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Implications for Policy and Practice

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Abstract

Ideas and claims about children's development (e.g., concerning attachment relationships) that have found broad acceptance in the academic community have impacted the development of policy in governmental and international organizations. These accepted ideas and claims, in turn, have been incorporated into practice and services provided to families in various forms (e.g., social work, child care). The reconceptualization of attachment systems proposed in this volume—in particular, the explicit evaluation of the influence of multiple attachment figures on children that is normative in many societies—should have profound effects on both policy and practice. This chapter addresses issues that need to be considered if society is to integrate current understanding of the cultural nature of attachment into policy and practice.

Policy: International Organizations, Governments, and Professional Organizations

International bodies and national governments set policies that affect families the world over, based on a limited conceptualization of children, caregivers, and their relationships that are incongruent with the actual values and practices of many societies and cultures (Serpell and Nsamenang 2014). Such policies often conflict with the meaning systems and goals for parenting in particular settings, as well as people's everyday experiences, and are thus likely to be ineffective. This situation has emerged, in part, because academic experts (on whom organizations rely for theories and models) have reached "scientific" conclusions about "universal" behavior by studying a narrow range of human behavior that primarily reflects Western thought and practice, and then over-generalizing those conclusions to the rest of the world. Governing bodies, like

scientists themselves, are often unaware of the cultural assumptions that are embedded in the very foundations of their policies. This bias not only threatens the validity of a policy, it reduces the likelihood that it will be embraced by the people it is intended to support.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) delineates a broad range of rights applicable to children around the world (United Nations 1989). It has been ratified by the vast majority of nation-states, with the United States a notable exception. The range of rights covered under the UNCRC is extraordinary: Article 27 recognizes the right of children to a standard of living adequate to their physical and mental needs. It also stresses freedom of expression, the right to have their opinions respected, freedom of association, the right of privacy, access to information, and freedom of thought and conscience. UNCRC provides an expansive interpretation of children's rights intended to guarantee minimal requirements of health, safety, and well-being. It also urges nation-states to adopt a much broader view of children's rights than most currently embrace. In a subsequent document (United Nations 2005), the UNCRC clarifies that these rights apply to young as well as older children, emphasizing that both parents and extrafamilial stakeholders play important roles in their implementation.

More recently, the World Association for Infant Mental Health (WAIMH), an international organization that works with infants and parents from diverse societies and cultural groups, published a position paper which argued that infants require additional rights beyond those listed by the UNCRC, because immature infants, unlike older children, are totally dependent on caregiving for survival (World Association for Infant Mental Health 2016). From animal and human research, it is clear that early experience contributes significantly to brain development during the first three years of life, as well as to a child's positive adaptation and well-being later. Thus, there is an urgency to provide developmentally informed care and appropriate protection for infants. WAIMH seeks to inform and guide policies that provide support for parents and other caregivers. It also aims to raise awareness of the special needs of infants, particularly those reared in "high-risk" environments (e.g., poverty, violence).

Without doubt, these types of international initiatives, which are designed to support the health and well-being of all infants and their families, are important. However, significant barriers exist that limit their efficacy and ease of implementation across diverse cultural settings. With respect to parent-child relationships, for example, some of the rights guaranteed to children reduce, as a consequence, the authority and autonomy of parents to regulate their children's care and conduct. This sets up a conflict in cultures where a strong commitment to parental authority (and even physical punishment) is used to instruct children in what they need to learn. In such cultural settings, some might view these provisions as inconsistent, or at least in tension with the UNCRC's guarantee of the rights of parents to direct and guide their children

(Article 4). The UNCRC initiatives concerning children's rights often challenge existing values and beliefs of indigenous cultures (see Rosabal-Coto et al., this volume). This may explain why the global adoption of UNCRC and its implementation has been inconsistent.

To maximize acceptance and compliance with these international initiatives, policy-makers and practitioners need to recognize and respect the distinct meaning systems of families in diverse settings. When policy and practice procedures are developed, local stakeholders need to be included in the process, a caveat that is in line with the recommendations delineated by Serpell and Nsamenang (2014) for childcare initiatives.

Similarly, individual national governments often produce top-down policies that affect families and young children, based on guidance received from international agencies and Western academic research. Still, because national governments have access to local knowledge and meaning systems, they are in a position to develop policies that are culturally informed and sensitive to the very people they are designed to serve. This process will be enhanced if bias (racial or cultural) is recognized and mitigated.

