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Many Mothers, Many Fathers, Many Others

Insights from Other Cultures

Children do best in societies where childrearing is considered too important to be left entirely to parents (Stephanie Coontz, 1992)

As Westerners learn more about other cultures, we come to realize that our Western “ideal” family form is the exception rather than the rule across the cultures of the world. In fact, extended family arrangements and various degrees of nonfamily member involvement in the care and rearing of children is both historically and cross-culturally the norm rather than the exception (Hrdy, 2009; Rogoff, 2003). While our Western culture endorses a narrow view of the ideal family form, other cultures embrace an expanded view of the family form that includes other players beyond a mother and father in a nuclear family. This type of distributed child care has been variously described as cooperative caregiving or alloparenting. In this chapter, we will explore variations in cultures across the globe and in the next chapter, we will continue this examination by taking a close look at the variations among families of different ethnic backgrounds in our own society.

In Chapter 1, we met the Aka, a group of hunter-gatherer pygmies living in the Central African Republic and the northern Congo who are models of both mother–father equality and community-based child care. Aka fathers have been described as the “best dads in the world” in view of their active role in caregiving. When the mother is not available, the father calms his baby by giving him a nipple to suck (figure 6.1). Among the Aka not only do relatives but other women in the community participate in the care and even the nursing of newborns and young infants. The Gusii of Kenya consider child rearing a shared enterprise involving both parents as well as child caretakers. As in the case of our own contemporary society and in past times, even when caregiving duties are shared, mothers or at least parents are still the central caregivers. Anthropologist Melvin Konner (2005) has termed this the “maternal primacy” hypothesis. The issue is whether there are advantages associated with this cooperative caregiving arrangement that can inform our current discussions about family forms. The purpose or adaptive function of this shared childcare arrangement in past times

was to allow women the opportunity and energy to reproduce by reducing their child-care load and to shorten the length of time between births. Another function of cooperative parenting was based on reciprocal altruism: you help me now and I will help you later. Finally, especially in the case of younger children and adolescents, the involvement in the care for another person's offspring provides an opportunity to learn how to be a competent caregiver, a set of skills that will be valuable when the young caretakers become parents themselves. In cases of caring for their younger siblings, older siblings would increase their parents' reproductive success as well as increasing their own inclusive fitness (Crognier, Villena, and Vargas, 2002). Of course, we need to be cautious about assuming that these examples from other cultures with their own unique ecology, customs, and traditions can easily be transferred to our own culture. Anthropologist Meredith Small (2001) has addressed this issue of the relevance of our ancestors to how we think about families today.

We have come a long way away from the Pleistocene era of a million years ago. Surely our child rearing skills have evolved since then. Yes, but when we assume that the nuclear family is the "natural" way for parents and children...it is wrong. The natural human child care situation, the one through which our species evolved our hearts and minds, is a more communal, kin based extended family system (2001, p. 215).

This observation by Small suggests that the lessons learned from other cultures serve as reminders that other models of family organization and role allocation have been successful in our past and merit renewed consideration in the present.



Figure 6.1 Aka Pygmy Father.
Source: Barry Hewlett.

*Many Fathers, Many Mothers, or No Fathers:
One of Each Is Not Always the Norm*

To Western eyes with our laser focus on the “ideal” family form, it is a surprise to discover that the current increase of two father or two mother families in our own culture has precedents in other cultures. Although Janice and Darlene Standish–McCloud, the same gender parent family who we introduced in chapter one, view themselves as pioneers on the frontiers of new family forms, they are, in fact, continuing in a long-established tradition of multiple mother or multiple father families found in some other cultures. As anthropologist Stephen Beckerman and his colleagues (Beckerman and Valentine, 2002; Beckerman et al., 2002) discovered during their frequent visits with the Bari Indians of Venezuela, these people believe that a child can have several biological fathers. In contrast to our view of conception of one man and one woman as the procreational unit, the Bari have an understanding of conception as a shared enterprise. According to the Bari version of conception, although the husband always begins the conception process “a fetus is built up over time with repeated washes of sperm – which means that, of course, more than one man can contribute to the endeavor” (Small, 2003, p. 54). These secondary fathers along with the husband or primary father are all expected to contribute to the child’s well-being by contributing food and gifts. While not all of the Bari follow this multiple partner route to conception, the presence of secondary fathers has evolutionary implications: infants with secondary fathers in contrast with infants without additional fathers are more likely to survive to adulthood. Further probing found that the extra contributions of food by the secondary fathers during pregnancy was a major factor in protecting the viability of a fetus and in its long-term survival (Beckerman et al., 2002). Nor is this belief in shared biological paternity restricted to the Bari. According to a recent survey, 70% of Amazonian cultures share this belief in shared paternity (Walker, Flinn, and Hill, 2010). Other indigenous groups in New Guinea and India have similar beliefs about multiple paternity (Beckerman and Valentine, 2002).

Partible paternity may have benefits for both sexes, especially in societies where essentially all offspring are said to have multiple fathers. Despite a decrease in paternity certainty, at least some men probably benefit (or mitigate costs) by increasing their number of extra-marital partners, using sexual access to their wives to formalize male alliances, and/or sharing paternity with close kin (Walker, Flinn, and Hill, 2010, p. 19195).

Similarly, wives benefit not only by increasing the survival of their children but by having a paramour available as a possible future husband if their current husband dies or defaults. There are downsides too: male sexual jealousy and sexual conflict are not absent from even the most sexually liberal of partible paternity societies (Crocker and Crocker, 2004; Kensinger, 2002). In short, these beliefs and reproductive practices may have some benefits but may also be the source of social tension. In any case, the Bari customs clearly challenge our western beliefs about the “ideal” family form, especially regarding the ideal number of parents. According to the Bari, a husband and wife may not be enough and that for them two or more fathers and a mother is an improvement.

