

The Social Construction and Subjective Reality of Activity Settings: Implications for Community Psychology¹

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A major focus of the article is the idea that activity settings are in part social constructions of the participants. The socially constructed "meaning" of an activity setting is a complex mix of ecological, cultural, interactional, and psychological features. These features may be observed and assessed, directly and indirectly, in terms of personnel, cultural values, tasks, scripts for conduct, and motives and purposes of actors. Empirical illustrations and extensions to community psychology are drawn from research with different populations: Native Hawaiian children and families, Spanish-speaking children and Mexican and Central American immigrant parents, Euro-American families with a developmentally delayed child, and Euro-American families who intentionally adopted nonconventional child-rearing values and practices.

KEY WORDS: activity settings; social constructions; ecocultural theory; subjective meaning; family proactivity.

In several forums, O'Donnell and Tharp (1990) have argued that the basic unit of analysis for community psychology is the *activity setting*. This concept has many conceptual parents including Roger Barker, John and Beatrice

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Whiting, and Urie Bronfenbrenner. Its applications to community psychology are discussed by O'Donnell, Tharp, and Wilson (1993).

In this article, we first present a brief review of our understanding of activity settings as an embedded feature of ecological and cultural contexts. Second, we summarize some findings from our research that employed the activity setting concept, with a focus on examples we believe relate to community psychology research and practice.

For the empirical examples, we draw upon research with several different social and cultural groups: Native Hawaiian children and families, Spanish-speaking children and Mexican and Central American immigrant parents, Euro-American families with a developmentally delayed child, and Euro-American families with nonconventional child-rearing values and practices.

A major theme of the article is this idea: Activity settings are in part social constructions of the participants. This same point was made by O'Donnell and Tharp (1990) in their original presentation of activity setting as a unit of analysis for community psychology. They emphasized that the activity-setting concept added the subjective to the traditional focus on the objective features of settings. This article elaborates this key idea and provides empirical illustrations and extensions to community psychology.

THE ECOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT OF ACTIVITY SETTINGS

The idea that the social setting around a child and family is a powerful influence on children's development is a long-standing one in the social sciences (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Our version of this is ecocultural (*ecological-cultural*) theory, which is derived from the psychocultural model developed by John and Beatrice Whiting (1975; B. Whiting, 1976, 1980; B. Whiting & Edwards, 1988) and their students and associates (LeVine, 1977; Munroe, Munroe, & Whiting, 1981; Super & Harkness, 1980, 1986; Weisner, 1984).

Ecocultural theory proposes that ecological and cultural effects are mediated through the activity settings of the daily routine (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Weisner & Gallimore, 1985). Everyday activities provide opportunities to learn and develop through modeling, joint production, apprenticeship, and other forms of mediated social learning that are embedded in goal-directed interactions (Rogoff, 1982; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Weisner, 1984; Wertsch, Minick, & Arns, 1984; B. Whiting, 1980; B. Whiting & Edwards, 1988). Through participation in cultural activities that require cognitive and communicative functions, children are drawn into the use of these functions in ways that nurture and develop them.

Children's activity settings are the architecture of everyday life, not a deliberate curriculum; they are homely and familiar parts of a family's day: preparing meals, eating dinner, clearing up, mowing the lawn, repairing cars, watching television, getting ready for school, and dozens of mundane settings in which adult-child interaction is embedded. They can be deliberate teaching opportunities however; for example, many families create storybook times and other activities for the express purpose of promoting cognitive and linguistic development.

Ecocultural theory emphasizes that a major adaptive task for each family is the construction and maintenance of a daily routine through which families organize and shape their children's activity and development. The activities of the everyday routine create opportunities for development-sensitive interactions on which development partly depends. The conception of development-sensitive interactions and their activity contexts are derived from several sources including the concept of "behavior settings" (B. Whiting, 1980; B. Whiting & Edwards, 1988), and the ideas of Vygotsky (1978), for example, his notion of the zone of proximal development as elaborated by recent research (Gallimore & Goldenberg, 1993; Rogoff, 1990; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Weisner, Gallimore, & Jordan, 1988; Wertsch, 1985; Wertsch et al., 1984).

Activity settings are a perceptible instantiation of the ecological and cultural system which surrounds the family and the individual. They are the everyday conduits through which social and cultural institutions affect children's experiences and their development. What activities children engage in as an ordinary part of their daily lives have a profound impact on the cognitive and communicative functions they develop. To study these activities is to identify the cognitive and communicative opportunities provided by culture (Nerlove & Snipper, 1981).

ACTIVITY SETTINGS IN CULTURAL CONTEXT

The cultural context makes an enormous difference in both the objective conditions surrounding activities, and the subjective meanings of activities to the participants.

