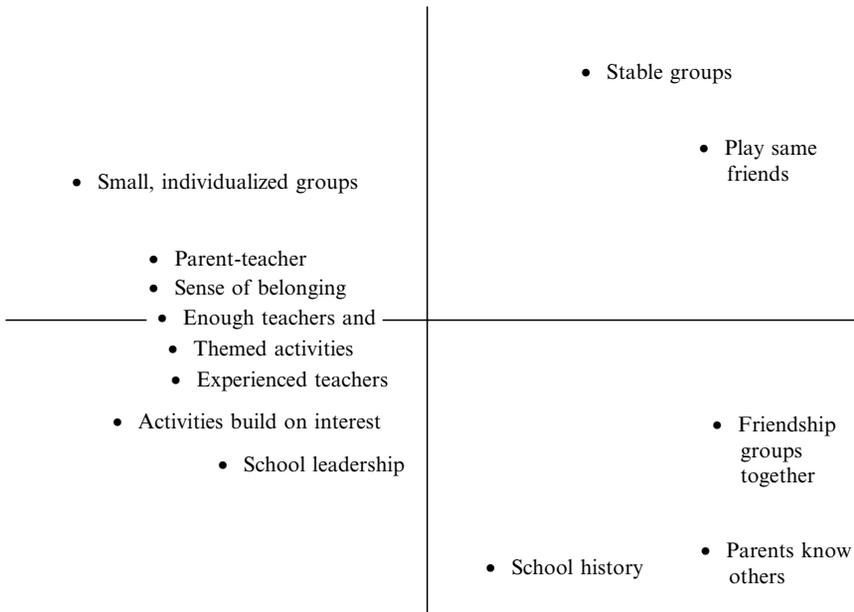- Parent-teacher
- Play same friends
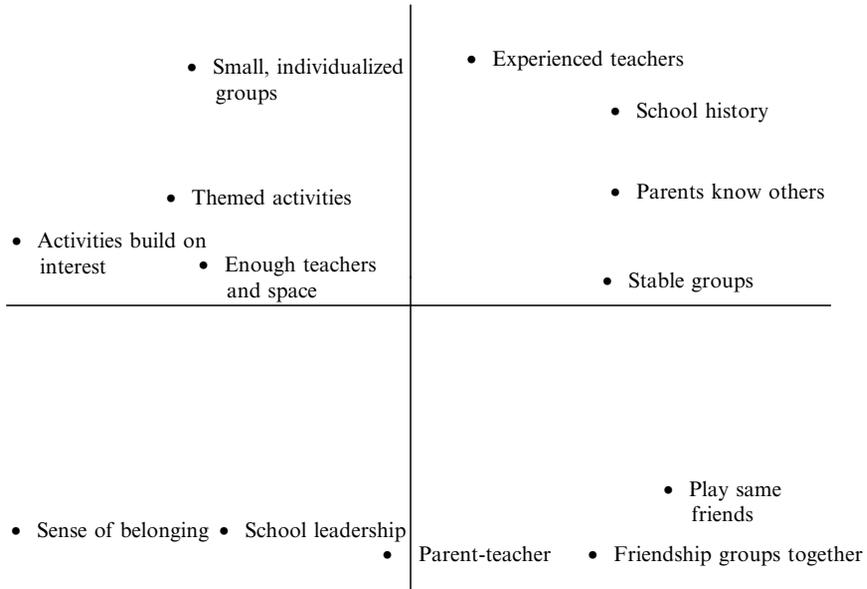- Friendship groups together

Figure 4. Multidimensional Scaling of Ratings by Parents from Seoul, Korea, on Dimensions of Preschool Quality

variable 3 "children play with the same few friends every day," and was also near to variable 10 "stable school leadership" and 5 "close parent-teacher relationships," but not close to variable 2.

If we again turn to Oyserman et al. (2002) concepts of individualism as an orientation promoting ease of interacting with strangers, and collectivism as promoting obligation to an in-group and willingness to remain permanently in relationships, even in personally costly ones, then this sample of Lincoln, Nebraska parents appears to be quite individualistic in its understanding of what constitutes a high-quality childcare or preschool experience. Indeed, the parental model goes along with the organization of the early care and education system in Nebraska (and elsewhere in the USA), where standards of quality are rated on high teacher-child ratios, daily curriculum planning, and plentiful resources, but not on teacher stability or children's social relationships with peers.

In sum, the Lincoln, Nebraska, parents have a more balanced view of the kinds of social and communication skills they value for their children's development (indicated by their responses to the Parental Beliefs about Social and Communication skills scale) than they do for the kind of preschool environment that they consider to be of high quality for their children (found on the Parental Values About Dimensions of Preschool

Quality measure). Individualism is more highly expressed in Lincoln parents' concepts about where their children should spend out-of-home time than it is in their views of what social and communication skills are desirable for children.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Culture is organized and coherent, but not homogeneous and static. It is a dynamic system that a group of people who share an environment use to encode and adapt to their surroundings, make a living, raise families, communicate with one another, and regulate their social behavior. Parental belief systems are part of the learning environment that enfolds developing children and embed their learning, growth, work, play, education, and participation in a shared system of meaning.

The parental ethnotheories of American parents suggest some contradictions and tensions in their configurations of beliefs about childrearing, and perhaps these match the confusions and contradictions of contemporary life as they know it. In the past, both researchers and the public have tended to discuss American childrearing ideas in a long-familiar language of independence and individualism. However, a fresh and closer look reveals that their sets of beliefs contain some tension between their goals for their children's development and for their children's daily environments.

The approach of indigenous psychology takes researchers inside the American system of parental ethnotheories and allows researchers to see how parental beliefs and goals can be set into dynamic interrelationship for parents and children. People frame issues in terms of the discourse they use everyday and the situations and routines they face in their current lives. In our four-culture project on Young Children's Close Relationships Outside of the Family, parents from Lincoln, Nebraska particularly wanted their children to quickly gain the social and communicative skills for getting along and for functioning well in a community of relative strangers, for example, being able to attach quickly and readily to new caregivers as a basis for secure learning at preschool. At the same time, they almost equally favored the social and communication skills valuable for becoming part of a close-knit group and forming lasting relationships. In thinking about their own child's needs and selecting what makes a preschool or child care center high quality, Lincoln parents looked to individualistic features related to the immediate present, such as sense of belonging (not being excluded or left out), getting enough individual attention from teachers, and having activities that respond to their own interests in an environment with plenty of teachers and space. While they wanted their children to be able to make close friends and

become attached to teachers (values fostering interdependence), they did not see a high quality out-of-home experience dependent on forming intimate or relationships with either adults or children in the preschool.

In some ways, the ethnotheories of these Nebraska parents are part of a framework of expectations about the kinds of social relationships their children have at present and will meet in the future in a fairly mobile (sometimes confusing and stressful) context that values close-knit families and settled ties to Nebraska roots but at the same time provides incentives for people to change jobs, residences, schools, and friendships fairly often—where many people learn to relish change and its possibilities and opportunities while minimizing the costs of relationship turnover.

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