What happens if there are no fathers present? In some cultures such as the Na of Yunnan Province in the Himalayan region of Southern China, multiple mothers in the same household are found while neither fathers nor husbands are anywhere in the household. In his book *A Society Without Fathers and Husbands: The Na of China*, Chinese anthropologist Cai Hua (2002) describes a matrilinear and matrilocal society in which descent and resources are passed through the maternal line and siblings and their children lived in the household of their maternal relatives. Brothers, sisters, their mother, and in some cases grandmothers live together as a family and economic unit in the same household. “Biological fathers” of the children are recognized neither as husbands nor social fathers in this society and they have no responsibility for or power over either their offspring or the mother of their children. In fact, there is no word for father in the Na language (Hua, 2002). According to Cai Hua, “the identity of her children’s genitors is never important” (2002, p. 296) but only in rare cases is the biological father not known to the mother, her sisters and brothers who reside together with the children. In this arrangement, the mother along with aunts and uncles raise the children, who are well adjusted and well adapted to life in their cultural group (Hua, 2002). Presumably the uncles (and possibly aunts) provide the kinds of experiences usually provided by fathers, a reminder that the identity of the socializing agent may be less important than the social/cognitive input that they provide. The fact that boys or girls develop normally when there is neither an intact married family unit nor a biological father present in the household clearly challenges our notion of the “ideal” family form as necessary for the socialization of children. A woman may have several male lovers but these men reside in their own maternal household and are treated as visitors but never as members of their offspring’s family unit. These sexual arrangements are sometimes called “walking marriages” which for the Na means literally “going back and forth.” (Shih, 2010). Even the houses are designed to reflect these social arrangements with rooms and spaces for the mother, her sisters and brothers, and the children, but no space for a father or husband. Just as we saw earlier that introduction of ART led to the uncoupling of sex, reproduction, and parenting, this unusual arrangement “separates sexuality, and romantic love from kinship, reproduction and parenting” (Stacey, 2011, p. 182). These customs have some benefits by allowing both women as well as men a high degree of independence and freedom. Moreover, this arrangement is relatively free of gender of child preference and unlike in other parts of China, girls and boys are equally valued. There have been vigorous efforts by Chinese government authorities to bring the Na in conformity with dominant Chinese norms of monogamous marriage, by offers of land to monogamous couples, outlawing conjugal visits and even withholding food rations from children who could not identify their father. In spite of these efforts, the Na have tried to maintain their patterns of matrilinear descent, living arrangements, and sexual practices, and, of course, their right to define the concept of family in their own unique way. The Na have captured the imagination of not just anthropologists but film makers as well. More than ten documentary accounts of the customs of the Na in Mosuo (the Na language), in Mandarin, and in English have been produced. Unfortunately, some have sensationalized and distorted their actual practices which has raised both visibility and curiosity about this group and their customs among Chinese and foreign tourists. As tourism to this region has increased, some worry that the Na may succumb to modern pressures to conform to a more stable, monogamous relationship model (Stacey, 2011).

Evidence of these practices and beliefs is not in and of itself support for the viability of multiple father or multiple mother households in our own society but a reminder that throughout our evolutionary history, there have been many alternatives to the “ideal” family form. Anthropologist Beckerman summed it up this way: “One of the things this research shows is that human beings are just as clever and creative in assembling their kin relations as they are putting together space shuttles and symphonies” (cited by Small, 2003, p. 61).

Beyond Mothers and Fathers: Siblings as Caregivers

In some cultures, caregiving responsibilities are commonly distributed among a wide number of individuals beyond the biological parents including siblings, extended family members and nonkin (Weisner, 2008). Sibling caregivers, especially girls are common among some African communities such as the Nyansango of Kenya, the Mali of West Africa, and among the Kahuli in New Guinea (Weisner, 2008). In these cultures, five- to ten-year-old sibling caregivers often assume responsibility not only for their own younger siblings but for children from other nonbiologically related families in the community. In some cultures such as Polynesia, by the time they are able to walk infants are cared for by three to four year old siblings (Martini and Kirkpatrick, 1992). The older siblings supervise, transport, calm and play with the younger children, and serve as models for their younger charges.

Children may carry a younger sibling or cousin around on their back or hip to be entertained by the sights and sounds of the community and the play of other children. If the young one becomes hungry, the child caregiver returns to the mother to allow the child to nurse. Adults are available to supervise child caregivers, but the entertainment of young children falls to other children (Rogoff, 2003, pp. 122–123) (Figure 6.2).

As this quote suggests it is not just typical maternal activities such as calming and carrying that are distributed among other members of the family such as siblings. Functions such as play, which, in our culture, is a central role of mothers and especially fathers are “outsourced” to others as well. In one culture, the island of Tonga in the South Pacific, adults rarely play with their children for a simple reason: they view parent–child play as a waste of time. Children play with their siblings and peers instead (Mavoa, Park, Pryce, 1997; Morton, 1996). In Mexico, older siblings from working class families assume not only the role of caregiver (Kramer, 2002) but the role of play partner for young children as well (Zukow-Goldring, 2002). Neither father nor mother serve as play partners but leave this activity to siblings. Nor is the quality of sibling play inferior: play between siblings is just as complex as mother–child play and siblings were just as nurturant and supportive as mothers as well. And sibling playmates are welcome. Polynesian mothers reported that toddlers preferred to play more with their siblings than adults, in part, because young children found the play of older siblings more interesting while parent activities are viewed as boring (Martini and Kirkpatrick, 1992).

Sibling caregiving has benefits too. At the most basic level, recent analyses suggest that the help provided by older siblings (at least three years older) is related to higher



Figure 6.2 In southern Mali, West Africa, older siblings are often caregivers.

