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Cultural diversity in center-based child care: differences and similarities in caregivers' cultural beliefs

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1. General introduction

The last decades in the Netherlands can be characterized by two important demographical and economical changes. First, for economic and emancipatory reasons there is a pressure on women to become part of the work force. This has caused a rapid growth of child care provisions for young children. In 2007 nearly 300.000 children under age 4 were enrolled in child daycare centers, 40.000 more than in 2006 (CBS, 2008). A second important demographic change is the increasing cultural diversity of the Dutch society, as is the case in many countries in Western Europe. Nowadays about 1.7 million inhabitants, 11 % of the total population, are first- or second-generation immigrants from non-Western countries (CBS, 2008). In the main urban areas of the Netherlands one third of the population and even half of the youth are first- or second generation non-Western immigrants (CBS, 2006).

As a consequence of the increased numbers of young children spending a substantial part of the week in the care of professional caregivers, the quality of center-based child care has become an important issue for parents, researchers, and politicians alike (Gevers Deynoot-Schaub & Riksen-Walraven, 2005; De Kruif, Vermeer, Fukkink, Riksen-Walraven, Tavecchio, Van IJzendoorn, & Van Zeijl, 2007; Riksen-Walraven, 2004). Another consequence of the rapidly increased use of child care, was the demand of staff. Over the past 15 years many young females from the immigrant communities entered the child care workforce. This process was paralleled by a steadily rising number of children with immigrant backgrounds in early child care provisions. The diversifying of staff and children presents further challenges to the field of center-based child care. In particular, to the standards and images of the interactional quality between a caregiver and a child, the so-called process quality. From a large body of research it is known that beliefs about children and childrearing vary substantially across cultural communities (for overviews, see Bugental & Johnston, 2000; Kagitçibasi, 1997; Rubin & Chung, 2006). Can these cultural differences in beliefs about children and childrearing also be found among child care professionals of different cultural com-

munities? Are there differences in the importance these caregivers attach to the various core concepts in child care? As concepts such as 'high quality care' are based on beliefs and values (Moss & Pence, 1994), we hypothesize that the increasing cultural diversity among staff and families may result in less consensus about what constitutes quality, and especially process quality.

1.1 Cultural childrearing beliefs

Cultural belief systems on childrearing can be defined as a set of cognitions that parents and other educators personally hold about the nature of children and their development, about themselves as educators, and about their own and children's functioning in social groups, such as the peer group, the family, the community, and the society at large. These are often implicit, taken-for-granted beliefs about the right or natural way of childrearing (Harkness & Super, 1999; McGillicuddy-DeLisi & Subramanian, 1996). As such, belief systems include values and norms regarding children's personal and social development, and specify strategies to socialize these values and norms (Harkness & Super, 1999; McGillicuddy-DeLisi & Subramanian, 1996). Studying educators' childrearing beliefs is important because these are assumed to be an important source for childrearing practices (Harkness & Super, 1996), and, following from this notion, affect the interaction quality between caregivers and children (Abbott-Shim, Lambert, & McCarty, 2000; Maxwell, McWilliam, Hemmeter, Jones Ault, & Schuster, 2001; Phillips, Mekos, Scarr, McCartney, & Abbott-Shim, 2000; Scott-Little & Holloway, 1992).

Following Harkness and Super (1999; 2006), we propose that personal childrearing beliefs basically stem from two sources: everyday experiences with childrearing in particular contexts, such as the child care center, and socially shared cultural beliefs of childrearing within particular communities, such as a team of caregivers or the cultural community. Through processes of cognitive construction and the negotiation of childrearing values, personal experiences are combined into new general ideas that are shared with fellow members of the cultural community (Bugental & Johnston, 2000). In turn, childrearing beliefs are transformed from shared and general into personal and situation-specific through processes of cognitive reconstruction (Valsiner & Litvinovic, 1996). In periods of

change or disequilibrium - as may be the case in situations of increasing cultural diversity - social networks outside the family are especially important as a source for childrearing beliefs (Bugental & Johnston, 2000). Through these recurrent dynamics of caregivers' reasoning, cultural belief systems are both organizing experience as well as adapting to experience, providing caregivers with guidelines and reassurance while changing to meet new challenges.

