4: Influences of Family, Society, and Culture on Childhood

Learning Objectives

This week you will:

• Describe and analyze the influences of family, society, and culture influence the lives of children.

Introduction

How are childhoods influenced by nature and nurture? This week we will consider how family society and culture influence the lives of children. You will explore how the natural sciences (biology) and social sciences (anthropology, psychology, social work, and sociology) study these influences on children. We will use an interdisciplinary approach to learn more about the topic of sexuality. I like to use Urie Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory to illustrate how the influences of nurture impact childhood. Watch Urie Bronfenbrenner Ecological Theory explained on YouTube on Blackboard to learn more about this model. How might Urie Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological theory help you study your research question or childhood in general?

Terms and Definitions

Important concepts to look for in this chapter:

• Socialization: the process where children learn to meet the expectations of and how to fit into a society.

• Play is:
  ◦ self-chosen and self-directed
  ◦ an activity in which means are more valued than end
- structure, or rules determined by the players
- imaginative, non-literal, mentally removed in some way from “real” or “serious” life
- involves an active, alert, but non-stressed frame of mind. (Gray, 2008)

- **Competence**: The ability, capacity, or qualification to perform a task, fulfill a function, or meet the requirements of a role to an acceptable standard.

- **Cultural Relativism**: a person’s beliefs and activities should be understood based on that person’s own culture.

- **Developmentalism**: The behavior of children is shaped by physical, psychological, and emotional development. Maturity is determined by age and stage of development.

- **Diversity**: There are many different types of childhood.

- **Ethnicity**: The culture of people in a given geographic region, including their language, heritage, religion and customs. To be a member of an ethnic group is to conform to some or all of those practices. Race is associated with biology, whereas ethnicity is associated with culture.

- **Familialization**: the caring of children in individual households and homes by family members rather than in state institutions.

- **Gender**: The condition of being male, female, or neuter. In a human context, the distinction between gender and SEX reflects the usage of these terms: Sex usually refers to the biological aspects of maleness or femaleness, whereas gender implies the psychological, behavioral, social, and cultural aspects of being male or female (i.e., masculinity or femininity.) [American Psychological Association, 2015]

- **Friendship**: Children’s affective social relations with their peers and others.

**Sources:**


**Ecological Systems Theory – used often in Social Work**

Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005) developed the ecological systems theory to explain how everything in a child and the child’s environment affects how a child grows and develops. The theory is illustrated in the figure below. This chapter will concentrate on the Micro and Mesosystem levels. I find this model helpful in understanding the influences of nurture on childhood.
The **microsystem** is the small, immediate environment the child lives in. How these groups or organizations interact with the child will have an effect on how the child grows; the more encouraging and nurturing these relationships and places are, the better the child will be able to grow. Furthermore, how a child acts or reacts to these people in the microsystem will affect how they treat her in return. Each child’s special genetic and biologically influenced personality traits, what is known as temperament, end up affecting how others treat them.

The **mesosystem** describes how the different parts of a child’s microsystem work together for the sake of the child. For example, if a child’s caregivers take an active role in a child’s school, such as going to parent-teacher conferences and watching their child’s soccer games, this will help ensure the child’s overall growth.

The **exosystem** includes the other people and places that the child herself may not interact with often herself but that still have a large effect on her, such as families workplaces, extended family members, the neighborhood.

The **macrosystem**, which is the largest and most remote set of people and things to a child but which still has a great influence over the child. The macrosystem includes things such as the relative freedoms permitted by the national government, cultural values, the economy, wars, etc.

**Chronosystem** developmental processes vary according to the specific historical events that are occurring as the developing individuals are at one age or another. Moreover, cultures also are continually undergoing change.

As you read and explore the topics in the chapter, think about how the influences impact children.

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**Nature and Nurture Shape Childhood**

Now, let’s use the concept of sexuality to see how nature and nurture are interconnected.

Nature and nurture, biology and culture, work together to shape human lives. Nature and nurture are intertwined, processes.
• Do you assume biology (nature) is destiny that may be minimally modified by culture (nurture, or environment) throughout childhood?
• Do you assume environment (nurture) is a more important factor in shaping individual psychology than biology (nature)?
• Specifically, what is the relationship between biology and culture with respect to sexuality?