An Example

Imagine two cultural contexts: A suburban Canadian family of white-collar workers with a pet dog, and a rural peasant family with a milking goat living in a Third World nation. In both the Canadian and

Third World families, animal-feeding is a part of everyday life. But even though they share common features (children are assigned to feed a four-legged animal twice a day), they represent two distinct activity settings because of the meaning of the activity in each culture: In the Canadian family a dog was added to the household to help instantiate strongly held views about child development — children develop responsibility and become more empathetic when they care for a living creature to which they are bonded. In the Third World, a milking goat is a source of protein in a hardscrabble farming region, and is an essential contribution to family subsistence; the children are needed to guard and care for the animal because both parents spend long hours working in a field far from the household.

The task of feeding the goat is an immediate and vital part of family subsistence survival for one family, as well as exemplifying broader cultural standards for compliance and obedience training for children; if the goat is not fed properly or on time, a child may be punished or deprived. In the Canadian family, a pet dog is not required for subsistence and family adaptation and survival. But feeding it is done in ways conforming to Canadian cultural standards for teaching and training children to be responsible and empathetic. If the task for the Canadian family was insuring that their child passed a critical high school entrance exam, the parents might well show little tolerance for missed deadlines and laziness. By the same token, if the task for the Third World family was sewing torn clothing, more tolerance might be shown.

This hypothetical example illustrates how objective and subjective features are never sharply separated in activity settings. Beliefs and values contribute to the “reality” that is perceived. One family may have a cultural belief that firstborn children are born with the soul of the most important and powerful familial ancestor, and so must be more responsible and compliant than a later born. Another family may share a belief that feeding a dog is a “boy’s job,” and so respond differently to a daughter’s forgetfulness. Where do the objective facts of personnel and task end, and the subjective beliefs or social construction of meanings begin?

By social construction, we mean that part of the structural and operational reality of an activity is the meaning it has in the minds of participants. Activity settings are embedded in cultural contexts. The meaning of a particular activity to the participants is constructed from the meanings that are an intrinsic part of culture and human activity.

ACTIVITY SETTINGS AS A COMBINATION OF THE OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE

The idea that the reality of everyday life is in part a social construction applies equally well to controlled test and experimental settings. All settings — research (e.g., experimental, test) as well as natural (family, home, school) — have subjective meanings, according to this formulation. Yet for many decades, behavioral and social scientists paid scant attention to the subjective sense their research subjects made of experimental and test settings. Researchers were trained to follow a standard protocol to assure that all subjects were engaged in the same activity. So long as the objective conditions of the method were identical — same room, task, instructions — it was assumed that all subjects were being observed under uniform conditions and that all subjects perceived the setting in essentially similar ways.

In the 1970s several lines of research appeared that shook the assumption that settings or social contexts could be defined strictly in objective terms. For example, even supposedly age-linked Piagetian cognitive stages disappeared if the test setting was altered in ways that changed its meaning for young children (Donaldson, 1978). Donaldson’s results, and many since, illustrate how a social setting with the same objective characteristics can be interpreted very differently depending on individuals’ perception of its meaning.

This suggests that dimensions under “the rather vague term of ‘social context’ are not simply external variables which influence the child’s cognitive activity. The child’s cognitive activity is therefore always an answer to the [researcher’s] staging [of setting] and what he interprets about its sense and aims” (Grossen & Perret-Clermont, in press, ms p. 4).

A classic experimental demonstration of the impact of socially constructed task reality was provided in the Wertsch et al. (1984) comparison of Brazilian mothers and teachers interacting with children. Although the task (a puzzle) and the personnel (a child and an adult woman) were identical, the nature of the interaction that occurred was entirely different. Teachers perceived the puzzle as a teaching opportunity and used a scaffolding script to assist the children, but without actively participating. Mothers, however, treated the puzzle as a job to be finished and actively collaborated with the children to find a solution. What the women believed about the purpose of the activity determined the behavioral script they employed (Gallimore & Goldenberg, 1993).

In other words, the meaning of the task and its setting is partly a social construction of the individual: Task and setting are some mix of personal construction and the objective reality. The subjective and objective are intertwined; together they are the setting for the individual no matter how carefully the researcher — or intervener — follows the protocol.

This review of theory and research underpinning the concept of activity setting is brief in the extreme. But the literature from which it is pulled has in common the view that both the objective and the subjective must be reflected in a single unit of analysis — the activity setting.

OPERATIONALIZING ACTIVITY SETTINGS

We have been part of an effort to operationalize activity settings in ways that can guide empirical research and analyze the effects of interventions (Gallimore & Goldenberg, 1993; Goldenberg, Reese, & Gallimore, 1992; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Weisner, 1984; Weisner & Gallimore, 1985; Weisner, Gallimore, & Jordan, 1988). This effort has suggested that at least five activity setting variables must be considered: (a) *personnel* present during an activity; (b) salient cultural *values and beliefs*; (c) the operations and *task demands* of the activity itself; (d) the *scripts* for conduct that govern the participants' actions; (e) the *purposes* or *motives* of the participants.