Agencies (national and regional) charged with carrying out government policy must be able to interpret and apply national policies to the "pressing" needs of local communities being served. For instance, a policy designed to support the physical, emotional, social, and cognitive aspects of child development may well respond to different needs: In one community, a program may be needed to reduce child mortality and improve children's physical development, as in the face of dietary deficiencies (Abubakar et al. 2011). In another, a program might be used to optimize social development, as when children have been separated from their families because of war (Macksoud and Aber 1996; Hasanović et al. 2006). In still another community, a program may be needed to support cognitive development, when schooling is limited (Koller et al. 2012). The particular programs that government or other agencies might prioritize in each of these communities may look quite different, yet they all address the common goal of supporting children's development and well-being.

At times, national governments may resist the recommendations of international organizations. For example, the UNCRC articulates the importance of parent-child relationships and the need for governments to support them. This responsibility, however, may not be accepted or considered a priority in certain areas of the world. Some governments, for example, may believe that a child's well-being is the primary responsibility of individual parents, and thus government policies should not intrude. In such cases, it is important to persuade governments that supporting families does fall within their area of responsibility, but that this support needs to be meaningful to local communities.

When there is a significant mismatch between the articulated policies of an international agency or government and the existing ways of raising children inherent to the cultural setting, programs may not be fully embraced or implemented. Two examples of issues (as locally interpreted) raised by the UNCRC

that may be seen to be in conflict with local understanding and practice are (a) child labor, which may be viewed as a valuable learning environment as well as an important contribution to a marginal economic system (Gaskins 2014), and (b) corporal punishment, which (when differentiated from child abuse) may be viewed as an effective teaching technique that also supports a valued hierarchical social order (Nutter-El-Ouardani 2014).

To illustrate the complexities involved in developing and implementing a policy at odds with parental commitments, let us consider the example of spanking, as it has been discussed so thoroughly in the literature. Many nations have adopted the position held by the United Nations that spanking is a form of "legalized violence against children" and that it should be banned altogether. The UN has banned the use of corporal punishment in member countries, without considering that it may be viewed as an effective tool for teaching by parents in some cultural groups. This international declaration, by itself, does little to change parents' behavior or attitudes toward spanking, and for that reason it is often ineffective.

The United States, for example, has no national governmental policy on spanking. However, a growing empirical literature suggests that spanking and other forms of corporal punishment are ineffective disciplinary techniques and may have detrimental effects on children (Gershoff 2013). Many professional groups (e.g., the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Psychological Association) recommend that parents refrain from spanking young children as a disciplinary strategy (American Academy of Pediatrics 1998; Hagan et al. 2008; Smith 2012). Local government agencies, such as child protection services, rely on these professional recommendations when they establish their own guidelines about what is acceptable parental behavior. However, as in other countries, many parents of young children in the United States—depending in part on their ethnicity, religion, and class (e.g., Berlin et al. 2009; MacKenzie et al. 2011)—ignore these recommendations. The majority of parents in some groups report that they have spanked their children at least once during the past year, and many endorse "a good hard spanking" as an effective disciplinary strategy in certain circumstances (Child Trends 2015a).

Official policies on spanking are adopted without consideration of the diversity of parental beliefs about corporal punishment, the consequences that may ensue once this socializing technique is eliminated, or the broader parental ethnotheories that motivate and validate them. Such policies may not only be insensitive to different systems of parenting, they may also be inappropriate. Some research shows that spanking may or may not have long-term negative consequences for children, depending on the cultural environment in which it is administered (e.g., Deater-Deckard et al. 1996; Lansford 2010). Other findings suggest that spanking has negative effects on children even when it is in accord with cultural traditions (Gershoff 2013). Of concern here is that government and institutions have formed policy based on (a) inadequate knowledge of what families do and, especially, why they do it, (b)

with little consideration of how the local meaning of the targeted parental behaviors may affect the implementation of the policy, and (c) incomplete scientific evidence.

For international, national, and professional organizations that are focused on young children, the overall goal is to support and increase their well-being. This goal is compromised if an organization's expectations and recommendations conflict with reality concerning the role of children, their social support systems, and the powerful forces of socialization that mold them through their everyday experiences to become members of particular cultural groups. Policy-makers need to recognize that parents and caregivers share the goal of supporting the well-being of children, and policies need to be designed to enable caregivers to be more successful in raising healthy and well-adapted children. Unfortunately, policies can actually achieve the opposite effect. When they deny resources or impose penalties on caregivers whose perspectives do not match the policy more harm than good may result. Such policies can also sow doubt in the minds of caregivers about the appropriateness of their cultural commitments to child-rearing. Thus, it is imperative for academic researchers and scientific advisors to incorporate a cultural view into their claims, and to emphasize the importance of cultural considerations when translating recommendations about young children and their families to policy-makers. This will help governing bodies, reliant on their expert advice, to develop policies that support the full range of cultural contexts of development and, in the process, better serve children's well-being.