Source: Photographer: Line Richter (2011). This photo originally appeared in *Profile Global Health #2*, p.19, University of Copenhagen.

survival rates for the younger siblings (Sear and Mace, 2008). There are other, though less dramatic benefits. The presence of older children in the social world of younger children offers opportunities to learn more advanced skills from their older sibling and peer models. The younger siblings learn not only a variety of motor and physical skills such as running and jumping but other practical skills such as learning to dress themselves, toileting routines as well as a variety of social rules such as handling multiple relationships in a group and how to manage conflict and settle disputes (Weisner, 2008). In contrast to our North American age-segregated society, one of the central features of sibling caregiving in more traditional cultures is the mixture of children of a wide range of ages in the sibling and peer caregiving and play groups (Rogoff, 2003). Unlike studies of the links between birth order and intelligence in the United States, which suggest that intellectual achievement is lower for later born children who primarily interact with siblings rather than parents (Herrera et al., 2007), cross-cultural evidence suggests that when sibling caregiving is culturally normative, children do not show these intellectual deficits (Rogoff, 2003). In cultures where child and sibling caregiving is common, it is generally carried out in collaboration with adults present who ensure that the experience is competence building for both the child and the sibling caregiver (East, 2010). Moreover, this caregiving builds strong bonds between siblings which is seen later when adult siblings act as supplementary coparents for their nieces and nephews. As cross-cultural scholars (East and Weisner, 2009; Rogoff, 2003; Weisner, 2008) argue, the routes and processes of learning vary across cultures but the outcomes are similarly positive in producing culturally competent children and adults.

Beyond the Nuclear Family: Grandparents as Caregivers

As we saw in the case of the Na of China, in some cultures, relatives such as aunts, uncles, or grandparents share caregiving responsibilities with members of the nuclear family. Are grandparents important? In many cultures, grandparents, especially grandmothers, play a significant caregiving role either as a supplementary figure who occasionally provides direct care or in cases where the mother is unavailable as the main custodial caregiver (Hayslip and Kaminski, 2008; Smith and Drew, 2002).

Even in our own society the number of custodial grandparents or at least coparenting mother–grandparent dyads has increased in recent years (Pew Research Center, 2010). The role of grandparents has been widely recognized by anthropologists and other cross-cultural scholars who have examined family relationships in traditional societies. We will explore these issues and then ask whether grandparents are still relevant in our own contemporary society.

In all cultures, grandparents influence children's development directly through the quality of their interactions with their grandchildren in their roles as occasional caregivers, playmates, advisors, and support figures or indirectly through emotional and financial support, guidance, and child-rearing advice that they provide their adult children in their parenting role (Smith and Drew, 2002; Tinsley and Parke, 1984). As we saw earlier in Chapter 2, grandparents can be attachment figures for their grandchildren and function as an additional source of emotional security for the developing infant and child. These close ties often emerge from the grandmother's part-time or custodial caregiving role. Observational studies reveal that grandmothers are competent caregivers and engaging playmates. For example, in a study of seven-month old American infants, Tinsley and Parke (1987) observed that grandmothers who engaged in more stimulating and engaging behavior with their grandchildren and infants who had more contact with their grandparents had higher cognitive development (Bayley Mental Development Index scores). Nor is it simply cognitive development that is related to grandmother availability and support. In his studies of hormonal reactions to stress among poor children on the Caribbean island of Dominica, anthropologist Mark Flinn found that access to kin networks enhance children's ability to regulate stress (as measured by cortisol, a biological stress marker), which, in turn enhanced social competence (Flinn et al., 2011). Children with a rich network of kin are able to escape stressful family situations (e.g., marital discord) by visiting a nearby relative such as a grandmother. Kin connections are even related to physical development. Among the poor children in Dominica, those with many kin relationships are taller and heavier than their peers with fewer kin ties (Flinn et al., 1996). Even more dramatic is the finding that grandparents, particularly maternal grandmothers, exert a positive effect on the survival rates of infants and children in traditional societies. In an analysis of 12 traditional societies, Rebecca Sear and Ruth Mace (2008) found that the presence of grandmothers was positively linked with higher child survival.

There are several circumstances under which grandmothers are important players on the cooperative parenting scene. Grandmothers matter more when the mother is inexperienced or has fewer older children with whom to share the caregiving responsibilities (Hawkes et al., 1998). They are particularly helpful at developmental transition points such as weaning (Biese, 2005; Sear and Mace, 2008).

Weaning is a dangerous time for children. It increases their exposure to pathogens in food and is often associated with the arrival of a younger sibling, when mothers divert their attention away from weaned children and to their new babies. Maternal grandmothers may be stepping in to protect children from the dangers associated with this stage of childhood (Sear and Mace, 2008, p. 10).

And it is not just any grandmother. In our own culture, maternal grandmothers have more contact with their grandchildren than do paternal grandmothers (Cox, 2007; Pollet, Nelissen, and Nettle, 2009) and the grandchildren notice: they feel closer to their maternal than their paternal grandparents (Dubas, 2001; Sheehan and Petrovic, 2008). Anthropologists show us that this modern pattern has deep historical roots in older cultures. Maternal grandmothers are more reliably associated with childhood survival than paternal grandmothers (Sear and Mace, 2008). Several factors may account for this discrepancy between paternal and maternal kin. Since females tend to reproduce at a younger age than males, paternal grandmothers are older than their maternal counterparts and therefore less able to assist. Maternal gatekeeping may play a role as well and mothers may simply be more comfortable and feel closer to their own mother than their mother-in-law. As a result the maternal grandmother is allowed more access to her grandchildren. Perhaps for some, it is their relative uncertainty about their level of genetic relatedness to their patrilineal descendants as a result of the lingering issue that their son may not be the biological father of their grandchild that decreases paternal grandmother involvement (Sear and Mace, 2008). Therefore, sticking with the offspring of daughters and sisters is the safest strategy of ensuring that one's genes are being protected and passed along. However, in some cultures such as rural Greece where paternal lineage is paramount, there is greater involvement of paternal than maternal grandparents (Pashos, 2000). Hence, cultural norms as well as evolutionary considerations may play a role in determining contact patterns.

What about grandfathers? On average grandfathers are much less important to children's survival in traditional societies. According to Sear and Mace (2008), 83% of maternal grandfathers had no effect on child survival, though 17% had a positive effect. Paternal grandfathers had either no effect (50%) or a negative one (25%) while only 25% had a positive effect on child survival. Perhaps grandfathers help in material ways but clearly not in ways that are as effective as their wives. However, although their role may be limited in traditional societies, it is too soon to give up on grandfathers.