This list includes both objective and subjective features in a united definition of settings. Uniting the objective features of personnel, task, and place with the subjective features of values, motivations, and purposes is a new experience for many social scientists and practitioners. Because these features have been typically separated, "the activity setting concept requires some practice before its use is comfortable" (O'Donnell & Tharp, 1990, p. 253).

In hopes of contributing to a greater comfort level, we have summarized some research on families and children to illustrate the social construction of subjective meaning of activity settings. For each example, we try to make explicit implications for community psychology practice. Although, our research mainly involves families and children, we believe the findings implicate that broader province of research and action that is community psychology.

EMPIRICAL EXAMPLES OF ACTIVITY SETTING ANALYSIS

Family Proactivity: The Social Construction of Children's Activity Settings

The everyday routines in which children and adults interact are strongly affected by geographic, demographic, and economic presses. Yet, for all the constraints they face, families are not merely hapless victims of implacable circumstances. They are proactive as well as reactive, and seek

through various accommodations to mitigate or transform the impact on daily life of environmental presses (Gallimore, Weisner, Bernheimer, Guthrie, & Nihira, 1993; Gallimore, Weisner, Kaufman, & Bernheimer, 1989; Weisner, 1986). As result, a child's experience is a product of both environmental circumstances and family proactivity.

One important form of family proactivity is the creation and maintenance of children's activity settings in the daily routine. Parents arrange in the daily routine the experiences deemed necessary for optimal child development and for preparation for adulthood in the family's ecocultural niche. Examining a family's proactive efforts to shape their children's daily experiences offers a window into the process by which the meanings of activity settings are socially constructed.

Consider this case of a family that used a variety of proactive accommodations to maximize therapeutic activities by embedding them in the everyday routine of their 4 year-old daughter with developmental delays (Gallimore et al., 1989). This family, like the other 101 families in our longitudinal study, have a child whose early developmental delays have an unknown prognosis; they are keen to do everything possible to help the child catch-up to developmental norms. To accommodate both parents working full-time, a daily routine was organized that maximized implementation of professional recommendations:

[The therapists] have been real good about giving us all things to do [to help speed up her development]; in fact, they gave the older [brother] assignments, and that's really helped him. It gives [my husband] a job. It gives me a job . . . so each one of us, [the grandparents], and the babysitter, when we all have our time with her, we're supposed to do our job with her. . . . We have very supportive parents, sisters- and brother-in-laws, some friends are very supportive too. . . . When the babysitter is sick, [both sets of grandparents] trade off Usually, if the grandparents are here, [the therapist's plan] gives them a job too His mom [should] have been a physical therapist [because she is so good at carrying out the therapist's instructions]. . . . [When we get home from work] we . . . let [her] watch what we're cooking and talk about what we're doing. Same with the laundry — I let [her] watch what I do, same as with the dishes. I talk about each thing I do. I use that as a language experience. Then we have our dinner, and we talk about what happened during the day. (Case #103)

Across multiple activity settings, this family sought to sustain a daily routine that reflected the value they attached to certain kinds of interactions which they believed optimize physical and language development. Each of the five activity setting components is represented in their general plan: The parents tried to organize each activity setting so it included *personnel* who *valued* the growth promoting potential of *tasks*, games, and mundane interactions and conversations — a caregiver or companion who was competent to carry out desired *scripts* by identifying development-sensitive *purposes* in ordinary activity.

The parents strongly believed — along with many professionals in child development — that even ordinary daily chores can be socially reconstructed into opportunities to implement development-sensitive interaction. For this family, what transformed a mundane chore, or any interaction, into an activity setting that implements their goals is the presence, with the child, of a person who has internalized the same values.

But implementing and sustaining family valued activity settings for children is not always a simple manner:

Mother: . . . Harriet [our regular daycare woman] used to be really exercising [our daughter Kathy] — but Harriet just isn't the same anymore. She talks all the time. She doesn't leave any time to let Kathy talk back to her . . . [e.g., She doesn't encourage her to talk]. . . . Kathy is starting to use three-word sentences — she's starting to do a lot of naming of things. When you talk to her, you need to talk to her about what she's doing. I want her to say it back to me if she can. Like, Harriet, she just keeps talking and doesn't give her a chance to say it back . . . Harriet's a little bit on the slower side of things. She doesn't use very good English, but she's loving. We think Kathy needs to go on now and start getting something different from somebody else, but Harriet's been really dependable. . . . I don't think she can teach Kathy anymore. . . . I don't want to down her, she's really a nice lady . . . very loving (Case #103)

The emergent perception of the babysitter's inadequacy had become an adaptive problem, and foreshadowed change. Adaptation to a special problem brings cultural values and beliefs to a conscious level because it forces a family to make choices and become proactive. When this happens we get a glimpse of the way that families proactively create activity settings that are a palpable manifestation of their values and beliefs — and we see why the meaning of a given setting is, in part, in the minds of its participants.