Practice

When agencies develop goals based on assumptions that do not match the groups being served, the methods selected to realize such goals may prove ineffective or even harmful to families. This is particularly relevant for services developed by international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) for implementation in developing countries. It is also an issue in Western nations, where migration is increasing in prevalence, especially from African and the Middle Eastern countries. Uprooted immigrant or refugee families often depend on social workers and educators, who are trained in Western "best practice" principles but often lack culturally sensitive information about their clients' specific parenting beliefs and practices. This situation does not just go away. Instead, the "native" population of the society becomes increasingly diverse as second- and third-generation immigrants make up a larger percentage of the population. Generally, the parenting beliefs and practices of immigrant families are conservative, in comparison to those of native families in the host country. Many immigrant parents retain the child-rearing beliefs and practices that they learned from their own parents and grandparents, often without even realizing it, even as they assimilate into the dominant culture in other ways.

It is not difficult to find examples where the application of current public policy relevant to attachment theory is interpreted in culturally insensitive ways, potentially resulting in inappropriate negative judgments about child-care practices because they differ from normative Western practices:

- Leaving a child home alone or in the care of another preadolescent child.
- Parent-child co-sleeping arrangements.
- Leaving children in the home country or sending them back to the home country to be cared for by relatives (see Liu et al., this volume).
- Fathers being denied adequate visitation with their children to ensure that children maintain a close relationship with their mothers.

In each of these examples, as in many others, the issues at stake are complex, nuanced, and potentially significant in terms of negatively influencing the well-being of families. Parents and caregivers who are immigrants or who come from minority communities are often evaluated negatively for engaging in practices that have been handed down to them over generations—practices judged positively by their communities. In addition, significant legal and financial consequences may result when such practices violate the host country's laws and practices (e.g., use of physical punishment). We are not suggesting that there is no room to interpret the concept of harm by a caregiver or danger for the child. Instead, we suggest that all social service interpretations of attachment behavior should begin by asking the following questions:

- Why is the parent doing that particular practice?
- Is the intent to hurt or harm the child?
- Is there a reason that motivates the behavior, perhaps stemming from a belief in particular socialization practices or from difficult circumstances outside the child-rearing domain?
- Is there actual evidence that the practice causes harm to the child being raised in this environment?

The effectiveness of professionals who work with children and families from diverse groups would be greatly improved if they had increased knowledge of cultural variation in parental beliefs and traditions, including those related to children's attachment systems and their associations with variations in parenting practices—the same range of information we raised earlier for researchers to consider (see Chapter 8, this volume). Practitioners need to explore and reflect on the meaning of parenting practices (and their attitudes toward them) when those practices vary from those considered "optimal" in Western society. They also need to recognize that different parenting styles do not automatically reflect "poor" parenting or a lack of care or concern about the child. When practice is culturally insensitive, parents are likely to ignore the guidance offered to them. This puts them at risk of being misunderstood and judged negatively, or even of being accused of abuse or neglect.

Many practitioners in fields such as medicine, mental health, law, education, social services, and economic development are fully aware of this problem (e.g., Forehand and Kotchick 1996; Lillas and Marchel 2015). There are, however, significant barriers to more culturally sensitive practice. The sheer number and diversity of cultures that need to be understood is daunting. In addition, individuals in any society have difficulty recognizing and accepting that one's own beliefs are culturally motivated, yet without this awareness, the beliefs of others cannot be recognized as legitimate. In her account of a Hmong immigrant family's struggle with the Western medical system during a serious illness of their infant, Fadiman (1997) captured the complexities involved in trying to help a tiny child when two cultural systems collide.

When evaluating services and interventions, it is important to integrate "culturally competent," evidence-based perspectives into the process over time. The initial experiences of the practitioner, the researcher, and the client trying to work together may not be one of ease: significant disorientation may leave all parties feeling less assured about how to interpret behaviors and experiences, much let alone what should be said or done. These experiences, however, provide an opportunity to learn about the other person as well as the impetus to get the interaction and support "right" for all participants. This process is crucial if "culturally pluralistic" situations are to be addressed competently (Weisner and Hay 2015:2–3) and needs to occur both in the application of attachment theory as well as in the study of attachment. It is important to observe the process, evaluate it, and reflect on it as part of taking up a commitment to embrace a cultural perspective.

