The Role of Culture and Context in Child Maltreatment: Perspectives of Risk and Protection in Diverse Societies

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Introduction

The field of knowledge concerned with risk, wellbeing, and protection of children is rooted primarily in universal developmental theories, and it is from these theories that definitions of risk, abuse, and neglect are derived. The cross-cultural literature, however, is fraught with examples of child rearing practices that can be classified differently, either as normative or as abusive or neglectful, by different cultural groups. Although the ecological perspective stresses the significant impact of culture and context on understanding risk, wellbeing, and protection, the precise pathways and mechanisms by which culture and context influence the definition, etiology, prevention, and treatment of child maltreatment remain somewhat elusive. The proposed panel incorporates the presentation of four studies conducted at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem's NEVET Greenhouse of Context-Informed Research and Training for Children in Need. All of the studies apply a context-informed approach to the study of perspectives of risk and protection among parents from different communities in Israel, including the Ultraorthodox community, Bedouin living in unrecognized villages in the Naqab, and immigrants from the Former Soviet Union and Ethiopia. Together, the papers highlight the importance of listening to parental voices in diverse societies, which may differ from the views of professionals, and stress the need for a context-informed perspective in designing prevention and intervention programs for children at risk and their families in diverse society.

Keywords: Risk, Culture, Context, Diversity, Multiculturalism

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Ultraorthodox Perspectives of Child Risk and Protection


The ultraorthodox community is a close-knit community characterized by a clear and distinct set of values and norms. Widespread effective social support networks within the community bring with them many protective factors for children, as well as numerous factors of risk. The main goal of the presented study is to generate a comprehensive understanding of ultraorthodox perspectives of risk and protection in the ultraorthodox community's everyday surroundings. Specifically, the study aims to shed light on local definitions of “risk,” “safety,” “neglect,” and “abuse”; to explore explanations of etiology; to identify help-seeking behaviors; and to assemble ideas regarding effective prevention and intervention. The data was collected using in-depth interviews with ultraorthodox Litvak mothers (n=15) and fathers (n=15) in Israel. Thematic analysis of the interviews suggest unique views regarding children's risks including perceptions of corporal punishment, the strong role of parental feelings of responsibility in ensuring children's wellbeing and preventing abuse, and an emphasis on the emotional dimension of abuse. In addition, the concept of “spiritual risk”—referring to the negative influences of society and the permissive environment on children and adolescents – was found to be a significant risk in the eyes of ultraorthodox parents.

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The Definition of Risk, Prevention, and Intervention Among Bedouin Parents from Unrecognized Villages in the Naqab: A Context-Informed Perspective


Caregivers are rarely asked about their perceptions of risk and their ideas for its prevention. Through context-informed ecological lenses, the current study examines perceptions of Bedouin parents living in six unrecognized villages in the Naqab region of southern Israel. Its findings illuminate the importance of parental risk definitions in the context of political conflict, tradition, religion, and gender roles among families experiencing a cultural transition from nomadic to sedentary life. Data was collected by means of two focus groups (separate groups for men and women) and 33 in-depth interviews with Bedouin mothers of young infants and was subject to qualitative thematic analysis exploring reality as perceived by the study participants. The findings demonstrate that Bedouin parents are aware of a wide range of risks to child well-being and development, including: individual characteristics and the child's immediate environment (microsystem); relationships in the child's life (mesosystem); physical elements of the environment (exosystem); sociopolitical risks (macrosystem); and risks related to historical events (chronosystem). Despite the numerous risk factors, most of the families have demonstrated an ability not only to survive and to cope in harsh conditions but have utilized the opportunity for change, growth, and development. Resilience factors include familial ties, extended family support, support of the community and the tribe, and religion.
"Children at Risk": Perceptions of Immigrant Parents from the Former Soviet Union in Israel on Risk, Prevention, and Intervention


Immigration is a complex phenomenon. Families who have experienced a transition between cultural contexts are of special interest because they demonstrate how conceptions of parenting and related issues can be modified in the process of negotiating between cultures. The present study documents the perceptions of immigrant mothers and fathers from the former Soviet Union (FSU) in Israel regarding risk for children, children at risk, prevention, and intervention. The research was conducted using qualitative methodology through semi-structured interviews with immigrant mothers (n=25) and fathers (n=15). The parents were interviewed about their perceptions of "children at risk" and "risk for children" and were asked to define risk from developmental, physical, social, and emotional perspectives. Participants were also asked to express their views about the causes of risk for children and their proposals for prevention and intervention programs. Preliminary findings suggest that immigrant parents regard primary responsibility for risk to children as resting with the family unit and that this population's perceptions and definitions of risk reflect processes of preservation and change, both of which are typical in contexts of immigration.

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Risk, Prevention, and Intervention among Ethiopian Mothers in Israel: A Context-Informed Perspective


This study examines perceptions of risk from a cross-cultural perspective among mothers from the Ethiopian community in Israel – a community that is currently in the process of cultural transition. The gaps between Israeli culture and these women's culture of origin intensified their difficulties coping with integration into Israeli society. This study is an effort to address the need for knowledge about childrearing within the Ethiopian community in Israel and documents existing definitions of risk within this community.

Children challenge their parents’ acculturation process by constantly raising questions about the extent to which the culture of origin should be preserved and elements of the host culture adopted. This study presents the perceptions of 30 mothers of young infants who were born in Ethiopia and immigrated to Israel as children. Qualitative analysis of the data reflected mothers' perceptions regarding physical and emotional risk, desirable ways of addressing risk to children from the Ethiopian community, recommendations for preventing harmful situations, the possibility that immigration to Israel is a risk factor in itself, and a number of positive impacts of their immigration. The study findings shed light on these women's new world view, which was born in Ethiopia and underwent significant change in Israel.

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