In the case example, the parents' desire that emotional security goals be met by the babysitter are now in conflict with the parents' perception that this original setting cannot provide for cognitive/linguistic stimulation their child now requires. What was once a satisfactory activity setting is no longer, and must be changed because "loving" and "exercising" child care is no longer enough. For many reasons, the meaning of the setting had changed in the minds of the parents.

But not all families of children with early delays perceive the same meanings, or engage in identical proactions. Other parents faced with similar value choices chose different accommodations, including mothers abandoning career goals, fathers quitting work to stay home to supervise the child's physical exercise program, or other changes (Gallimore et al., 1993, 1989). These are only a sampling of the striking number of different and substantial accommodations proactively made by families to create and sustain a daily routine that included a child with delays: Some 680

accommodations were reported at age 3–4 alone and a comparable number when the children were 6–7 (Gallimore et al., 1989, 1993; Weisner, Beizer, & Stolze, 1991).

Proactive accommodations needed to sustain daily routines involved 10 different ecocultural domains: subsistence, work and career, family domestic workload, child care, children's play and peer groups, information-seeking, transportation, social networks, and so forth. Although hundreds of such accommodations occurred, only a trace few were unusual or culturally nonnormative. In this respect, family accommodations to children with delays are very similar to ones with developmentally normal children.

These findings suggest that proactivity is continually occurring in families, whether or not they have a child with unusual problems. They alert us to the important role of family proactivity in the social construction of the daily routine. Intervention planning that ignored these complex dynamics would risk less effective outcomes, a topic which we take up again in the Conclusions and Implications section of this article.

Within-Culture Variability in Socially Constructed Meaning of Activity Settings

The value-driven meanings of activity settings presented thus far are only a limited representation of the range documented by empirical research. Both the Euro-American families of children with early delays and those with normally developing children may access a much wider range of values.

A dramatic illustration of the diversity of values that impact the meanings of activity settings comes from Weisner and his associates' study of conventional Euro-American families and those who self-consciously and explicitly adopted alternative family arrangements and circumstances (Weisner, 1986; Weisner, Bausano, & Kornfein, 1983; Weisner & Garnier, 1992; Weisner & Wilson-Mitchell, 1990). Although all families in the cohort were Euro-American, the sampling procedure was designed to maximize within-culture variability on a number of dimensions. Thus the cohort included both conventional, two-couple nuclear families and a variety of countercultural families. The countercultural families consisted of single mothers, social contract couples, and communal families — arrangements that differ considerably from the traditional nuclear family associated with mainstream Euro-American families. Among many of the countercultural

families, moreover, there was a commitment to experimentation, which sometimes led to a high rate of change in spouses or mates, jobs, residences, or religions and ideologies, in the early years of their children's lives (Weisner, 1986).

As might be expected, children in these nonconventional families experienced a wide range of nonconventional activity settings, some purposefully instantiated by parents, some a by-product of the parents' chosen life-styles (Weisner et al., 1983). Some of these families adopted what were described as "pronatural" values and life-styles, for instance; others focused on antimaterialism, religiousness, and sex role egalitarianism in their domestic roles and in their children's socialization (Weisner & Wilson-Mitchell, 1990). Some went to heroic lengths to put into practice their nonconventional beliefs by accommodating ecocultural niche presses to create and sustain activity settings reflecting their values and child development goals.

In a follow-up study of these children of nonconventional families, Weisner and Garnier found no evidence from infancy to sixth or seventh grades that countercultural family values, in and of themselves, led to poor school achievement. Nontraditional family arrangements, and the nonconventional values they reflected, did not necessarily lead to adverse outcomes for children — if the families were committed to their alternative values and life-styles.

In families committed to their values and life-styles, children did as well on academic and socioemotional outcomes as the children in a comparison group of two-parent families in the study, even if the family experienced poverty, change, and instability. Values commitment was assessed by parents' reports of the strength of their values orientations and feelings they were a part of the countercultural movements. In contrast, in the absence of such commitment, nonconventional family arrangements, particularly if they led to increased instability, put children at risk for poorer developmental outcomes. The commitment to meaningful values also may have provided some protection for children and parents alike against the risks of their life-styles, which were very real, including high family change, relative poverty, or social stigma in some cases.

Weisner and Garnier's data suggest that multiple paths can lead to good school performance in children. Many kinds of family organization and daily routines, with a variety of associated values, had the potential to lead to school success. Middle-class two-parent married couples provide one model, but so do committed, relatively stable single parents, and changeable family situations with a countercultural values orientation and commitment to that kind of life-style. A coherent set of cultural values is an important component, among others, that determines how a family's activity settings are constructed and experienced by parents and children.

Their data also suggest that a wide range of practices can support desirable outcomes for children in North America. Helping children develop and succeed in U.S. society does not require every family — whether they are Euro-American or members of other ethnic minority communities — to adopt a single set of values and practices. The conception of family values, in this approach, is broader than that used in current political debates over "traditional family values." Family values include many important goals and beliefs, embedded in activity settings, which perhaps are not overtly concerned with familism, but which contribute to family adaptation and resilience through strengthening family daily routines and the meaningfulness of family activities for members.