Are grandparents relevant in our own society? Coall and Hertwig (2011) recently offered this thoughtful reflection:

Because of substantial increases in human life expectancy in industrial societies, grandparents and grandchildren have more shared lifespan than ever before (Murphy and Grundy, 2003). Consequently, grandparents have unprecedented opportunity to invest in their grandchildren. Simultaneously, however, low fertility rates and later ages at first childbirth mean that fewer people are becoming grandparents, and those who do become grandparents have fewer grandchildren. Paradoxically, although extended life span offers more opportunity for grandparents to invest, low childhood mortality rates and low fertility rates mean grandparents' altruistic acts may have less impact than ever before,

when measured on these classic fitness indicators. However, this does not mean that grandparental investments in industrialized societies are wasted. With reduced mortality and fertility, the resources invested in children (e.g., education) have increased exponentially to ensure that they can fare well in employment and mating markets (Borgerhoff Mulder, 1998). Thus, the need for grandparents to invest their time, money, and affection in their grandchildren may actually be stronger than ever. Ironically, there may be a good fit between the high levels of investment required by grandchildren in industrialized societies and grandparents having fewer grandchildren in whom to invest their resources; benefits may materialize more than before on less tangible dimensions such as psychological adjustment and cognitive ability (p. 93).

The role of contemporary grandparents has been extensively examined and most accounts portray grandparents as actively involved in their grandchildren's lives. The majority of grandparents have contact with their grandchildren once or twice a month, according to surveys in the United States and Great Britain (Smith and Drew, 2002). In modern times, grandparents often play recreational, playful, advisory, or confidant roles rather than being critical contributors to the child's survival. Nonetheless, these contributions are viewed by both grandparents and grandchildren and their parents as significant and enriching experiences which serve to bind the generations together (Smith and Drew, 2002). There is considerable variability in the amount and type of contact between grandparents and their adult children and grandchildren due to geographical proximity, age, and health of grandparents, gender of grandparent and grandchild, and lineage (Tinsley and Parke, 1984). For many contemporary families, even in "ideal" families such as the Evans, geographical separation often limits children's contact with their grandparents.

Do grandparents play a unique role in children's development? In an examination of grandparents' impact on adolescents academic outcomes, economist Linda Loury (2008) found that grandparents' education made a difference in whether their grandchildren attended college even after controlling for the effects of the nuclear family. She found that when grandfathers had completed high school, their grandsons but not their granddaughters were 13% more likely to attend college. In contrast, the granddaughters of grandmothers who had a high school diploma were 10% more likely to attend college. While the differential gender effects of grandfathers having a greater impact on their grandsons and grandmothers on their granddaughters are interesting, the important message is that grandparents have a separate and added influence on their grandchildren after taking into account parental influences.

Just as we saw in traditional cultures, in our own culture, grandparents may be particularly influential in high-risk family environments such as poor or single-parent families or at times of family transitions such as divorce, parental incarceration, an adolescent pregnancy, or economic hardship. For example, Jackie Fuller, the adolescent mother who we met in the opening chapter benefits from her mother's help in caring for her daughter Elle. The depression or physical illness of a family member especially a custodial parent are other circumstances where grandparent aid is particularly important (Coall and Hertwig, 2010). For example, a study in Bulgaria (Botcheva and Feldman, 2004) found that perceived economic pressure during an economic downturn was linked with harsher parenting which, in turn, was associated with higher levels of depression among adolescents. However, the depression of these

adolescents was reduced when there was a supportive grandparent in the household who played a buffering role. Similarly, among American children, the buffering role of grandparents on children in the presence of a depressed mother even extended into adulthood (Silverstein and Ruiz, 2006). Children who grew up with a depressed mother were less depressed as young adults if they were emotionally close to their grandparents, saw them frequently and viewed them as a source of social support. This work underscores that buffering is not inevitable but depends on the quality of the relationship between the grandparents and the grandchild. Finally, as we will explore in the next chapter, grandparents sometimes become custodial parents as well. And they are well prepared to take on this role since grandparents – grandmothers and grandfathers – are able to nurture and respond to children’s needs in a competent manner which reminds us that even in our own era grandparents can function as custodial parents in time of need (Tinsley and Parke, 1987). Although the roles of grandparents may have changed across time, even in our own era, they are an important part of the socialization mix by providing direct and indirect support to parents and their grandchildren.

However, grandparents can be a negative influence on both grandchildren and their parents. The grandparent may undermine the parental role by overindulgence (“Oh, he is my grandson so I can spoil him”). Or grandparents can undermine a parent by acquiescing to a child’s request which a parent has turned down (“When Mom says no, ask Grandma”). Listen to this tale of interference:

“Oh, you’re being too hard on Bobby. It’s okay Bobby. Grandma says you don’t need a nap.” I look at my mother like she is from another planet. Are you kidding me? Is this the same person that raised me? “No, Bobby does need a nap,” I say and lead my crying son into the bedroom. After a few minutes of kicking and throwing a fit, the exhausted child fell into a peaceful and well-needed sleep (Suttor, 2008).

And criticism of the parent’s parenting style and behavior standards (“we were strict with you when you were this age but now you let her get away with everything”) can undermine parental effectiveness and confidence.

Many of these issues can lead to serious conflict between grandparents and their adult children, especially when the grandparent is a coparent living in the same household with the parent or parents (Moore and Brooks-Gunn, 2002). However, a variety of factors including economic well-being, the age of the mother, and the health and age of the grandmother will increase or reduce the level of conflict. For example, conflict is less likely when the grandmother is a coparent with a relatively young and inexperienced mother rather than a more confident older mother (Chase-Lansdale, Brooks-Gunn, and Zamsky, 1994).

