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

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Summary

The last decades in the Netherlands can be characterized by two important demographical and economical changes. First, child care provisions for young children have rapidly grown as more women have entered the work force. A second important demographic change is the increasing cultural diversity of the Dutch society. Many young females from these immigrant communities entered the child care workforce as a response to the high demand for staff in the expanding child care system. The diversifying of staff and children presents challenges to the field of center-based child care. In particular, to the standards and images of the interaction quality between a caregiver and a child, the so-called process quality of child day care.

Cultural beliefs systems on childrearing are the often implicit, taken-for-granted ideas about the right or natural way of childrearing. Belief systems include values and norms regarding children's personal and social development and specify strategies to socialize these values and norms. Cultural childrearing beliefs are constructed and reconstructed both in everyday experiences with childrearing in particular contexts and by the socially shared cultural beliefs within a particular community, such as a cultural community or the team of caregivers. From a large body of research it is known that these cultural beliefs vary substantially across cultural communities. The main goal of this thesis was to explore whether these cultural differences in beliefs about children and childrearing can also be found among child care professionals of different cultural communities. Studying educators' childrearing beliefs is important because these are assumed to be an important source for childrearing practices, and, following from this notion, affect the interaction quality between caregivers and children.

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. 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

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as in the community at large, yet different cultures may emphasize different constellations of ideas. Balancing independence or autonomy and interdependence or relatedness is an important issue in the rearing of young children in every society. However, in center based child care in predominantly individualistic Western countries this is a particularly critical issue. The official childrearing beliefs and quality standards in child care match the individualistic child-centered model best, whereas the characteristics of the setting – where young children are in the presences of at least a dozen peers most of the day – may be more compatible with a more collectivistic orientation on child development and socialization.

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 care centers in two major cities in the Netherlands participated in the main 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 first and second generation immigrants from Morocco or Turkey. The Surinamese, Antilleans, Moroccans and Turks are nowadays the largest immigrant groups in the Netherlands. Each caregiver was visited while at work. All caregivers were personally interviewed about their beliefs on children and childrearing, and all caregivers were observed in their groups at the child care 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 aim of the first two empirical studies was to investigate whether there are cultural differences in caregivers' beliefs, in spite of the professional education all caregivers have received within the Netherlands. Next to caregivers' cultural background and professional education, we investigated the influence of the cultural context of the child care center on caregivers' childrearing beliefs. This was done both by means of a survey (chapter 2, N=116), as well as through semi-open interviews (chapter 3, N=61). Both Dutch and immigrant caregivers valued individualistic as well as collectivistic childrearing beliefs and that there was considerable overlap in the beliefs they valued. However, cultural differences in

caregivers' beliefs were found as well. Caregivers differed in the significance they attached to beliefs from either the individualistic or the collectivistic category. Dutch caregivers especially emphasized individualistic childrearing goals such as, for instance, children's independence. The caregivers with an immigrant background especially emphasized collectivistic goals such as, for instance, children's obedience to adults, however they did not differ from the Dutch caregivers in their appreciation of individualistic goals as children's self-confidence or their own role in actively stimulating children's development and creating the opportunities for development. This finding, first, supports the notion that individualism and collectivism can co-exist, both in individuals and in societies, and second, it confirms the multidimensionality of individualistic and collectivistic childrearing beliefs. However, when investigating differences between and within cultural groups in more detail, the distinction may be too general and may carry the risk of oversimplifying cultural patterns.

In the third empirical study, presented in chapter 4, we related caregivers' beliefs to observed childrearing practices. If, as we proposed, cultural childrearing beliefs were indeed important for process quality in child daycare, there had to be a relevant connection between caregivers' beliefs and their behavior. Beliefs that referred directly to concrete behavior were moderately to strongly related to the observed behavior, while very few substantial relations with behavior were found for the beliefs with a general and abstract meaning. In search for contextual moderator effects, we found stronger relations between collectivistic beliefs and behaviors were found in centers high in cultural diversity, than in centers with predominantly Dutch colleagues and Dutch children. Conversely, beliefs classified as individualistic were stronger related to practice in centers low in cultural diversity than in culturally diverse centers. Interestingly, these findings not only applied to caregivers with immigrant backgrounds but also to the native Dutch. These results not only underline the importance of the cultural context in understanding caregivers' beliefs, they also support the idea that beliefs are constructed and reconstructed in response to everyday experiences with childrearing in particular contexts, and in social interaction with others, such as a team of caregivers or the cultural community.

The current study also has limitations that should be considered in future studies. The study's sample size appeared to be a limitation in the statistical analyses. The four cultural groups were too small to study within-group differences, and to con-

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trol for these differences in the analyses. Furthermore, the focus in this study was on professional caregivers only, and included a limited set of possible determinants of caregivers' beliefs. Future research should also include parental childrearing beliefs and examine the possible discrepancies in the beliefs of caregivers and parents. This could provide us with a better understanding of the dynamics of beliefs reconstruction, as parents and caregivers' possibly influence each other's beliefs in the frequent encounters they have. This would also give us insight into how parents and caregivers create a shared meaning when educating a child together.

This study has implications for the discussion on child care quality. We argue that there is a cultural bias in the discussion on child care quality, as well as in research on this issue, that seems to favor Western, individualistic childrearing beliefs and practices, while beliefs and practices more common in collectivistic societies, such as clear ideas on childrearing in groups, stimulating collaborative interaction and social play, may constitute very important, nevertheless understudied, aspects of center-based child care. We propose to reconsider current consensus on the elements of process quality in child care in view of the central role played by group processes and to open up current thinking on quality in child care to collectivistic themes as group management.