We encourage policy-makers and practitioners to use information to support parents from all cultural groups in the care of their children. All parties need to be more aware of their own cultural commitments and more open to recognizing those of others. To illustrate this problem further, we discuss three types of agencies and institutions that illustrate the perils of cultural mismatch: NGOs, social work, and child care.

International Nongovernmental Organizations

How do NGOs develop programs to help communities and families achieve the best outcomes for their children? Unfortunately, all too often, NGO programs fail in this endeavor. To improve effectiveness, programs need to be designed and established through collaborative partnerships with the communities and individuals they are intended to serve, and the resulting goals need to be effectively communicated to the target group(s).

Although many organizations impose standards and make judgments without local community engagement and collaboration, and without understanding the negative consequences of their good intentions, others are committed to working with local partnerships (Pence 2013). Some NGOs do not provide direct services from a national or international office but rather partner with

local community organizations to provide programs (e.g., preschools, women's health, youth programs, child protection) that are linked to ongoing local projects (e.g., connecting preschools to local primary schools or women's organizations, connecting youth programs to schools or work programs). By partnering with local organizations, programs can be adapted to local goals and may even be jointly funded through local or regional sources. No matter how desirable and empirically based, intervention proposals will only be successful if they are integrated meaningfully into the daily lives of the families and communities being served. Since many NGOs are internationally based, precautions need to be taken to ensure that NGO workers understand the cultural landscape of the local setting and develop the programs in partnership with that community.

Social Work in Support of Children's Health and Well-Being

Social workers assigned to help families often analyze the social relationships within a family to see if they are "healthy" and capable of promoting a child's "well-being." Yet the mode of evaluation often depends on the current interpretation of academic research and the recommended best practices derived from that research.

Attachment theorists and researchers posit that the establishment of secure attachment relationships with caregivers in early childhood is foundational for children's later successful functioning, but not all have incorporated cultural variation into their model of attachment. Instead, based on research conducted mainly in Western societies, they hold that a primary antecedent of secure attachment is, for example, an adult caregiver's "sensitivity." Further, Western professionals widely accept these findings as defining "universal" behavior and use them to develop and implement attachment-based therapeutic interventions for at-risk families. For instance, a goal of many Western attachment-based interventions is to support parents in providing sensitive, nurturing care in the context of child distress (Dozier et al. 2001; Cyr et al. 2010) and in engaging in contingently responsive ("serve-and-return") interactions with children (Bernard and Dozier 2010) (see also Chapters 5 and 8, this volume). This, however, overlooks the fact that even though a significant association between "sensitivity" and child's "attachment security" was found in the Western populations studied, only a small amount of the variance in the children's behavior has actually been explained.

Given the conceptualization outlined in Chapter 8 (this volume) and developed throughout this volume, it would follow that the concept of sensitive parenting and attachment-based interventions derived from it are not necessarily appropriate for use with all families in non-Western societies or from minority communities within Western societies. Best practices need to be culturally specific. We believe that the effectiveness of parenting interventions will be maximized when they are informed by culturally specific ethnographic

information (e.g., local parental/community socialization goals for children) and developed and implemented in direct collaboration with local "stakeholders" in community organizations. When the goals and content of interventions clash with local parenting beliefs and practices, the extent to which they will be adopted will be reduced and inappropriate moral judgments about parents who use parenting practices that vary from Western norms will increase.

Child Care

In the United States, changes in attitudes toward child care over the last fifty years illustrate how perceptions in child care (and its developmental consequences) are both empirical and culturally constructed, and how attachment theory has played a role in this evolution. Since the 1950s, public attitudes have evolved past the initial deep concerns about out-of-home care and its effects on young children. In many cases, resistance to out-of-home care was originally "justified" by reference to attachment theory and the view that very young children required continuous access to their primary attachment figure in order to develop security. (The same view, incidentally, was and still is used to justify sole child custody to mothers, as primary attachment figures, during divorce proceedings.) These attitudes affected public acceptance of preschool and nursery school care, combined with strong doubts about the developmental consequences of infant/toddler care, which again were justified based on the claims of attachment theory—this time with reference to the stresses on the infant of developing and maintaining a secure attachment when early and extended child care begins. In the current era, both infant care and preschool-age care are normatively enlisted by the majority of families, and it is recognized that young children form significant attachments to their regular childcare providers as well as to their parents. Families who live in different cultures throughout the world, however, would regard the debates in the United States as inexplicable, since children experience normative shared care virtually from birth without any concerns about young children becoming insecure or overwhelmed by the experience. Although the concerted empirical study of child care and its effects on children in the United States is warranted (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network 2005), public attitudes have changed—and are varied—independently of, or in transaction with, expanding research knowledge.