The biological features of sex and sexuality are determined by chromosomes and hormones such as testosterone, estrogen, and progesterone. Biologically, there are more than 2 sexes – chromosomes which can be XX, XY, XXX, XXY, XO, XYY. XX is female and XY is male; usually if the Y exists the person is generally seen as male. O produces ambiguous sexual features. Hormones and sex are apparent at seven weeks in utero.

The difference between sex and gender is: sex is male or female and is biological. Gender is meaning given to biological sex by culture. We develop a gender identity which is how an individual identifies as masculine or feminine. Gender is a spectrum. We learn gender roles during childhood, such as, appropriate behaviors and work or division of labor

• Can a male can be a female?
• Is it only one or the other?
• Are gender and sexuality fluid over a lifespan?
• Can they change? Is sex a spectrum like gender?
• Did you know the Navajo have four genders?
  ◦ women
  ◦ men
  ◦ nadleehi (born male functions in women roles)
  ◦ Dilbaa (born female functions in male role)

I challenge you to reflect on gender and sexual diversity. Imagine you have a child who is born with an intersex anatomy [XXX, XXY, XO, XYY] You read up on diagnostic testing and the recommendations of the Intersex Society of North America, that suggest you give your child a binary gender assignment (girl or boy). Do you follow the advice of the ISNA? Why/why not? If not, what do you name your child? How do you dress your child?

As your child acquires language, what pronouns do you use for your child? Would you use he, she, ze, or they?

You inform yourself and read about current possibilities at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Resource Center’s article on Gender Pronouns

What is ‘competency’?

Families should help children mature and become competent. The concept of competency is related to the concept of agency discussed in Chapter 2. Listening to children and respecting their opinions can contribute to their personal development. A supportive environment can lead to children to making better decisions, prepare them to participate in society and strengthen their accountability. Children’s competency or abilities may be recognized, ignored, encouraged or inhibited. The supporting adults’ willingness to respect children’s decisions will determine whether the children’s choices are honored Figure 1, described by Alderson (1992) and illustrated by Orr (1999), illustrate the internal and external variants that may influence a child’s competency. (van Rooyen, Water, Rasmussen, & Diesfeld, 2015)
When we consider competence, we should also think about cultural relativism, are there universal standards we can apply to childhood? Is the UNCRC a set of universal standards? Implementation of the UNCRC can be difficult when violations of the rights of children are justified on the basis of cultural practice. Think about the practice of female circumcision.

In 1996, a 17-year-old girl named Fauziya Kassindja arrived at Newark International Airport and asked for asylum. She had fled her native country of Togo, a small west African nation, to escape what people there call excision.

Excision is a permanently disfiguring procedure that is sometimes called “female circumcision,” although it bears little resemblance to the Jewish ritual. More commonly, at least in Western newspapers, it is referred to as “genital mutilation.” According to the World Health Organization, the practice is widespread in 26 African nations, and two million girls each year are “excised.” In some instances, excision is part of an elaborate tribal ritual, performed in small traditional villages, and girls look forward to it because it signals their acceptance into the adult world. In other instances, the practice is carried out by families living in cities on young women who desperately resist. For more information read the World Health Organization Fact sheet (2017) Female genital mutilation

Cultural relativism would accept the practice. Does the UNCRC allow the practice?

Role of families

As discussed during Week 1, we see the world through our cultural lens, we are cultural conditioned. Conditioning happens at different levels

- Global
- Societal [Macrosystem in Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory]
- Institutional [Exosystem in Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory]
- Group [Microsystem in Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory]
- Individual [The center of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory]

The group level or microsystem in Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory includes families. One of the major influences on childhood is families. The family is the principal institution responsible for childbearing and childrearing so society assumes a more passive role in facing the commitments and costs connected to childhood. The UNCRC gives all children the right to a family. The right to a family allows children to be connected to their history, and it offers a protective perimeter against violation of their rights. Children separated from their families can become victims of violence, exploitation, trafficking, discrimination and all other types of abuse. However, sometimes the family which should be protecting the child is in fact inflicting the abuse.

