2.1: Introduction

Culture is a broad concept that refers to the customs, values, beliefs, and practices of a group of people. It incorporates family roles, rituals, communication styles, emotional expression, social interactions, and learned behavior. Culture also refers to a shared way of life that includes social norms, rules, beliefs, and values that are transmitted across generations (Hill, McBride-Murry, and Anderson 2005, 23). Although cultural groups often share ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, these are not what define culture. Culture has been described as arising from “a dynamic system of social values, cognitive codes, of behavioral standards, worldviews, and beliefs used to give order and meaning to our lives” (Gay 2000, 8).

Culture infuses and is reflected in routines of daily living. Culture is a primary source of beliefs, attitudes, language, and personal efficacy (belief that one has control over and is responsible for one’s life), sense of time (whether time is thought of in large chunks such as hours and days rather than precisely in terms of minutes and seconds), and perceptions of personal space. Culture is the source of the symbols used to capture aspects of life such as important life transitions, relationships, status and power, achievement, group identity, and the meaning of life and death. Culture conveys a set of beliefs about how social relationships should be ordered and how the world operates. [18]

A variety of definitions of culture are provided in the table below. The purpose of providing these definitions is to invite us to review and discuss the various definitions of the term as a framework for further discussions. [19]

Table 2.1: Definitions of Culture [20]

Culture is…
• The organized and common practices of particular communities.
• A shared organization of ideas that includes the intellectual, moral, and aesthetic standards prevalent in a community and the meaning of communicative actions.
• The complex processes of human social interaction and symbolic communication.
• A set of activities by which different groups produce collective memories, knowledge, social relationships, and values within historically controlled relations of power.
• An instrument people use as they struggle to survive in a social group.
• A framework that guides and bounds life practices.
• All that is done by people.
• The ways and manners people use to see, perceive, represent, interpret, and assign value and meaning to the reality they live or experience.
• The complex whole that includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.
• Shared understanding, as well as the public customs and artifacts that embody these understandings.
• Patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts.
• Not so much a matter of inert system in which people operate, but rather a historical construction by people that is always changing.

Culture is complex and is something we are exposed to from the day we are born. It is a process detailed in the following deep structures:

1. Culture is a set of rules for behavior. Culture cannot be “seen” because the rules are invisible; one can see only the products of culture: the behaviors produced by the rules. Nevertheless, cultural rules do not cause behavior; they influence people to behave similarly, in ways that help them to understand each other. It is by understanding a culture’s rules that one knows how to greet a person younger than oneself, older than oneself, a friend, or a stranger. Cultural rules help people to know how to hold a baby. Cultural rules shape food preferences and celebrations—determine whether the sun or the moon is celebrated; whether to wear a dress or pants, or nothing at all. These rules give meaning to all the events and experiences of life. The essence of culture is not these behaviors themselves, but the rules that produce the behaviors.

2. Culture is characteristic of groups. The rules of a culture are shared by the group, not invented by the individual. The rules of the group, which are passed on from one generation to the next, form the core of the culture. Although one must remember that in addition to group cultural differences, there are individual differences. Each person develops a unique personality as a result of his or her personal history and, at the same time, develops in a cultural context with some behavioral characteristics that are shared by other members of the group.
3. Culture is learned. No one is born acculturated; rather, each person is born with a biological capacity to learn. What each person learns depends upon the cultural rules of the people who raised them. Some rules are taught with words: “hold your fork in your right hand, and your knife in your left.” Other rules are demonstrated by actions—when to smile, how close to stand when talking to someone, and so on. Because culture is learned, it is a mistake to assume a person’s culture by the way she or he looks. Someone may be racially black and culturally Irish. A person can also become bicultural or multicultural by learning the rules of cultures other than his or her own primary group.

4. Individuals are embedded, to different degrees, within a culture. Culture is learned and as children are acculturated, they usually learn the core rules of their culture, yet they may not always learn each cultural rule equally well. Some families are more bound to tradition, others less so. Further, even though families and individuals learn the cultural rules, they may not always behave according to what they have learned—some people are conformists; others are nonconformists. Consequently, the behavior of members of a cultural group will vary, depending on how deeply embedded their experiences are within the core of a culture. Thinking about behavioral variations in this way helps those who work with individual families to understand why those from a similar culture do not share all culturally based behaviors.

