5 *Family obligation and assistance are fundamental features of children's development that link general developmental processes with the context of a particular historical moment and a specific cultural community.*

Children Investing in Their Families: The Importance of Child Obligation in Successful Development

Thomas S. Weisner

Development is organized by engaged participation by children in the activities they find in daily life. The psychological experiences of children and youth are mutually made up by the sociocultural worlds they encounter and live within, as well as by processes of the human mind. To understand children's roles in a system of family obligation and assistance, then, we need to know what children do in those activities in order to know what they think and feel, just as much as we need to know about obligation from the other way around—the more common way in psychology—which is to study what children feel and think in order to understand what they do. Kessen (1993) reminded developmentalists that understanding and explaining what children do should be at the core of what we want to know about children and families, yet for reasons of method, theory, and disciplinarity, we have somehow lost sight of this in understanding human development.

Some of the best work in child development can be found in studies linking the context of a particular historical moment and a specific cultural community to general developmental processes and individual differences in response to that time and place (Elder and Conger, 2000; LeVine and others, 1994). The cultural content of what children do and think should be a part of our theoretical models and empirical methods, along with the more familiar abstracted and generalized psychological scales and assessments. Children do specific, particular, concrete cultural activities. Those activities have a script, norms, and cultural goals organizing them. Children do specific kinds of work and fulfill obligations that are embedded in particular

relationships and systems of moral beliefs that make them feel that they are obliged to do them. Those who think about development in this way—as a fully contextualized, comparative social science—will enjoy reading the chapters in this volume. Those who are curious and interested more in the topics of the chapters—family assistance and the sense of obligation—will discover new, useful, and productive ways to think about development in context.

These chapters focus on a topic surprisingly underappreciated in developmental psychology: family responsibility, obligation, and the flows of moral and material capital between the generations from child to parents as well as parents to children. They also focus on adaptive problems and cultural goals that really matter to families and to our society for survival and well-being, such as children's everyday competence to manage a family and household economy and doing well in school. Each chapter illuminates the important roles of family responsibility, obligation, and the flows of moral and material capital between the generations.

Most developmental research emphasizes investment in children—stimulating them in home, school, and community for future productive success, for example—rather than on children investing in their families and communities. Yet we know that competence in assisting others can provide a sense of maturity and pride in children, that making a civic contribution can teach political as well as personal lessons, and that this experience is vital for working families who need children who can and will help. It is a matter of family survival and sustaining a family routine that children learn and can be relied on in this way.

This is of no surprise if we consider the findings from cross-cultural studies of children's development. Parental and child work and workload are important predictors of developmental transitions, social behavior, and cognitive development. The shift that occurs between ages five and seven, for example, is not only a change in cognitive and self-understanding; it is a cultural and familial transition as well, marked around the world by increasing expectations that children will not only assist but manage important parts of family life: caretaking of younger children, cooking, home safety, teaching, and other crucial tasks (Sameroff and Haith, 1996). A similar shift occurs in early adolescence; youth move toward peers and nonfamilial institutions, but also embody a family's hopes, social and material capital, and their future reproduction. In most cultures where children's contributions to family work has been examined ethnographically, working is a normal, expected part of a child's cultural pathway. A child who was not doing important tasks would be the marked category (What is the problem in that family? would be asked) rather than child work being unusual enough to be of concern as potentially problematic.

These chapters take children's work as a family contribution seriously. Workload can be considered from several points of view: sheer caloric expenditure and effort, time needed to do tasks, the calling up and organization of

resources needed for domestic tasks, and the managerial and organizational complexity of the tasks children are asked to do. Some tasks entail doing other tasks (Burton, Brudner, and White, 1977)—that is, there is a functional efficiency to do them together. If you are already at home, it is more likely that you will do other tasks done in and around the home; if you are going to do the cooking, you are more likely to be responsible for buying the food, storing it, scheduling meals, and so forth. The subjective experience of doing tasks is also important. Is it felt as a burden, as unfair, as an important responsibility, or as part of the flow of everyday life that gives pleasure and satisfaction? Interesting data from children and parents about the experience of obligations and work can be found in these chapters.

Children acquire many of their work skills in the midst of family and community life as apprentices (Rogoff, 1990). They imitate, have the chance to practice work in context, and learn from other children through observation rather than through didactic instruction from adults in individualized, formal institutions like schools. Monitoring is usually done in context, while work is going on. The consequences of success and mistakes are concrete and immediate, matter to others who matter to the child, and build cumulatively in difficulty. Learning and doing family and neighborhood tasks in these ways is likely how children throughout cultural history acquired most of the competencies they needed for successful adaptation. The chapters in this volume capture some of these kinds of apprentice-like ways children become and feel competent in the contemporary world. Apprenticeship and obligation continue to be critical features of and for children's acquisition of valued and needed skills.