And some grandparent–grandchild relationships are unhealthy and characterized by lack of involvement, conflict, and nonsupportiveness. In a minority of cases especially grandfather–granddaughter interactions can lead to sexual abuse as well (Smith and Drew, 2002). As in all family relationships the quality of the processes that characterize the interactions is paramount. Just as families are better off if divorce reduces maltreatment on the part of a parent so it is in the case that reducing contact with troublesome grandparents is advisable as well. Not just any grandparent will do; a warm, sensitive, and responsive one who respects the parent’s authority and household routines, treats

their grandchildren appropriately, and provides support when needed is the type that is going to be a valuable member of the cooperative socialization network.

The influence of grandparents even reaches across generations. Grandparents teach their own children lessons about child rearing by how they raise them. Harsh parenting by the grandparent generation is sometimes repeated by the next generation and, in turn, the grandchildren may suffer the consequences. In one study, young parents who had been treated by their own parents in a hostile and angry fashion when they were adolescents were more likely to be hostile with their own children a decade later. In turn, the more they were treated in a hostile manner, the more toddler grandchildren were disobedient, aggressive, and withdrawn, especially children with emotionally reactive temperaments (Scaramella and Conger, 2003).

Grandparents across time and cultures have played important, even critical roles in the matrix of caregivers and support figures upon which families and children rely for survival and well-being. In recognition of this historical tenet, we need to elevate our appreciation of the significant role of grandparents can and do play in the lives of families. Parents and children can potentially benefit by giving grandparents along with other extended kin a clear and deserved place in our broadened view of families as cooperative ventures consisting of multiple players beyond the nuclear (i.e., “ideal”) family form. Next, we turn to other extended but often neglected kin – aunts and uncles.

Beyond the Nuclear Family: Aunts and Uncles

Are aunts and uncles helpful? In many cultures aunts and uncles play important and helpful roles in the socialization process. For example, Kipsigi children in Kenya do better if they have either paternal or maternal uncles (Borgerhoff Mulder, 2007). However, Chewa children in Malawi have lower survival in the presence of maternal aunts but only in households in which women own resources. In households in which men own resources, maternal aunts protect against child mortality (Sear and Mace, 2008). Nineteenth-century Mormon children benefited from maternal uncles and both maternal and paternal aunts (Heath, 2003). On the other hand, Venetian children apparently neither gain nor suffer from access to aunts or uncles (Derosas, 2002). In a study of child-care arrangements in Efe hunter-gatherers, Ivey (2000) found that children were frequently looked after by individuals other than their mothers, but these allocarers were rarely other women who had nursing infants of their own. Childless females may be more available and more willing to assist in care of their nieces and nephews since they are not responsible for children of their own. Just as we saw in the case of grandparents, maternal uncles and aunts were viewed more favorably by parents than paternal aunts and uncles (Gaulin, McBurney, and Brakeman-Wartell, 1997; McBurney et al. 2002). This is consistent with the paternity uncertainty hypothesis that evolutionary theorists have invoked in the case of grandparents as well. In general, individuals seem to invest more in kin associated with the maternal line.

Although it is clear that aunts and uncles are important figures in other cultures, are they relevant in our contemporary society? In North American culture, aunts and uncles have been viewed as “the forgotten kin” (Milardo, 2010), an observation which is supported by the fact that less than 1% of the research literature on family

relationships is focused on collateral kin such as aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews (Fingerman and Hay, 2002). This is surprising because people rate these collateral kin ties as relatively important and just behind spouses, children, parents, and siblings in importance (Fingerman and Hay, 2002). For example, parents, spouses, and children received a rating of 8 (on a 10 point scale), siblings a 7.5 and aunts and uncles a rating of 6. Most of us think that our collateral kin are more central in our lives than do family scholars.

Before we explore the various roles that aunts and uncles play in children's lives, let's address the question "do aunts and uncles make a unique contribution beyond the nuclear family"? Whether their impact is unique and distinct from parental influence seems likely in view of other work on nonfamily mentors (Rhodes, 2002). In fact, recent evidence suggests that there is added value contributed by aunts and uncles to adolescent educational involvement even after controlling for the effects of the nuclear family. Specifically, the level of schooling attained by aunts was a significant factor in whether their niece attended college (Loury, 2006). The number of aunts who were high-school dropouts significantly lowered the probability of their niece attending college while the number of aunts who were high-school graduates increased college attendance by their niece. Uncles' educational level was linked with how well their nephews performed in high school tests and their college attendance. The number of uncles who graduated from high school significantly raised age 14 test scores for nephews and increased their likelihood of attending college. Uncles had larger effects on nephews, while aunts had larger effects on nieces. Aunts and uncles do indeed make a unique contribution to children's development. Next we turn to the ways in which this influence is achieved by examining the myriad of roles that these kin play in the lives of their adult brothers and sisters and their children.

In his recent book, "The Forgotten Kin: Aunts and Uncles," Robert Milardo (2010) has documented, in an in-depth qualitative interview study, the family roles of over 100 aunts and uncles in New Zealand and the United States. He shows that these kin play a variety of roles in the lives of both their nieces and nephews as well as in the lives of their adult siblings. They both complement and supplement the roles of parents in children's lives, they serve as third parties with unique outsider perspectives and even act as surrogate parents or as second mothers or fathers. Here is a sample of the voices of aunts and uncles that illustrate the myriad roles that they play in family life.

Aunt Denise, who is single and childless and who provided additional care for her twin nieces, especially when they were infants noted that "The infants had irregular sleeping hours and somebody would have to get some sleep in that house. So I would go over for a few hours. It was a kind of changing of the guard" (Milardo, 2010, p. 72). Mary Winston, a single-mother-by-choice who we met at the start of the book is another example of a mother who relies on her sister, Aunt Janice, to help out with her son Sam when she is out of town.

