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978-1-107-09329-4 - Debating Early Child Care: The Relationship between Developmental Science and the Media

Robert Crosnoe and Tama Leventhal

Excerpt

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I The child care wars

RYAN: A major study Wendt commissioned of 1,364 children showed a clear link between parents' dumping their kids in day care and an increase in hyperactivity, lack of discipline, and violent behavior.

WILL: Can I see that?

JOSH: You're saying Jeffrey Dahmer's only problem was day care?

RYAN: We're always harping about the root causes of crime and violence.

JOSH: I work for the federal government. I've never heard of Wendt's so-called "major federal study."

WILL: Maybe that's because all TV news programs are produced by mothers who dump their kids in day care.

From "An Khe," the 102nd episode of the West Wing (originally aired February, 2004)

This exchange among the advisors of a fictional Democratic president in an episode of the Emmy-winning television show was referring to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (SECCYD), a birth cohort study of 1,364 US children that began in 1991 and officially ran until 2008. Like many developmental scientists, we knew exactly what the NICHD SECCYD – one of the most famous studies in the field – had found about the effects of early child care on children's development. Moreover, we were particularly attuned to the study at the time because we had just joined the team of investigators (the NICHD Early Child Care Research Network) that ran it. Needless to say, we were nonplussed by the conclusions that these characters were drawing about the study. In reality, the findings from careful analyses of the NICHD SECCYD consistently revealed,

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among other things, small but significant associations between the quantity of time that children spend in nonparental care and their engagement in aggressive behavior, but, rest assured, these statistical patterns do *not* rise to the level of violent behavior or, worse, Dahmer-like cannibalism (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network [ECCRN], 2005a).

This scene in the *West Wing* was clearly written and played for comic effect. We understand that. Still, we could not help but ruminate on it, as, to us, it offered a vivid illustration of the sometimes bumpy process by which scientific research moves into the domain of public discussion. In short, this episode plays into some of the worst fears that scientists have about what happens when they send their research out into the real world. They like to think of research as producing “facts,” but the truth is that the findings of even rigorous empirical studies are usually open to multiple lines of interpretation. When moving from the lab to the television (or the newspaper, blog, magazine, website, etc.), those lines of interpretation can morph into different “messages” that are difficult for scientists to control. As a result, the media sometimes get research dead wrong. Other times, the media do not get research wrong, but do convey it in ways that might not be to the researchers’ liking – playing up or down something that does not warrant it, simplifying something complex, or making too much out of something simple. Still other times, the media get it exactly right but perhaps not the way that the researcher, who has her or his own perspective, wants it. The perils of this translation between research and the media are particularly acute when the stakes are high because the topic is of great importance, highly contested, or controversial in some way (Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997; Semetko & Valkenberg, 2000).

This translational tension is by no means confined to developmental science – the primarily psychological but inherently interdisciplinary study of how humans, especially children, grow, mature, and adapt to their environments (Cairns, Elder, & Costello, 1996; Lerner, 2015). Still, developmental science has all of the ingredients for a high

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degree of tension. It covers a subject – what is healthy, safe, and good for children – about which many people have general lay knowledge (all of them having once been children and many of them now parents) and about which they care very deeply. Developmental science also increasingly seeks to inform federal, state, and local policies and programs relevant to this subject. Perhaps because people care so much, developmental science often generates or is co-opted into fierce debates about controversial topics concerning children and their parents (Dunifon & Wetherington, 2012). Consider, for example, long-standing media-fueled controversies about spanking (is it abuse or effective discipline?), latch-key children (is it neglect or building independence?), and breastfeeding (do the health advantages of breast milk outweigh the convenience of formula?). Continuing this tradition, more recent media-fueled controversies have centered on helicopter parenting (parents should be involved in their children’s lives, but are some *too* involved?), “tiger moms” (are US parents too soft, coddling, and lax?), and, once again, breastfeeding (does the length of time that a woman breastfeeds indicate how good a mother she is?).