Crouter, Head, Bumpus, and McHale present a model of what encourages, in mothers' minds and in their practices, the use of boys and girls for domestic work in our culture. Their study suggests four processes or mechanisms that encourage mothers to rely on children to help and to lean more on daughters for home tasks: mothers' workloads are heavy; there is a cultural script for women and girls to do domestic work; mothers and daughters are close and daughters offer to help; and boys are not worth the trouble to try and bargain with in order to get them to do housework—this last an economic and bargaining hypothesis to help account for gender differences. Each of these mechanisms has cross-cultural support. Minturn and Lambert (1964), Whiting and Whiting (1975), and Whiting and Edwards (1988) found that heavier maternal workload and maternal responsibility for the domestic domain and for provisioning of children meant that children were given more responsibility for family economic tasks. Boys were too; however, boys more often had tasks to do outside the domestic sphere (herding, farmwork, trading, school). Boys in middle childhood were least likely to do domestic work, although they did do so if girls were not available. Workloads of fathers did not have a similar effect on children as long as the cultural script for domestic work did not require substituting domestic work for outside work and as long as fathers were not expected to manage the

domestic domain. The tendency of children to imitate and practice what those similar (near in age, gender, interests, and other characteristics) to them do, rather than what those more different from them do, is likely also an important mechanism leading to the modeling of domestic tasks by girls of other girls and older women (Maccoby, 1998).

The low family size of Crouter's Pennsylvania sample compared to other countries means that there are fewer children available to help. Many communities around the world have culturally prepared ways to provide help for families and ensure that children have important work experiences. Child lending for periods of time, fostering children out to kin or wealthier families, time-limited adoptions of children into families needing a child's labor or assistance for some years, and full adoptions are widespread practices in many communities around the world. These shared responsibilities for caring for and managing children by a network of kin explicitly recognize the value of children's work, as well as the shared obligations for children's development (Serpell, 1993). At its best, such pathways enhance children's sense of community attachment and life chances, but children can also be exploited and denied opportunities in life.

Work obligations are shared among siblings in Crouter's sample. American cultural scripts for sibling relationships are not very clear and marked as important compared to scripts for gender roles, achievement, or parenting. Americans do not culturally elaborate sibling relationships nearly to the extent other cultures do. Sibling relationships are the idealized model for lifelong closeness in some communities, preferred to spousal or mother-child relationships (Marshall, 1983; Weisner, 1987). We certainly have extensive sibling caretaking in American society, but do not mark it or valorize it or research it nearly to the same extent as we do parental care, day care, and self-care.

The cross-cultural solution to the problems American mothers face in organizing domestic work is often to put an older girl in charge: if there are too many conflicts or the work is not being done, parents question, punish, or negotiate with the older children who are responsible. Little bargaining takes place directly between boys and their parents in such a system, for instance, although both siblings and parents certainly experience resentment, jealousy, and ambivalence. But if (as is true in the American middle-class cultural model of development and parenting) bargaining is set up as dyadic and nonhierarchical and if children are given cultural status as a coequal interlocutor with parents, then children have strong bargaining positions, as they seem to in many of the Pennsylvania families.

Fuligni shows the extent to which school achievement is related to factors in addition to classroom and teacher input and student abilities (although these surely do matter): the sense of family obligation and responsibility. Just as for domestic tasks, intergenerational family obligation is a very real practical matter around the world for family survival. Indeed, literacy and numeracy are the core subsistence tasks of the contemporary world, with the same

concern and anxieties about them that other communities might have given to hunting, farming skills, pastoralism, trade, or ritual expertise. Absent reliable banks and credit, and often absent a reliable local or national police and security institution, kin remain the first, and often only, resource for families in much of the world. The psychological experience of shame and guilt when family obligations are not honored can be deep, painful, and consequential for people.

Family obligation may be diffused, less monitored, and weaker in the contemporary world, but it remains an important motivational force. Motivation is not only an internal individual state, but also a constructed experience within a cultural pathway. The experiences that children have of obligation and a need to persist in tasks they may not like, for example, are constituted both by a cultural schema and life pathway in a family and by the person engaged in that pathway. The schema of school success for many of the immigrant children in these studies is motivational in that it is a shared cultural-familial script, internalized in self and identity, and attached to strong feelings. In this way, cultural scripts, schemas, and pathways motivate action and can usefully be thought of as motives (D'Andrade, 1995).

In Fuligni's interviews, obligation leads to a willingness to stay with subjects like math that youth may not like, even when students in high school become disenchanted with education generally and see little practical value. The respect of youths for parents and extended kin translates into economic and personal sacrifice and influence. Clearly many of these youths do desire to support their families. Note that Fuligni's data show that actual academic achievement only weakly follows aspirations and expectations based on family obligation. But sheer persistence and reciprocated family support for further academic work help some of these students regardless. Assistance, respect, and support have different implications for academic persistence and achievement. Family monitoring and investment in sons and daughters imply control as well as a feeling of support.