Beliefs about children and childrearing differ substantially between cultures. Educators in different cultural communities have different ideas about ideal childrearing goals and practices. Furthermore, these 'best ways' are associated with what is regarded normal and abnormal behavior in a given culture, as beliefs are functionally attuned to the social and economical circumstances, and geographical conditions of a particular society (for overviews see Bugental & Johnston, 2000; Harkness & Super, 1996; Kagitçibasi, 1997; Rubin & Chung, 2006). Cultural diversity within child care centers may imply a variety in childrearing beliefs and socialization goals, and varying strategies to socialize these values and norms (Harkness & Super, 1996; McGillicuddy-DeLisi & Subramanian, 1996). The frequency with which certain beliefs are expressed in words or practices affirms cultural beliefs and keeps them prominent in the mind of cultural members (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Martinez, 2000). Therefore, beliefs of caregivers from different cultural groups who share the ecology of the workplace are influenced by both their cultures of origin and their exposure to the cultures of the workplace, that is, of both colleagues and children (Suizzo, 2007; Rosenthal, 1991). This makes the investigation of beliefs of caregivers with a minority background especially interesting.

1.2 Individualism and collectivism

Nowadays, in many studies, cultural differences are examined using frameworks based on the individualism-collectivism distinction. This distinction refers to belief systems stressing individuality, competition, and independent selfhood versus relatedness, cooperation, and interdependent selfhood (cf. Triandis, 1995). The distinction has proven to be of heuristic value in ordering and qualifying clusters of beliefs of different cultures, in particular Western and non-Western communities (Bornstein & Cote, 2004; Cote & Bornstein, 2003; Harkness, Super, & van

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Tijen, 2000; Kemmelmeier et al., 2003; Raeff, 2000), and in interpreting differences in childrearing practices (Greenfield, Keller, Fuligni, & Maynard, 2003; Keller, Borke, Yovsi, Lohaus, & Jensen, 2005; Rudy & Grusec, 2001). According to current understanding, individualism and collectivism are not simply opposites on a single dimension, but represent different dimensions that can co-exist in the individual mind as well as in the community at large. Likewise, individualistic and collectivistic ideas are found to co-exist in many cultures (Harwood, Schölmerich, & Schulze, 2000; Harkness et al., 2000; Kağıtçıbaşı, 2005; Killen & Wainryb, 2000; Raeff, 2000; Suizzo, 2007; Tamis-LeMonda, Way, Hughes, Yoshikawa, Kalman, & Niwa, 2008), yet different cultures may emphasize different constellations of ideas (Greenfield et al., 2003; Valsiner & Litvinovic, 1996). Independence or autonomy and interdependence or relatedness – considered core values in individualistic or collectivistic socialization – are both important themes in children's development. The balance between the two is an important issue in the rearing of young children in every society (Greenfield et al., 2003; Kağıtçıbaşı, 1997). Cultural differences in the solutions caregivers reach may depend on their particular belief systems. Striking a balance between fostering individuality and independence on the one hand, and participation in the group and interdependence on the other, is a particularly critical issue for center-based child care in predominantly individualistic Western countries (Singer, 1993). The official childrearing beliefs and quality standards in child care match the individualistic child-centered model best (cf. Rosenthal 1999), however, an important question is whether these are compatible with the characteristics of the setting, where young children are in the presence of at least a dozen peers most of the day.