They not only help parents in child care but provide alternate sources of information and act as confidants, especially around sensitive issues that may be "too hot" for parents to handle such as sex and drugs. For example, one uncle described counseling his nephew about experimenting with drugs by sharing his own experiences, good and bad, as a way of providing perspective on the issue but in a nonjudgmental way. It goes beyond touchy topics and includes educational or occupational advice as well. Another uncle, a university librarian, recounted helping his nephew with a term paper

that was beyond the expertise of his parents. Rather than feeling jealous or violated by this assistance, many parents condone and even welcome the help. Aunt Harriett captured this appreciation of the importance of aunts and uncles for children in the following comment: “It is nice to know that her sons and daughters can have these other adult supportive relationships” (Milardo, 2010, p. 73).

Aunts and uncles are especially important during times of family conflict and when communication is strained between parents and children; these alternative adult figures can step in as confidants and buffers. As one niece said: “my aunt was more of a confidant than my mother ever could be” (Milardo, 2010, p. 74). Not surprisingly, aunts and uncles often play a larger role when their relative is single or undergoing a divorce or separation. According to Aunt Susan, “My sister struggled and had to work and work just to take care of Nika and her two brothers. Nika used to beg me to come and take them out and have fun. And that’s what I did when they were little. We’d go camping and shopping” (Milardo, 2010, p. 75). In some cases, the aunt or uncle function as a second parent due to the absence of one or both parents or as a member of an extended multigenerational family household including an aunt or uncle, a mother and a grandparent. Or these relatives may provide temporary housing in times of parent–adolescent turmoil or parental unavailability due to illness or incarceration. In these cases, children often describe their aunts and uncles as second moms or dads. This type of family work is similar to the role played by grandparents, especially grandmothers who often provide supplementary child care for single mothers (Hayslip and Patrick, 2006; Milardo, 2010). At the same time this does not imply that the types of relationships between adult siblings and between parents and grandparents are similar. Age and generational differences characterize grandparent–parent relationships. In contrast, aunts and uncles have very different relationships with their siblings since they are close in age, share a distinct developmental history including their childhoods and major milestones such as graduations, marriages, parenthood, and the aging of their parents. In contrast to the grandparent–parent relationships, siblings are more peer-like in their relationships (Milardo, 2010).

The ways that aunts and uncles participate in the lives of their nieces and nephews shift as the children develop. While direct child-care assistance is welcome in the early years as the child develops, these relatives help with issues of identity development and conflict management during the adolescent years. And the parents themselves benefit from their siblings who can provide social, emotional, and material support as well as being confidants (Milardo, 2010).

Aunts and uncles focus on different issues with their nieces and nephews. While only 19% of uncles and nephews discussed relationship issues, 48% of aunts and nieces talk about romantic partners and sexuality issues. As one uncle put it: “That’s not something I’d really want to get involved with. How somebody selects a person (romantic partner) is pretty much their own taste” (Milardo, 2010, p. 106). In contrast, aunts provide relationship advice and guidance more regularly and not only about boyfriends and sexuality but about marriage and breakups too. As one aunt told her niece about a boyfriend who was “being weird”: “dump him and move on” (Milardo, 2010, p. 109). Of course, children continue to rely on their parents’ counsel but often turn to aunts and uncles for a fresh and perhaps a more detached and objective perspective. Just as with parents, nieces and nephews sometimes accept and other times reject the advice of these extended family members. Much

more needs to be learned about when aunts and uncles are influential and when they are rebuffed.

Sometimes aunts are more than just aunts and designated by their relatives as Godmothers, a practice that is common in but not restricted to Catholic communities. Instead of the more informal relationship that often characterizes aunt–niece relationships, the godmother role carries with it both more responsibility and more long term commitment (Falicov, 1998). As one godmother saw it: “I took it as a commitment that I would always look out for my niece,” while another said “It is a promise that I will always protect my niece’s well-being throughout her life” (Milardo, 2010, p. 111). Nor is it just women who play this role. In the next chapter, we will examine the role of male and female compadres and comadres who are coparents in Latino culture and serve as guides and mentors for children and youth.

Together, these observations illustrate the variety of roles that these “forgotten kin” play in the lives of nuclear families and dispel the myth that families are isolated and self-sufficient. Finally, these findings are even more striking since the Milardo sample was largely White non-Hispanic, not the African American or Hispanic families who we would expect to show porous boundaries between the nuclear and extended family.

Beyond Family: Nonrelatives as Caregivers

Most challenging to our western ideal family form is the fact that in many cultures nonrelatives in the community either assume or share the tasks typically performed by parents in our culture. The caregiving unit is no longer just the family but the community. In West African Cameroon, unborn babies are viewed as the property of parents but after birth, children are no longer solely a parental responsibility but are the responsibility of their extended kin group (Nsamenang, 2004).

Here is one example from Polynesia where the community is the caregiver

Children often grow up in an environment where many adults and children have responsibility for their upbringing in enduring social networks (Martini and Kirkpatrick, 1992). Children belong to the community and everyone is expected to comfort, instruct, and correct them. Within the extended family, a new baby belongs to the family, and adults all care for, teach, and discipline the child as it grows. Children have “many laps” to sit in and many models of adult behavior. Often children are adopted and raised by kin other than their biological parents in a system in which children are shared and help to strengthen ties among households (Rogoff, 2003, p. 129).

Nor is this an isolated example. Among the Efe pygmies who reside in the Ituri forest of Zaire, child care is shared between mothers and women in the community (Ivey, Morelli, and Tronick, 2005; Tronick, Morelli, and Ivey, 1992). As soon as the baby is born the infant is attended by a group of midwives who had assisted with the delivery. As the infant develops so does the network of caregivers. When the mother returns to work, child care is shared among members of her work group. As early as 3 weeks the infant spends 39% of their time in physical contact with community members other than their mothers and this increases to 60% of the time by 18 weeks. The average Efe infant is cared for by 14 different individuals and, in some cases, as many as 24 different community members (Tronick, Morelli, and Winn, 1987).

Among the Aka of the Central African Republic, we find another example of multiple or cooperative caregiving. As in the case of the Efe, members of the community share in the caregiving tasks, including other women in the community who even nurse others' newborns and young infants. For example, one to four month olds are held by other adults about 60% of the time and may interact with as many as seven different caregivers a day (Hewlett and Lamb, 2005). Fathers and mothers do the rest but it is clearly a cooperative, community wide venture. The active sharing of caregiving increases a sense of belongingness among members of the community as well as protects the infant by ensuring their care even when the mother is working or unavailable.