Families are the first to have the power to act on behalf of the child and ensure their rights are respected. Hopefully, their objectives are to protect the child and to secure the child an education, development, security, health and morality. To achieve these objectives, a family should provide supervision by controlling the child’s comings and goings, relationships, and communications. For example, they may forbid the child from maintaining relationships with certain persons that they believe are not in his or her best interest. Families make educational decisions including religious and sex education and decide on the health care to give their child. Families are responsible for the needs of the child, such as food, clothing, shelter, educational costs, vacations (if possible), and health coverage. What happens to children
when families find it difficult to provide basic needs? Families often struggle with finding time, money and resources to effectively parent. In the US, families may have difficulty earning a living wage, finding social supports, securing affordable housing, high-quality child care and paid family leave. It can be difficult to provide a nurturing environment all children need and may result in neglectful or abusive environment.

Did you know that in 2016 the relative poverty rate for children 0-5 in the U.S. was more than 25%; for ages 0-18 years the rate was about 22%. In other words about 1 out of 4 young children in the United States live in poverty. What changes in the US might lower the child poverty rate? How can we create environments that enrich the lives of all young children and their families, allowing them the opportunity to realize their full human potential?

A former student shared: So I definitely think that the Department of Children and Families (DCF) needs to be more proactive in checking in on families, especially families living under the poverty line, to ensure they are receiving assistance if needed and that the child is living in a stable home where he/she is healthy and can thrive. I agree with the student that all children deserve a safe and healthy environment and our society should support them. I wonder why income often is the only resource considered when giving families assistance. To help you think about interacting with diverse families, please read the following scenario:

You are a teacher in the 4-year-old room at Kids Place child care center. Daequan and Mathew are two children in your class. Both were born at 30 weeks’ gestation and had hospital stays of about 6 weeks. Both are in generally good health and are monitored for respiratory illnesses. For the most part, the boys are reaching their developmental milestones, with slight delays in language/emotional development.

At the present time, Daequan and his mother, Shania, are living in a homeless shelter. Their home burned down 2 weeks ago and they had nowhere else to go. Matthew is part of an intact family. Ralph and Sue are his parents, and he has an older brother, Nick. The family lives in an affluent community a mile from Kids Place.

• Which child would appear to be experiencing a greater number of risk factors that can affect his development?
• With which family would it appear to be easier to develop a partnership? Why?

Then you learn:

Daequan and his mother have a number of extended family members available for support and will be moving into an apartment within a month’s time. Shania has contacted a number of local agencies for assistance to rebuild her and her son’s lives.

Matthew’s father travels 3 weeks out of the month. Sue is on medication for depression and has recently started drinking around the boys during the evenings and weekends. She turns down offers of help from her friends and family and tells them everything is fine with her marriage and her ability to raise her sons.

What questions might you or others ask to find out “the whole story”? Ruby Payne (2009) describes the nine resources by which one negotiates their environment. Poverty is when you need too many of these resources, not just financial.

1. Financial
2. Language (ability to speak formally)
3. Emotional
4. Mental
5. Spiritual
6. Physical
7. Support systems
8. Relationships/role models
9. Knowledge of middle class rules

**How do you and other discover what resources are available to children and families? How do you build on a families strengths.** Everything that improves the economic security, safety and peace of mind of families improves parenting—and increases children’s chances for growing into healthy, compassionate and responsible adults. These include living wages and reliable hours, secure housing, high-quality childcare, paid family leave, safe neighborhoods, flex time, desegregation and social inclusion. **Which disciplinary perspectives might help you understand family influences on childhood?**

### Friendships

Besides family and other adults in the culture, peers can be an influence on childhood. Recent research shows the importance of friendship, and its impact on mental and physical health. Preschool friendships are helpful in developing social and emotional skills, increasing a sense of belonging and decreasing stress. (Yu, Ostrosky, & Fowler, 2011). People who feel lonely or socially isolated tend to be more depressed, have more health issues and may have a shorter lifespan. (Lewis, 2016). Having a support system can help us handle hardships.