1.3 Thesis outline

The central goal of this thesis was to gain insight into the issue of cultural diversity in center-based care, a theme which has received surprisingly little scientific attention before this project started. The present thesis comprises three empirical studies, which are described in three separate chapters. Data on which these studies are based were collected in the fall of 2004 and winter and spring of the year 2005. In total, 61 female caregivers working with toddlers in 22 different child

daycare centers in two major cities in the Netherlands participated in this study. The sample represents three cultural groups; 20 caregivers had a Dutch background, 20 caregivers were of Surinamese-Dutch or Antillean-Dutch origin, and 21 were originally from Morocco or Turkey. The Surinamese, Antilleans, Moroccans and Turks are nowadays the largest immigrant groups in the Netherlands (CBS, 2008). Each caregiver was visited while at work. All caregivers were personally interviewed on their beliefs on children and childrearing, and all caregivers were observed in their groups at the child daycare center. After the visit, all caregivers received a questionnaire. Next to these 61 caregivers, a larger sample of caregivers was approached to participate in the survey part of the study, resulting in a total group of 116 caregivers. The study is unique because of the multi-method approach that was used. As the three empirical chapters are based on this same set of data, there is overlap in the method sections of those chapters. For a more detailed description of the sample, the procedures, and the measures, the reader is referred to the separate studies.

The focus of the first empirical study (chapter 2) is to investigate, by means of a survey, whether there are cultural differences in caregivers' beliefs, in spite of the professional education all caregivers have received within the Netherlands. Furthermore, we examine whether caregivers' childrearing beliefs can be explained by their cultural backgrounds, or whether their beliefs are also determined by the professional training they have received, and by the context of the child care centers, including their years of experience, and the beliefs of their colleagues. In this chapter, we differentiate between caregivers' general and daycare specific beliefs. General beliefs are thought to reflect the fundamental ideological orientation regarding general issues of child development of the cultural communities the caregivers belong to, whereas daycare specific beliefs intend to capture childrearing beliefs, socialization goals and particular constraints of daycare. This distinction is assumed relevant because these more specific beliefs are expected to be influenced by caregivers' professional training and by the shared experiences with colleagues. Furthermore, these more specific beliefs are expected to be more closely related to actual behavior (Harkness & Super, 2006).

The second empirical study, described in chapter 3, examines the cultural childrearing beliefs of caregivers in more detail, by means of semi-open interviews. The main goal of this chapter is to examine the cultural differences and similarities in caregivers' reasoning about children's independence and autonomy, child-

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ren's social development and group related issues, and caregivers' authority. These themes are often considered as typical individualistic and collectivistic childrearing beliefs (cf. Triandis, 1995), and therefore of particular interest in studying the beliefs of caregivers with different cultural backgrounds living and working in an individualistic society such as the Netherlands. Furthermore, we focus on the question whether differences in caregivers' reasoning can be accounted for primarily by caregivers' cultural background, or whether other factors, such as training, should be considered as well. And finally, we investigate the influence of the cultural context of the child care center - that is, the cultural background of colleagues and children, and the overall quality of the child care center - on caregivers' childrearing beliefs.

In the third empirical study, presented in chapter 4, we relate caregivers' beliefs to observed childrearing practices. The relation between beliefs and actual behavior is a topic of much debate. Evidence for such a relation is still far from conclusive. While in studies in early childhood settings a relation between educators' beliefs about education and teaching and actual classroom practices is often demonstrated (Abbott-Shim, Lambert, & McCarty, 2000; Charlesworth, Hart, Burts, Thomasson, Mosley, & Fleege, 1993; Maxwell, McWilliam, Hemmeter, Ault, & Schuster, 2001; Scott-Little & Holloway, 1992; 1994; Solomon & Battistich, 1996; Stipek & Byler, 1997; Vartuli, 1999), studies focusing on parental attitudes and cognitions as determinants of their childrearing behavior found only weak evidence for such a relation (for overviews see Bugental & Johnston, 2000; Holden & Edwards, 1989; Sigel, 1992). Following Ajzen (1996), who stated that the difficulty in finding relevant and consistent relations between beliefs and behavior in childrearing arises from several methodological and conceptual problems, we improved our research design by measuring caregivers' beliefs and behaviors on similar levels of specificity, by using open interviews to address both general and specific beliefs on concrete childrearing issues, and by relating beliefs, thus assessed, to observations of concrete childrearing behavior in representative situations in the child daycare centers (Ajzen, 1996).