5. Cultural groups borrow and share rules. Each cultural group has its own set of core behavioral rules and is therefore unique; yet some of the rules of Culture A may be the same as the rules of Culture B. This happens because cultural rules evolve and change over time, and sometimes when two groups have extensive contact with one another, they influence each other in some areas. Thus, two groups of people may speak the same language,
yet have different rules about roles for women. Understanding of this concept helps to avoid confusion when a person from another culture is so much like the teacher in some ways, yet so different in other ways.

6. Members of a cultural group may be proficient at cultural behavior but unable to describe the rules. Acculturation is a natural process; as people become acculturated, they are not conscious that their ideas and behavior are being shaped by a unique set of rules. Just as a four-year-old who is proficient with language cannot diagram a sentence or explain the rules of grammar if asked to do so, so also people may become thoroughly proficient with cultural behavior without consciously knowing that they behave according to rules. In the same way, understanding acculturation explains why one cannot walk up to a person and ask him or her to explain their culture.

Cultivating openness about culture and development promotes a curiosity for the early childhood educator that helps with curtailing the two common assumptions that exist in society today. The first assumption is that there is one set of “best practices” and one set of universal developmental goals for all children and families. By avoiding this static view and looking instead at culture as a fluid set of practices organized to accomplish specific goals, one sees that each cultural community may have a unique set of "best practices" to promote socialization and developmental goals for its children. These practices and goals are situated within the broader community context that includes political, social, and economic history.

The second assumption is that culture is equivalent to one’s ethnic or linguistic background. Looking at culture as a set of practices rather than as a person’s background provides a more powerful way to understand variations within ethnic and linguistic groups than simply comparing attributes across groups. As teachers, early care providers, and researchers often note, it is typical for more differences than similarities to appear among children from the same ethnic or linguistic backgrounds. Families from similar ethnic or linguistic backgrounds do not necessarily have the same routines, goals, or practices. Routines, goals, and practices are developed in the context of a family’s history, including cultural and linguistic heritage, but they vary across regions and from country to country and are usually associated with the immediate and recent social, political, and economic goals of the community. The cultural practices, or routine ways of doing things, define the cultural context in which humans develop. Using this approach, practitioners and researchers can explore how culturally based practices with children drive developmental outcomes rather than focus exclusively on how developmental outcomes differ across ethnic and linguistic groups. The following vignette illustrates this concept. [22]

Naptime Struggles
José is a 17-month-old child whose family lives in an apartment in a large city located close to the Mexican border. His family has recently moved to the United States and has been living with his aunt and her four children. José has been attending a local infant/toddler program for almost two months. His teachers report that naptime is particularly difficult for José. Although obviously very tired, José struggles to transition to his cot and often lies on the floor and cries, which disturbances the other children and often wakes them.

José’s primary care teacher has tried carrying José to his cot and giving him a book or favorite toy to help him calm down; however, José rolls off the cot and onto the floor and continues to cry. When José finally does fall asleep, it is usually time for the children to get up and have a snack. The lead teacher, Carla, decides to bring up this issue to her supervisor during her next reflective supervision meeting.

When asked to describe how José’s behavior during naptime makes her feel, Carla shares that she feels sad for José because he is so obviously distressed and that she wishes she could do something to help him. She also feels that since José has been in the program for almost two months, he should be able to make the transition to naptime more easily. When asked how José’s behavior makes her feel in her role as lead teacher, Carla shares that she feels ineffective as a teacher and worries about the effect that José’s behavior has on the other children. She also worries about how she and her assistant will get their lunch breaks since all children need to be asleep in order for one of them to leave the classroom.

Carla’s supervisor suggests that she do a home visit to get to know the family better and learn more about the family’s caregiving routines. During the home visit, Carla learns that José has slept with his mother since birth and that in José’s country of origin, children typically sleep with a parent until another sibling is born, at which time they generally move to an older sibling’s bed. When discussing this with her supervisor, Carla comes to understand that co-sleeping reflects a goal of José’s cultural community, which is to foster interdependence.

As this vignette illustrates, the interdependence valued in José’s home is dramatically different from the emphasis on self-reliance and autonomy found in his early care program. Researchers have reported that environments where sleep patterns are different from those of the home setting can lead to uncertainty for children (Provence, Naylor, and Patterson 1977) and that sleep patterns are often among the final practices to change when a family moves to a new country (Farooqui, Perry, and Beevers 1991). José experiences very different practices in the early care program, which are based on the goal of independence, from those he experiences at home. By making a home visit to learn more about family practices, Carla has taken an important first step toward understanding José’s behavior and creating a sensitive and responsive classroom.