The Assessment of Culture Variability

Weisner and his associates' study of conventional and countercultural Euro-American families implicates a vital methodological point. Cultures are not monolithic in their values or practices. To the contrary: Cultural features manifested at the level of the families' activity settings can be highly variable within a group.

The importance of always assessing this range of variation in a culture, and avoiding the assumption of homogeneity, was illustrated in our studies of Native Hawaiian families' use of multiple caretakers. Sibling caretaking — one form of multiple, nonparental caretaking (Weisner & Gallimore, 1977) — has often been portrayed as a Native Hawaiian culture feature that affects adaptation to school settings that stress orienting to a single teacher and limit peer interaction and learning (Gallimore, Boggs, & Jordan, 1974).

However, Weisner et al. (1988) observed extreme variability among Native Hawaiian families with respect to activity settings families created that involved sibling caretaking. They found that Native Hawaiian parents were aware of and appreciated sibling caretaking as a valued and available custom in principle, but whether they used it depended on ecocultural features which influenced personnel available as well as other values and beliefs which superseded attitudes toward sibling and multiple caretaking. Heterogeneity was also found within children's experiences, as well as across families, when children in a family were visited repeatedly.

At the level of a culturally available value schema, available for potential practice, sibling caretaking is important and essential to understanding Native Hawaiian family organization and socialization. At the level of observed family practices — and therefore what children experience in everyday activities — it is highly variable. Knowing that a

child lives in a culture group that values sibling caretaking, for example, should not be confused with evidence that this particular child participates in activity settings and experiences developmentally sensitive interactions with a sibling caretaker. Such confusions produce a form of culture stereotyping.

To avoid such inadvertent stereotyping due to confusing levels of analysis and inference, it is vital to unpack culture (B. Whiting, 1976), or diaggregate its components, to identify within-group variations. One way to unpack culture into its constituent elements is the empirical investigation of activity settings. By assessing one or more of the five activity setting features, one can avoid treating children and parents of a particular culture or ethnic group as if they all have the same experiences. To treat all members of a culture as if their daily routines (and activity settings) were homogeneous is an error of potentially disastrous consequences, if it leads to stereotyping and a "one intervention fits all" policy. This underscores the necessity of empirically assessing the extent to which a custom or belief displays uniformity or variability in a community. It is a critical necessity for interventionists and community psychologists who must meet the challenge of the increasing cultural diversity of American society and avoid the snare of unwitting stereotypes.

Before turning to the next topic, however, we note another implication of the activity setting concept that is relevant to community psychology's response to the challenge of cultural diversity. Just as there is diversity within cultural groups, there is also commonality across different cultures in values and the activity settings to which they are linked. This suggests that interventions can build upon commonalities between families and interveners, rather than always assuming chasms that must be bridged.

For example, many Latino immigrant parents of children attending kindergarten and first grade in the U.S. — children who are at high risk for poor achievement (De La Rosa & Maw, 1990; Haycock & Navarro, 1988) — endorse values identical to traditional mainstream values about the importance of schooling and hard work. Parents, moreover, see education as the key to economic and social mobility. One parent said, "Whoever does not have a profession or a career is nothing in this life" [*El que no tiene una profesión o una carrera no es nadie en es vida*]. Another said that an education is crucial because whenever one looks for a job, "How far one has gone in school is the first thing they ask you" [*Hasta dónde llegó en la escuela es lo primero que le preguntan a uno*]. As a result of interest in their children's education, these parents set up daily activities and routines designed specifically to help children succeed academically (Goldenberg, 1987, 1988; Reese, Goldenberg, Loucky, & Gallimore, 1989).

Although the low-income Latino parents with whom we have worked see themselves as their children's primary socializers, rather than their teachers in an academic sense, they nonetheless have the interest and ability to become involved in children's academic development (Goldenberg, 1987, 1993; Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1991). Often they can accomplish this by helping children with school lessons or supervising their homework. In most cases, parents do not need specialized training or an intervention to accomplish this. Rather they need specific and systematic information from the child's teacher regarding how they can help their child succeed in school.

Our findings suggest wariness about making generalizations concerning conflicts between culture or values, and schools, as we design interventions; families and social institutions such as the school might have more in common than they think. We have taken advantage of this compatibility, and we can see improvements in developmental outcomes for children as a result (e.g., Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1991).

The Impact of Motives and Scripts on Activity Settings: An Illustrative Case

The examples to this point have focused on family proactivity and values as important influences on the social construction and meaning of activity settings. In this final section we turn to two more of the five elements of activity settings — *motives and purposes* of specific tasks, and the *scripts* for conducting them. In this final example we are using findings from one of our own intervention studies.