Lassonde's study exemplifies how much the idea of family obligation with regard to schooling and the work lives of youth is historically and culturally entangled. The Italian immigrant story Lassonde tells for southern Italian immigrants in New Haven before and after World War I begins with an outline of the secular trends in the United States concerning cultural and historical expectations regarding success and schooling among Italian immigrants. He reviews historical changes in schooling (starting and completing high school only gradually becomes normative), gender (girls began taking clerical courses for their careers yet then were out in the community, unmonitored, with boys), and the economy (the depression devastated these immigrant families, and the needs for wage versus clerical work changed). The cultural schemas of family respect, obligation, and control also were changing (for example, marriage alters which family one is obligated to—but differently for boys and girls), and the control of wages and sexuality by families had different implications for each gender. Moral codes themselves

were changing (the good and right path in life imagined by Italians at first opposed but then over the generations gradually incorporated what American society has to offer).

Lassonde provides a rich and contextualized example of the close connections between changes in the political economy in the United States (schooling beyond grade 8 is more and more expected as normative over time) and the way class and ethnicity change these expectations (unschooled immigrant parents are suspicious of formal schooling and are unprepared and unwelcome in it compared with schooled immigrants with a higher socioeconomic status). Utilitarian views of school were very important in the cultural models of these Italian families, just as they are among Fuligni's immigrant families. What counted as good-enough school achievement was a negotiated settlement between parents and children and the local community (a grade of C was fine if no college pathway was likely; when grades were too high, it led to problems with fulfilling other important family obligations). There were also variations among the immigrant families due to selective school and teacher investment and varying home literacy environments. Lassonde and Fuligni show how narrow are our judgments of school and family influences on school achievement outcomes and the potential abilities of youth if our understanding is based solely on school grades taken as the sum of teacher input plus student ability.

Although, as Lassonde says, age grading and school engagement emerged out of cultural and historical processes, rather than being "natural," the processes he and the other authors discover are found widely around the world. Although the obligations expected and assistance given by children and youth vary, the yoked developmental transitions linking youth and their parents actually are quite widespread around the world. Parents (and others where there is shared support and management by adults other than parents) are involved in arranging marriages (or preparing their children for their own mate choice by investing in children and making sure children invest in their family), regulating job choices of youth, and selectively making judgments about their children's aptitudes. Parents' lives are going through a change along with the changes in their teenagers' lives: parents are entering some version of midlife, or the beginning of the reproductive and intergenerational transitions in the continuity of the family (Shweder, 1998). Of course, midlife, like adolescence, varies around the world and throughout history as a life stage, and it may not even be a culturally recognized, marked category. Yet almost everywhere, there is a yoked transition linking parents and youth as youth leave or prepare to leave the household and as parents begin or reach the end of their parenting years. The parental goal of ensuring intergenerational success and the moral and material continuity of one's family surely is a very wide, if not universal, concern. This shared human concern underlies the diverse ways youth fulfill obligations and give assistance to their family and society, as well as shaping the psychological experiences of parents and their children engaging in this project.

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THOMAS S. WEISNER is professor of anthropology in the Departments of Psychiatry (Center for Culture and Health) and Anthropology, University of California at Los Angeles.
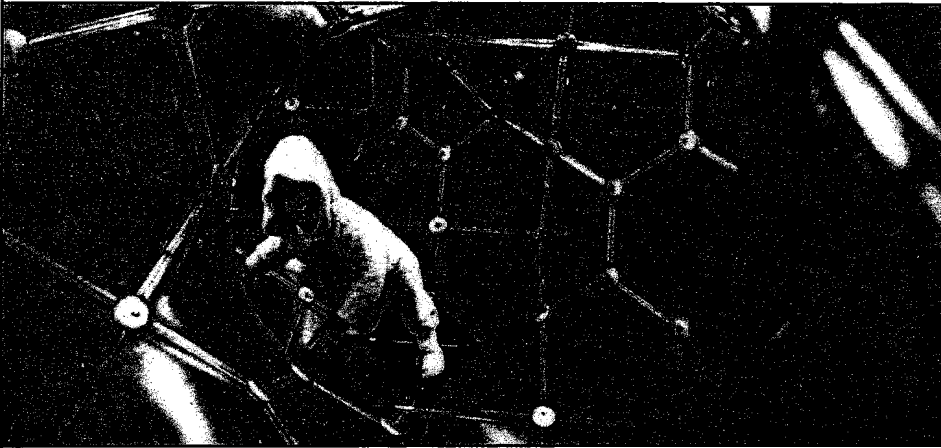
Family Obligation and Assistance During Adolescence

Contextual Variations and Developmental Implications

Andrew J. Fuligni

EDITOR