Early child care and more specifically the NICHD SECCYD are a ground zero for this potential drama surrounding developmental science. The former has been a core topic of developmental science for many years, and the latter was strongly influenced by developmental science perspectives and run by developmental scientists since its inception. People have strong (and divergent) attitudes about early child care and how it might affect children in the short and long term, making the extensive government intervention into the early child care market and the billions of dollars spent on it hotly contested (Scarr, 1998). As a credible barometer for what those early child care effects on children are and, therefore, how policy should intervene in the child care market, the NICHD SECCYD was sure to be polarizing. (“This study was bound to generate intense emotions,” remarked to us one journalist who covered the study for years, echoing the sentiments of many journalists, not to mention the scientists who ran the study.) For two decades, that polarization has played out in,

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and has been fueled by, the media. No doubt, a major contributor was the fact that the developmental scientists involved in the study, who themselves were often at odds, had no training in working with the media despite support from their federal funders and professional organizations and had to figure it out as they went along.

Consequently, we argue that discussing the long-standing media coverage of early child care research in general and the NICHD SECCYD in particular can shed valuable light on the translation of science into public use, providing a useful service to developmental scientists *and* the media along the way. In this spirit, we drew on theoretical concepts about framing effects from political science to organize a content analysis of US media coverage of the NICHD SECCYD and then supplemented this content analysis with interviews with many “stakeholders” in this particular research–media exchange – the study scientists, representatives of NICHD (Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, the federal agency that funded the NICHD SECCYD), and journalists who directly covered the study or write about family and early child care issues more generally. To provide some context for this discussion of early child care, we compared what we found with the results of parallel analyses of media coverage of the NICHD SECCYD in developed English-speaking countries outside the US and then with the results of similar analyses of the media coverage of another controversial subject of development science – corporal punishment, or spanking – in the US. Doing so revealed the ways in which the specific case of early child care generalized (or not) across national lines and to other developmental topics.

Specifically, political scientists often discuss framing effects, which is not something that developmental scientists typically think about, especially in relation to their research. The discussion of framing effects in political science is organized by framing theory, which contends that the ways in which communication is framed can alter the effects of information on public opinion. When evidence relevant to an emotionally charged debate is ambiguous or nuanced,

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a variety of messages can be created and disseminated to sway opinion one way or the other (Borah, 2011; Chong & Druckman, 2007). Our content coding of articles about the main NICHD SECCYD study reports in dozens of US newspapers during selected windows from 1996 through 2010 and the analyses of more qualitative data associated with this media coverage revealed a fairly clear case of framing on both sides of the translational process. The mixture of positive and negative findings from the NICHD SECCYD and the honest disagreements among its scientists about these findings occasionally allowed multiple “takeaways” to arise from the Network, which, in turn, enabled journalists with different orientations toward early child care (and, more broadly, toward mothers using early child care) to choose which message to pass on to the public. As one of the original investigators on the Network quipped to us, “It was kind of like a projective test – positive and negative interpretations of the same results from the same press release.”

Thankfully, this framing phenomenon never got to the level of linking early child care to serial killing, à la the *West Wing*, but exploring what happened reveals how things can go a bit awry when researchers and journalists start talking to each other. More than a cautionary tale, however, we think that this phenomenon is an object lesson for learning how developmental scientists and their partners in the media can do better in the future.

A DEEPER DIVE INTO EARLY CHILD CARE

Although we are especially invested in the issue of early child care and personally connected to the NICHD SECCYD, we view this book as being far more generalizable than this particular issue and study. We are using them as a specific crucible to engage in what we hope is a larger discussion of the role of developmental science in the public sphere during a time in which the value of all social and behavioral sciences is increasingly judged by how effectively it informs the public good, especially in terms of policy and practice. Media are one vehicle through which this translation of scientific research into public use

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takes place, and the ever-expanding number and types of media outlets make them a growing partner in this process. Having said that, we also know that understanding and learning from media coverage of early child care and the NICHD SECCYD requires that we start with some background on both. In what follows, we sketch out the parameters of the debates about the early child care issue, how research has contributed to these debates, and the role that the NICHD SECCYD was intended to play in this exchange.

Debates about early child care

Because mothers have long held the primary responsibility for the care of young children (i.e., newborns to five-year-olds), the extent of early child care – defined as children being cared for by adults besides their parents, typically because parents are working for pay outside the home – reflects the proportion of mothers in the paid labor force. As maternal employment rises, the use of early child care tends to rise. Thus, debates about early child care are often hard to separate from debates about mothers (and, more generally, about women) working outside the home (Bianchi, 2000). In many ways, this close coupling of trends in maternal employment and early child care dominates the narrative about early child care as a social issue, even though many other factors besides mothers' work have influenced the expansion of early child care use, particularly the increased diversity of family structures in the US (and elsewhere) and the changing role of fathers vis-à-vis the care and rearing of young children. We focus on the maternal employment story here because it is so clearly central to the public debate about early child care that has roped in so many developmental scientists, but we want to stress that this story is an incomplete one.