The parents in the families with whom we have worked are immigrants from Mexico or Central America, although approximately three fourths of the children were born in the United States. Features common to parents included employment in low-paying and relatively precarious jobs, grade school educations, a deep belief in the value of education, willingness to assist children with schoolwork, relatively scarce literacy resources in the home, and a strongly felt impact of the school on family literacy resources and activities (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1991; Goldenberg et al., 1992).

Despite important variations across the families, they nonetheless exhibited similarities in terms of personnel available and the educational values and goals for their children. They were also broadly similar in terms of types of tasks engaged in and materials used. All households participate, albeit marginally in some cases, in a literate society and environmental print of some sort (labels, bills, ads, printed clothing, etc.) was observed

in all homes. On the other hand, few books or magazines were observed in any of the homes. Thus, in terms of three of the five activity setting features (personnel available, values, and tasks), settings for young children to engage in literacy activity were at least potentially available in these households.

In the intervention study with these Latino families, we created a set of simple, photocopied storybooks in Spanish (*Libros*). Once or twice per month during the school year a new book was introduced and used at school, then sent home. No special training was initiated, but teachers did show parents a videotape at the beginning of the year and suggested to parents that reading the books with the children would be helpful. It was suggested that they use the *Libros* just as they would any other children's books. Parents were told that repetitive reading accompanied by conversation with the child would be especially helpful. In the comparison classrooms, teachers used the district readiness program, supplemented by project-supplied phonics worksheets. As expected, we found that children in kindergarten classrooms using the *Libros* (and accompanying materials) at school and sending them home were more advanced in their literacy development than were children in the comparison classrooms (Goldenberg, 1990a, 1990b).

We were surprised, however, by a second finding. Although children in the *Libros* classrooms had higher levels of early reading development than children in the "readiness and phonics" classrooms, observed use of the storybooks at home was unrelated to individual children's literacy development. In contrast, use of the phonics worksheets was strongly related to individual children's literacy development (Goldenberg et al., 1992). What explains these unexpected findings? We think it has to do with the parents' understandings of how children learn to read, the purposes they attach to the book and other assignments, and the motives that drive their structuring of such tasks.

We know from our home observations and interviews that parents have what is sometimes called a "bottom up" view of how children learn to read (Goldenberg, 1988). Parents see learning to read as consisting, in essence, of learning to associate written language (letters, syllables, words, or passages) with the corresponding oral language. Parents do not attach nearly as much importance (if they attach any) to children hearing books read repeatedly or to children having ample opportunities to learn to read, "pretend-read," or talk about simple books. In other words, the "emergent literacy" perspective (e.g., Smith, 1991; Teale & Sulzby, 1986) does not inform their understanding of the conditions under which children become literate.

Families in our study introduced the materials in ways that made sense to them. That is, the activity settings created were consistent with parents' views about how children learn to read, and their perception of the purpose of the homework assignments (books or worksheets). The congruence between the worksheets and parents' beliefs and perceived purposes led to their effective use in the home, and the more children used the worksheets at home, the higher their literacy attainment at the end of the school year. In contrast, the *Libros* were also used in a way that made sense to the parents ("children learn to read by accurately associating written language with corresponding oral sounds") but that was incompatible with the nature of the materials themselves. Storybooks make poor worksheets, and if they are used as worksheets, they are unlikely to have any effect on literacy learning — which they did not: Use of the booklets at home had no bearing on literacy attainment at the end of the school year.

Did the parent's perception of the *Libros* affect the scripts they used when reading with their children? Were the scripts different from those used with worksheets? Goldenberg and Gallimore examined the differential effects of *Libros* and worksheets on parent-child interactions (Gallimore & Goldenberg, 1993; Goldenberg, 1989a). They videotaped children and parents (or, on some occasions, older siblings) as they engaged in whatever literacy activities the teacher had sent home (*Libros* or worksheets).

They predicted that the nature of the activity (what parents and children engage in) should influence how an activity is carried out — that is, the scripts and language used by participants. Parents of children given the *Libros* should have more chances to use questions and related language forms, given the scarcity of books and other reading materials observed in the households (Goldenberg, 1989b; Reese et al., 1989). In contrast, simple worksheet tasks such as copying letters or names should create fewer such opportunities. Thus, this study explored the possibility that by manipulating activity setting components — in this case, the task children are given — conditions can be created that encourage and support beneficial language use during parent-child teaching/learning interactions.

Indeed, Goldenberg and Gallimore (1991) found use of the *Libros* greatly increased language use during home literacy activities relative to worksheets. While the two types of materials yielded episodes almost identical in length, parents spoke with their children much more during book reading, than did the parents whose children received more conventional worksheets. More specifically, parents gave children more positive feedback, asked more questions, and made more modeling statements (Goldenberg, 1989a). In other words, the meaningful texts led to increasingly elaborate verbal scripts during literacy episodes.