Beyond societal attitudes about child care in general, there has been much debate about what constitutes a quality childcare program, and much of that discussion has focused on what kind of attachment relationships should be nurtured between caregivers and children. We suggest that achieving social trust in the classroom and school community should be the primary goal and quality to measure—not solely warm teacher-child attachment relationships, which vary in how they are understood and recognized in diverse cultural communities. Howes (2009) provides a model of early child care and childhood education

programs that represents a contextual theory of relationship quality and security. The development of positive relationships integrates antecedent factors (e.g., child and family circumstances, caregiver internal processes, caregiver practices and beliefs, the peer group), which then influence the relationship quality of the child-caregiver dyad and peer relations. These relationships, in turn, shape the social and emotional "climate" of the early childhood education program itself: from childcare quality indicators to responsive teaching. There are many indirect pathways as well (Weisner and Hay 2015).

Providing a quality relationship between providers and children in an early childhood education setting is among the standard measures of process quality in early childhood programs (Howes 2009). Good teachers are those who understand that they must "balance the needs of the child, the group, and the child within the group" (Howes 2009:34). This balance is crucial to a reconsideration of the idea of a secure base and conventional measures of attachment security. The importance of social trust (not only a secure base from a single caregiver in a dyadic relationship) is a construct that fits with the early childhood education experience for children from a broad range of backgrounds. Social trust emphasizes the distributed relationship across a *community*. It does not focus on an individual child's internalized sense of security from the exclusive dyadic relationship with the mother. This model also makes clear that quality childcare practices may indeed vary for programs that serve ethnically diverse clientele. This enables the needs that children bring from home to be adequately addressed, especially in regards to relationship formation, security, and attachment.

Howe's model is particularly sensitive to cultural differences, yet many childcare programs in Western countries do not use such a model. As in social services, the primary focus of some curricula is often on caregiver sensitivity, drawing directly from the work of Ainsworth and her colleagues (e.g., Gutknecht et al. 2012). Some programs, for instance, use a formal transitional period to introduce children to the daycare setting. Based on attachment theory, it is assumed that this adjustment period is necessary to ensure a child's well-being. In Germany, for example, this period lasts up to four weeks: parents, children, and caregivers experience different phases designed to enable the caregiver (who is initially perceived as a stranger) to become an attachment person to the child. Parents are required to stay with their child during the first days in the daycare center so that the child can get used to the new caregivers while their primary attachment figure is present. Gradually, as the child adjusts to the new surroundings, parents spend less time at the daycare center (Laewen et al. 2011; Keller and Chaudhary, this volume).

Western middle-class parents usually perceive this procedure to be a sensitive and appropriate solution for an emotionally difficult transition. However, many immigrant parents view the procedure as inappropriate and, in fact, inexplicable. For parents whose children already have extensive experience with different caregivers and who show no stranger anxiety, such a transition period

may be perceived as incompetence on the part of the childcare center. These families may, as a result, choose not to send their children to day care because they are uncomfortable with the policies and/or are skeptical of the care their children would receive (Keller and Bossong, unpublished). In Germany, where every third child has some form of migration background, cultural mismatch in child care is an issue of great significance.

Attachment and Cultural Understanding of Parent-Child Relationships

In the United States, *attachment parenting* has become a popular, albeit controversial approach to infant and early child care in the lay population, because it is perceived to be based on caregiving practices that are deeply rooted in human evolution. Based on the work of Sears and Sears (1993), attachment parenting urges the adoption of practices such as immediate postpartum skin-to-skin contact between mother and baby, breastfeeding on demand throughout the child's early years, continuous contact between mother and baby ("baby-wearing"), co-sleeping throughout the early years, and other related practices. These practices are justified, in part, as being "natural" and "instinctive" to humans because they existed throughout evolution and can be seen in many indigenous cultures around the world. Thus they are deemed to be "best practice" for raising infants and young children.