As anthropologist Meredith Small (1998) notes, this opportunity to interact with multiple caregivers in cultures such as the Efe and the Aka has advantages for children beyond merely being ensured of adequate care:

Early on, Efe infants experience and presumably learn all about the interpersonal connections (of the Efe social system); they quickly learn social skills by navigating a series of coordinated and miscoordinated interactions while being held and cared for by several adults. Whereas a Western child experiences most of its interactions from one or two adults – thereby placing excessive demands for interaction on one or two people – the Efe child (who experiences multiple caregivers) will presumably be more socially adept at interactions with a multiple of others, and will probably be less demanding in general (p. 216).

Being reared in a cooperative community caregiving network is not only associated with more social and emotional advancement for children but decreases the chances of being physically abused as well. A network of supportive others not only lowers the stress of parenting by providing relief from the constant demands of parental responsibility but these individuals can provide child rearing advice and guidance that leads to better management of child-related conflict and, in turn, lowers the risk of abuse (Cicchetti and Toth, 2006). A network of supportive community members can intervene early and prevent disciplinary actions from escalating to abusive levels. Moreover, cooperative caregiving cultures may place higher value on children which may act as a further deterrent to abuse (Small, 2001). Finally, cross-cultural evidence suggests that children living in these child rearing contexts are more likely to survive and reach adulthood than children in less community based arrangements (Hrdy, 2009). In our own society, families such as the Millers who rely on child care and after-school programs to allow them both to work, of course, understand the value of “outsourcing” child care duties to others in the community. We are clearly rediscovering useful lessons from other times and places.

Variability in the Distribution of Caregiving Responsibilities

Family organization and the degree to which different kin and nonkin beyond the parents play a role in caregiving is best viewed as dynamic and flexible; the distribution of care changes in response to a variety of ecological factors. As anthropologists (Konner, 2005; Valeggia, 2009) have claimed there is a continuum of care arrangements among both our foraging and hunter gatherer ancestors.

This spectrum takes us from no use of allomothers among the Aché of Eastern Paraguay, to intermediate use among the Hadza of Tanzania and the Hiwi of the Venezuelan llanos, to the Efé of the Ituri Forest, the most extreme example of allomothering in a foraging population. Among the Aché, childcare seems to take priority over all other maternal activities, including foraging. Aché mothers carry infants and toddlers all the time; they even sleep in a sitting position, cross-legged with the infant on their laps (Hill and Hurtado, 1996). In contrast, Efé infants as young as three weeks old spend almost 40% of their time in physical contact with individuals other than their mothers and by five months of age, babies spend more time with other caregivers than with their own mother (Ivey et al., 2005; Tronick et al., 1987). In between these two extremes we find a whole range of childcare practices (Valeggia, 2009, p. 101).

Several factors have been identified that alter the extent to which cooperative caregiving is prevalent such as number of adult women without children available, density of the setting, the danger level of the environment, fertility and mortality patterns, and sex and age distribution in the social group (Hewlett and Lamb, 2005). The degree of use of others as allomothers would be directly related to the availability of caretakers. As expected, the more women without children in the group, the higher their rate of fulfilling this alternative mother role. Residence arrangements matter too. Meehan (2005) found that among the Aka, other females provided more care when the couple resided with maternal kin while fathers provided more care when they resided with paternal kin. Finally, and no surprise to contemporary parents, flexibility in schedules and degree of leisure time in each society influenced the pattern of care. Multiple caregiving arrangements are more prevalent in the hunter-gatherer societies who have more leisure time, than in the more rigorously scheduled farmer/herder groups (Hewlett and Lamb, 2005). The local ecology affects the type of childcare pattern as well. Cooperative caregiving of infants and children is less common in more dangerous environments. Among the Aché who live in heavily forested areas of Eastern Paraguay, there are many threats to young children (snakes, poisonous insects, jaguars, poor visibility in the underbush, among others) and alloparenting, especially by young siblings is uncommon (Hill and Hurtado, 1996). The use of alternative caregivers such as siblings is more common in less dangerous settings occupied by such groups as the Efé (Ivey et al., 2005). The identity of alternative caregivers vary too. Female kin, particularly grandmothers and sisters, are more frequently engaged as caretakers than other sex and age categories (Valeggia, 2009). These cross-cultural examples support our earlier argument (Chapter 2) that the ingredients of care/stimulation can be delivered by a variety of different individuals independent not only of agent gender but age and/or kinship ties as well. Finally, alternative caregivers are more involved as the child develops, in part due to the decrease in breast feeding as children grow older. However, as we noted earlier, in some societies such as the Efé, even breastfeeding of infants is a task shared by women in the community.

To further illustrate that caregiving arrangements are adaptive, dynamic, and responsive to changing conditions, consider the impact of a shift from rural to a more urban environment on caregiving patterns among the Toba, a foraging group in Formosa, Northern Argentina. When some of their members moved from rural to more urban environments, there was a drop in the amount of cooperative caregiving arrangements. Compared to those who remained in their historic rural setting where infants were cared for by others about 60% of the time, cooperative infant care was

present only 20% of the time for the market economy-based urban-dwelling Toba (Valeggia, 2009). Identification of conditions that would encourage, support, and sustain cooperative caregiving in contemporary contexts is a critical step if the lessons from the past are going to be successfully adopted.

Cautionary Tales: The Israeli Kibbutz and American Communes as Extreme Forms of Cooperative Childcare

To provide a balanced discussion of this issue, some social experiments in cooperative child rearing that have not succeeded such as the American Commune movement and to some degree the Israeli Kibbutz merit review in order to better specify the circumstances under which cooperative social child-rearing efforts can be effective (Van IJzendoorn and Sagi-Schwartz, 2008). The importance of maintaining the central role of the family while at the same time providing a supportive social context for families and children is the lesson from this work. If child socialization as a cooperative venture involving a network of kin and nonkin rather than a strictly nuclear family affair has been successful and adaptive in other cultures, I argue that we need to give serious consideration to its utility and applicability for our own culture.