However, these changes in amount of language were only true for parents. The texts produced no increase in spontaneous child language production relative to the conventional materials group. In the book-reading interactions, parents asked their children far more questions than those doing more conventional kindergarten worksheets. This is an important effect, given previous findings that young Latino children experience fewer opportunities to answer parents' questions during learning episodes (Laosa, 1978, 1980).

However, the Libros produced relatively few interactions focusing on the meaning of the text. Under both home literacy conditions, parents' overwhelming emphasis was on children's correct performance of the given task at the most superficial level — either writing or naming letters correctly or reading a text accurately. Utterances focusing on "surface associations" (letter-, word-, or phrase-recognition with no reference to meaning) constituted by far the majority of the utterances — over 90%. Despite the fact that the simple books sent home contained stories and various meaningful elements, and parents were explicitly encouraged to focus on these elements, they did not prompt more meaning-oriented interactions between parents and children.

Goldenberg et al. (1992) presented the following case illustration of a typical parent-child reading interaction around a Libro:

Fernando's mother calls him over, "*Ven a estudiar este libro*" [Come and study this book]. He stands beside her as she sits on the bed with the baby on her lap. She reads a page and has Fernando repeat it. She's reading upside down, so when she reads "miles de melones" as "melones de melones," that is how he repeats it. . . . On the next page, Fernando reads what he knows. When he hesitates on a word, Mother tells him and he repeats it. This form of word-by-word repetition continues for the rest of the book. . . . They finish the book, and Mother says, "*Otra vez*" [Again]. She has him start again and they continue word-by-word as earlier. On one page, Fernando looks at the picture of the melons in the tree and asks, "*Mamá, ¿por qué se metieron aquí los melones?*" [Mama, why are the melons put here?] She responds, "*¿Sabe?*" [Who knows?] and immediately says the next word to cue him to continue with the repetition.

Similarly, a parent and child interacting around a worksheet:

Carol is sitting on the floor of the living room with the [worksheet]. Her older sister is also working on homework. Carol works silently on the first pages, which require circling the letter U in different positions. . . . Carol shows a blank sheet that did not get copied to her mother and says, "*Aquí no puedo hacer nada.*" [I can't do anything here]. Mother says nothing, and merely turns to the next page and puts it on the table for Carol to work there. It is copying the U, so no directions are needed. Carol stands at the table to continue. She says to herself, "*Ya acabe*" [I finished], and immediately goes on to the next page. This also [consists of] copying the letter, and she works without conversation.

As the intervention study suggested, parents attended to surface features of the text because doing so is consistent with their conception of

how children learn to read — through *repetitious* and *accurate* practice of letters, syllables, or words (Goldenberg, 1988; Reese et al., 1989). While there might be several reasons parents focused almost exclusively on the surface features of the texts, an activity setting analysis suggests one explanation lies in the participants' immediate purposes and motives and their impact on their scripts. Purposes and motives — together with broader cultural values and goals — influence how tasks are carried out, that is, what scripts participants use.

Before we end this discussion, we note parents' understandings of the literacy learning process are not without foundation. Learning letters and sounds helps children learn to read, although they need many other print-related experiences as well (Adams, 1990). Thus parents can engage in activities with their children that are both meaningful to them and consistent with current understandings of how early literacy develops.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY INTERVENTIONS

In the case of families who received the little books, our "intervention" did not mean wholesale disruption of existing values and activity settings. Although culture constrains and shapes, it is not inevitably rigid and prescriptive. Setting up literacy events with and for their children was clearly within the repertoire of the families. Although child-based literacy events such as storybook reading are relatively infrequent in the preschool years in our study samples, once children started kindergarten and parents saw that teachers were sending home literacy activities and materials, parents responded by activating previously unobserved activity settings.

In other words, there were culturally available activity slots in the daily routine not previously used but available and accessed when circumstances warranted. Such variable use of culturally available structures and practices has been observed in other cultural groups (e.g., Native Hawaiians, see Weisner et al., 1988; Euro-Americans, see Weisner & Garnier, 1992). These findings suggest that culture is a storehouse of adaptive response to change rather than a straitjacket of custom. It is a resource that interventionists and evaluators should inventory early in their planning.

The inventory must include a sensitive examination of the cultural context (and its embedded activity settings) that receives an intervention. No matter the intended and apparent value of an intervention — for example, trying to increase meaning-oriented literacy activities. Not all parents perceive these as developmentally sensitive experiences. In the short run training parents to read to their children or acquainting them with current theories of

early literacy development might help produce initial changes in parent-child interactions and routines (see Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Edwards, 1989). However, we question whether the changes will be sustained if they depart too far from existing activity settings.

This question of intervention-compatibility with existing activity settings arose in our studies of families of children with developmental delays (Bernheimer, Gallimore, & Weisner, 1990; Gallimore et al., 1993, 1989). Many of the families reported they had received a wide range of advice from medical, educational, and social service agencies and personnel. Often, this advice led to interventions that had to be fitted into the daily routine of existing activity settings. In general, interventions by outside agencies were unlikely to be sustained if the families had to make changes in the activity settings of their daily routines that were too discrepant from those that had evolved through the families' proactivity.