Although attachment parenting shares with attachment theory an emphasis on parental sensitivity, nurturant care, and warmth toward young children, attachment researchers do not endorse attachment parenting practices. Attachment researchers criticize the emphasis on maternal care (atypical in most indigenous cultures) as undermining fathers as significant attachment figures and feel that it may upset the balance between attachment and exploration, which attachment researchers underscore in early childhood development. More generally, attachment parenting presents a narrow portrayal of which caregiving practices are "natural" to humans as a species, despite scholarly disagreement about which practices actually characterize care of the young (Fuentes 2009) and the extraordinary range of actual caregiving practices throughout the world in which infants thrive (Morelli et al. and Keller and Chaudhary, this volume). Reifying one pattern of child care plucked from ethnographic accounts as species typical, and therefore the norm against which other patterns are evaluated, seems as culturally uninformed as is reifying childcare practices of the United States middle class as the norm. In the end, because much more research is needed to identify the effects of attachment parenting on young children's development in contemporary conditions, it seems highly premature to identify these practices as ones for which adults and children are naturally best suited.

This is an interesting example of traditional attachment theorists making an argument that criticizes policy reliant on naïve and uninformed ideas about

attachment. It is particularly instructive here, because it represents the same kind of critique that we are making more generally about the dangers of applying Western-centric theory to child and family policies in other cultures.

Supporting Research, Policy, and Practice through Dialogue

Translating research from any scientific field into policy and practice is difficult. The multifaceted aspects of research are difficult to distill into a form that is accessible to policy-makers, who often seek direct, concrete information communicated in statements that resemble black-and-white dichotomies rather than shades of gray. Many researchers resist giving up the nuances inherent in their research or arguments. Moreover, data may only be available in basic research journals; policy implications may not have been fully developed or communicated, thus severely impacting the translation of findings into policy and practice.

In addition, translating research into policy involves bias that must be recognized. For example, although policy-makers often assert that designing and implementing culturally sensitive practice is an important goal, the successful implementation of this goal remains elusive. Part of the problem is that attachment-informed research still does not make the study of cultural differences a priority and, as such, it is reasonable to expect that recommendations from such research would not emphasize the creation of culturally appropriate practices. Simply put, unless culture is incorporated into the empirical database, culture will never finds its way into policy. To minimize bias and retain scientific integrity in the translation of scientific research, what would an ideal process look like? We argue that greater effort needs to be given to dialogue and debate, and that the construction of this process should be carried out with the relevant stakeholders.

In support of an inclusive translation process, we recommend that policy-making agencies which serve families be directly involved in the development of new research projects intended to address cultural differences in beliefs and practices surrounding young children's everyday lives, including attachment. This research needs to go beyond a basic description of attachment systems in different cultures and examine how attachment affects children's development and engagement in their social worlds.

We also recommend that greater applied research be conducted to help articulate how agencies and institutions can best support families in a variety of communities. This includes how to develop clearer and more effective recommendations for evidence-based best practices, which may vary across cultures. This research requires a multi-method, multidisciplinary approach (see discussion in Chapter 8, this volume, on a methodological tool kit), and needs to include the means to disseminate findings to policy-makers and practitioners as well as to strengthen capacity to design supportive policies for local cultures.

In addition, effort should be given to increase ecocultural training for professionals who work with families with young children: psychologists, psychiatrists, teachers, pediatricians, nurses, midwives, aid workers, social workers, and other community leaders.

Such an integrated approach to research would bring a clear advantage. Practitioners may be better able to appreciate the amount of diversity in attachment systems than researchers. Thus, by working together, researchers may come to see more clearly the ways in which infants and their attachment figures interact within a framework of cultural values and practices. In turn, this insight would enable researchers to correct theoretical blind spots (e.g., regarding the role of culture in forming healthy attachment systems).

As our world shrinks, through immigration and better communication, the need for a more culturally informed understanding of children's worlds increases (Jensen 2011). Those who set policy and provide services need to improve their understanding of how culture organizes and informs caregiving practices and children's everyday lives, so that they can respond effectively to the increasing diversity in the communities they serve. The academic community shares a responsibility in increasing this knowledge. Constructive dialogue, such as was accomplished at this Forum, is of paramount importance: between academics who study attachment in traditional ways and those who have critiqued that approach based on their study of families in cultural contexts, as well as between policy-makers and academics. None of this will be easy and considerable challenges exist. Yet with concerted effort and persistence, cultural diversity can be understood and incorporated into the most fundamental models of children's development and well-being. We hope this discussion will inspire you, the reader, to continue this much-needed discourse on culture and early attachment systems.