A well-known illustration of modern multiple caregiving comes from the Israeli Kibbutz in which children are reared in a “children’s house” with professional caregivers. Parents have regular contact with their children on a daily basis but most of the children’s activities take place in the children’s house. In many traditional Kibbutzim, as early as a few months after birth, the children followed a communal sleeping arrangement which involved sleeping in bedrooms shared by three or four other children rather than in their parents residence. This is a highly unusual arrangement: a survey of 183 societies found that none had a sleeping arrangement in which children are away from their parents (Barry and Paxton, 1971). Sagi and his colleagues (1984, 2005) compared the infant–mother attachment patterns of infants reared in the kibbutz in which communal sleeping in children’s houses was practiced with infants reared by their urban parents in nuclear family arrangements. They found that only 59% of the kibbutz children were securely attached to their mothers compared to 72% of the infants who were residing with their nuclear family. To determine if the communal sleeping arrangement may have contributed to this pattern, Sagi et al. (1994) compared two groups of cooperatively cared for children: kibbutz children who were reared in communal sleeping arrangements and other kibbutz children where family-based sleeping practices had been established. While only 48% of the children in the communal sleeping group were securely attached to their mother, 80% of the children with family-based sleeping arrangements had secure infant–mother attachments. This suggests that children who are in communal care are similar to those in more traditional parental care arrangements if there is the opportunity to sleep in the parental household (Sagi-Schwartz and Aviezer, 2005). Moreover, the involvement of multiple caregivers does not negatively affect the quality of the infant–mother relationship. As we noted earlier (chapter 2), a similar finding is evident in studies of children in child care (Clarke-Stewart and Allhusen, 2005). Further work by these Israeli investigators suggested that when children are in cooperative caregiving, the relationships that they form with their professional caregiver as well as with their parents are both contributors

to the child's socioemotional adjustment. They compared the predictive power of the network of infant's attachment relationships (i.e., attachments to mothers, fathers and professional caregiver) with the infant-mother attachment alone. The extended network was the best predictor of children's social functioning in kindergarten (van IJzendoorn, Sagi, and Lambermon, 1992). At later ages, the network continued to contribute but to a lesser degree (Sagi-Schwartz and Aviezer, 2005) and instead the infant-mother relationship even among cooperatively reared children emerged as the most robust predictor of children's functioning (Van IJzendoorn and Sagi-Schwartz, 2008). This work is a further reminder that multiple caregiving is a workable alternative to a more restricted nuclear family form but that variations such as communal sleeping arrangements that interfere with or undermine the quality of the parent-child relationship may have unwanted negative effects on the child. Natural experiments such as these studies of variations in Kibbutzim child care arrangements give us insights into both the feasibility and the limitations of alternative child-care models.

Another natural experiment that is instructive is the commune movement in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. In a 25-year study comparing 150 middle-class, two-parent married couples and 150 counterculture families, anthropologist Tom Weisner (1986) tracked their children's school achievement, peer relations, behavior problems, drug use, as well as values and social attitudes. The countercultural families had unconventional family configurations – single parents, cohabitating couples, and couples in communes or other group arrangements. Although the alternative family forms varied, a subset were committed to sharing of parental responsibility for child care. However, as often seen in western contexts as well as traditional societies, parents remained the primary caregivers. As Weisner observed “such parents made a real effort to extend the caretaking network and ‘share out’ the child to some extent with a circle of friends and like spirited kin and mates, yet retained American ideals of intense parental bonding” (1986, p. 203). How did children fare being reared in these more communal family forms? Weisner concluded that “contrary to some who had dire predictions regarding the children of the nonconventional or ‘hippie’ families, for the most part they seem to be doing as well or better than our comparison group” (1986, p. 205). In spite of their efforts and the generally positive outcomes for the children, these types of countercultural arrangements are often short-lived since they are out of step with the norms and demands of the mainstream culture. In contrast, in cultures where communal approaches to parenting are more normative, such as the Aka, the long-term stability of these caregiving strategies is more likely.

As both of these examples illustrate, the parent-child relationship is central and important for the healthy development of the child; parents are not easily replaced by a cooperative or communal child-rearing arrangement. However, supplementary caregivers can be beneficial for both parents and children and need not undermine the quality of the parent-child bond. The “ideal” family form is clearly not the only viable form for the care and socialization of children.

Reflections

This brief tour of other cultures reminds Westerners that our focus on the “ideal” family form is not shared by many other cultures. Instead this tour indicates that cooperative child care is, in fact, not a deviant arrangement but a commonly practiced

form by families in a myriad of other cultures. Moreover, as we argued earlier in Chapter 2, there is much more interchangeability among caregivers than our rather rigid views about the correct roles for mothers and fathers assume. In some cases, no fathers are actively involved but mother's male relatives are part of the caregiving network. Whether they provide similar or different roles than fathers in nuclear families is not fully understood but the children growing up under these social conditions develop normally. In other cases, there are multiple fathers who contribute to the support of the child instead of a single father; although a clear departure from our cultural view of the "ideal" family form, these children also thrive. And other family actors beyond mothers and fathers are involved in child care including siblings and extended family members. Their involvement benefits children by broadening their social-emotional experience and guaranteeing protection in case of parental incapacitation or loss. And nonrelatives commonly play active roles as caregivers in many cultures as part of a commitment to cooperative, community-based caregiving. Recognition of the value of a cooperative approach to care need not weaken or replace the parent-child relationship; instead, the parent-child unit and child care by others coexist and together can enhance the child's well-being. These cross-cultural examples present a major challenge to our narrow definition of the "ideal" family form and at the very least remind us that this minority view is neither universally endorsed nor necessarily in the best interests of Western children and parents. Much can be learned from these cross-cultural examples as we struggle to accommodate the changing roles of parents and families in our own society.