Selman and colleagues identified five successive stages in how children view friendships. The chart below illustrates the theory. **Why might it be helpful to understand the stages of friendship? How would it inform your possible work with children and families?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 0</th>
<th>Stage 1</th>
<th>Stage 2</th>
<th>Stage 3</th>
<th>Stage 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 - 7 year olds</td>
<td>Social Informational</td>
<td>Self-Reflective</td>
<td>Third Party</td>
<td>Societal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 - 9 year olds</td>
<td>6 - 12 year olds</td>
<td>11 – 15 year olds</td>
<td>12 – adulthood</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Momentary Playmates</td>
<td>One-way Assistance</td>
<td>Fair Weather Cooperation</td>
<td>Intimate Mutual Shared Relationships</td>
<td>Mature Friendship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on proximity</td>
<td>Friends are important because they perform specific</td>
<td>Interpersonal relationships are reciprocal</td>
<td>Awareness of continuity of relationship and affective</td>
<td>Friendship can grow and transform.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Early_Childhood_Education/Book%3A_Introduction_to_Childhood_Studies_(Elias…

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### Play

Play in one way in which families and peers interact with the child. Play is essential to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children and youth and is one of the rights in the UNCRC. Article 31 of the UNCRC states:

1. **Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.**

2. **Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.**

It is through play that children engage and interact in the world around them at an early age. Play allows children to create and explore a world they can master, conquering their fears while practicing adult roles, **developing new competencies** that lead to enhanced confidence and the resiliency they will need to face future challenges.
Child-directed play allows children to practice decision-making skills, move at their own pace, discover their own areas of interest, and ultimately engage fully in the passions they wish to pursue. When play is controlled by adults, children follow adult rules and lose some of the benefits child-directed play offers them, such as developing creativity, leadership, and group skills. Play builds active, healthy bodies. Play is a simple joy that is a cherished part of childhood. However, play can be challenged by child labor and exploitation practices, war and neighborhood violence, living in poverty, over scheduling, and pressures on children to achieve. (Ginsburg, 2007)

A wonderful resource to learn more about play is available on the National Association for the Education of Young Children website. After reviewing the information on the website reflect on these questions:

How can we enhance the opportunities for balance in children’s lives that will create the optimal development to prepare them to be academically, socially, and emotionally equipped for future growth? How can we make sure we play enough?

Conclusion

Genes make us human, but our humanity is a result of the complex interplay of biological and cultural factors. This week you read about the of the influences of family, society, and culture as they bear on the lives of children. As you discuss, try to answer: How are interactions between children and adults shaped, modified and redefined by overlapping institutional and organizational forces such as the economy, family, education, politics, religion, and so on? What is the impact of experiences in childhood later in life?

After reading this chapter and completing the activities you should be able to

- Describe and analyze the influences of family, society, and culture influence the lives of children as seen the discussion and assumptions inventory

Challenge

Reflection and Discussion

This week we explored the influences of family, society, and culture influence the lives of children. Reflect on your understanding of these ideas:

Socialization Developmentalism Gender
Play Diversity Friendship
Competence Ethnicity Ecological Systems Theory
Cultural Relativism Familialization

Now you are ready to type in Pages or in a Word document, a minimum of 3 paragraphs explaining your connections, extensions, and curiosities. Copy and paste your response in the Blackboard discussion or in class
Collaborative Research Project

So far during this course, you brainstormed a research question and should be using at least 2 disciplines to examine the question. Your work this week is to present your preliminary findings as a draft of the final project. Soon you will submit a video or some other oral report as well as written materials. You will likely use the same format as the Assumption Inventory. The report should

- Summarize your research question (What). Remember to relate the question to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)
- Present the research from different disciplines that help to answer or explain the question. (So What)
- Apply criteria listed in the grading rubrics to create a persuasive presentation
- Discuss possible solutions. (This is the start of the NowWhat of the project)
- Complete a peer feedback questionnaire.

References


Lewis, T. (2016). This common characteristic may be as big a risk to your health as smoking. Business Insider Website available at: http://www.businessinsider.com/how-social-isolation-affects-your-health-2016-1