We can illustrate this point by describing a case of parents with a delayed child who had a strong sense of familism and who were unable to sustain an intervention plan for integrating the delayed child into family mealtimes (Bernheimer et al., 1990). Different values came into conflict in this case. The family was strongly committed to optimize development of the child with delays, but not at the expense of familism:

Todd was one of four children. His parents ran a mom and pop grocery store, and placed a high premium on quality family time although it was difficult getting everyone together. One daily period of togetherness was the dinner hour. Because Todd was very withdrawn socially, the intervenor felt the dinner hour would be an excellent opportunity for intensive family input for Todd. The parents were initially enthusiastic, because the intended outcome — a more socially appropriate Todd — would enhance the quality of "family time." The unintended outcome was quite different, however. In addition to being socially withdrawn, Todd was very disruptive; throwing his food on the floor, leaving his seat and running around the table in circles. Thus "family time" became chaotic and stressful. The parents designed a new intervention: Todd was fed early, and during dinner, he was seated in front of the television to watch tapes of "Sesame Street," an activity he would stay with for a good half hour. The family dinner was salvaged as "quality time" for the other members of the family, while Todd was engaged in an age-appropriate activity. (REACH, Case 401; Bernheimer et al., 1990)

Neither this case example nor any of the other 101 families in the study ignored the needs of their developmentally delayed children. However, activity settings introduced by interventions had to be sustainable and meaningful within the full range of what the family was trying to accomplish. This conclusion is consistent with earlier research which indicated that it is more efficient and effective to design interventions that capitalize on existing cultural features than attempt to create new repertoires and contexts (Tharp, in press, 1979; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Tharp & Wetzel, 1969).

In a fundamental sense, adopting activity setting as a unit of analysis is a break from the traditions of family intervention. At least since the 1960s a principal target of interventions has been parent-child interaction. But parent-child interactions do not occur in a vacuum. They are a concomitant of the everyday routine, and the activity contexts in which children spend time.

The family whose circumstances allow them to create and sustain a daily routine that includes a "reading and homework activity setting," for example, creates an essential prior condition for parent-child interaction to occur. The creation of the activity setting is prior to and encompasses the interaction, for the latter is almost sure to follow the design of the former, as our examples have suggested. That is, an activity setting not only creates a slot for interaction to occur, it is likely to define a purpose for the activity and thereby script the interaction. Some may create the slot but leave it to the individual child to do the work alone. In other cultures, assistance is provided by older siblings or other caregivers. Other families may believe that a certain kind of parental assistance is essential for a reading child or homework assignee because it elicits greater motivation.

Careful attention to a family's existing proactivity and daily routine (and all that this implies in our theory) is one response to the increasing cultural diversity of the United States, Europe, and elsewhere, and the more general demand that family strength be taken into account in intervention planning (Bernheimer et al., 1990). The need for new approaches sensitive to diversity is clear given the attention now being given to the predicament of America's poor and minority children. Sooner or later discussion of how to help comes around to family intervention.

Over the past three decades, family intervention programs have indeed compiled a record of some success and maintained a cadre of enthusiasts. Despite their successes (e.g., Powell, 1988a; Sigel & Laosa, 1983) and "overwhelmingly positive" parent response (Florin & Dokecki, 1983, p. 47), interventions have also been controversial. Sigel (1983), for example, expressed concern about the ethics of family interventions, which inherently have an "authoritative conception of the good, the desirable, and the healthy" (p. 8). Who, moreover, is to be the model for "optimal" parenting? Farran (1982) decried interventions that try to remediate deficiencies in family functioning "by attempting to make [all] parent[s] behave like middle-class parents" (p. 271).

These issues have become more troublesome as our society has become more diverse — increasingly minority, non-English speaking, from nonnuclear families, and with varying life-styles (Committee for

Economic Development, 1991; "Dealing with Diversity," 1989; Weisner, 1986). For these and other reasons, professionals are shifting their conceptions of family intervention (Powell, 1988b). Clearly, we are in a period of transition with respect to parent training and family intervention. How we resolve certain issues will no doubt influence the shape of these programs in the 1990s and beyond. What principles can guide community and family intervention programs in a society that is becoming increasingly heterogeneous?

We think a major response to these questions is the adoption of the activity setting as a unit of analysis. Just as we are long past the notion that individuals are blank slates or empty vessels, so too must we disavow the idea that families are passive recipients (or, alternatively, reactive reactors) of our interventionist largesse. Activity settings as defined here are the point of contact between individuals and the surrounding cultural and ecological environment. For families, these settings are hard-won solutions to the adaptive problem we all share — sustaining a workable daily routine that is meaningful, and reasonably congruent with deeply felt convictions. Effective, sustainable interventions depend on understanding these proactive adaptations and the subjective meaning of the activity settings to the people who construct and live in them.

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