To begin, the gradual and seemingly inexorable rise in women's participation in the paid labor force over the last century, particularly the entry of certain women who had not previously worked for pay, was a highly significant and polarizing social trend. In 2000, the president of the Population Association of America, an

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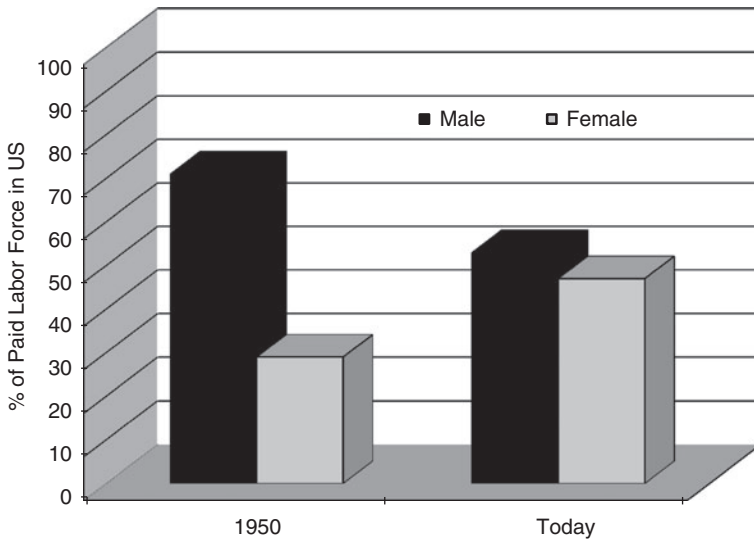
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FIGURE 1.1 Gender breakdown of the US labor force

Source: *Current Population Surveys* (US Department of Labor Women's Bureau, 2014)

esteemed family demographer named Suzanne Bianchi, looked back on decades of family change and remarked, "The most revolutionary change in the American family in the twentieth century, I would argue, has been the increase in the labor force participation of women, particularly married women with young children" (Bianchi, 2000: 401). Women have always worked, of course, and a significant number even worked for pay prior to the twentieth century. Yet, over time, working for pay became the norm, and that is what is historic. As recently as 1960, only 40 percent of US women held regular paying jobs outside of the home, but, over the last several decades, that percentage rose substantially. Today, a large majority of women have paid jobs outside the home, and the percentage is within 15 percentage points of men. As a result, women now constitute 47 percent of the paid labor force (see Figure 1.1), a major change from the historical norm.

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To reiterate Bianchi's point, what is especially surprising about the general upward trend in female employment over the last century is not just that it happened but also that the composition of the population of women working outside the home is so different than in the past. Perhaps most dramatically, a majority of mothers of young children – for whom disapproval of working is typically greatest – now work for pay, with 70 percent of mothers of infants in the labor force. Indeed, across almost all segments of the American population, working for pay outside the home is simply what mothers do (Cohany & Sok, 2007; Padavic & Reskin, 2002; US Department of Labor Women's Bureau, 2009).

As mothers (traditionally the primary caregivers for children during the day) moved into the labor force, they (and their partners) needed to find new care arrangements for their children. Children, especially young children, could not be left home alone when their parents worked, and the spread of employment across gender lines often meant that traditional care supports (e.g., grandparents and relatives) were also less available. The early child care market had to grow to meet this new demand. Thus, much like the surge in demand for nonparental care during World War II, when so many women were employed in the war-time economy, the rise in maternal employment that began in the 1970s led to the tremendous expansion of the early child care market. This market encompasses a wide variety of arrangements (Grossman, 1981; Hofferth, 1996). Although changes in the ways national statistics on early child care were collected make tracking historical child care trends difficult, the evidence clearly suggests a large uptick in the number of children being cared for in nonparental (and especially nonmaternal) arrangements as well as in arrangements outside the extended family (Clarke-Stewart & Allhusen, 2005).

Figure 1.2 provides a flow chart with information on who is caring for US children today. Only a minority of children below the age of five are cared for primarily by their mothers. Of the majority cared for in other arrangements, over two-thirds are cared for by relatives (e.g., grandparents) and more than half are cared for by

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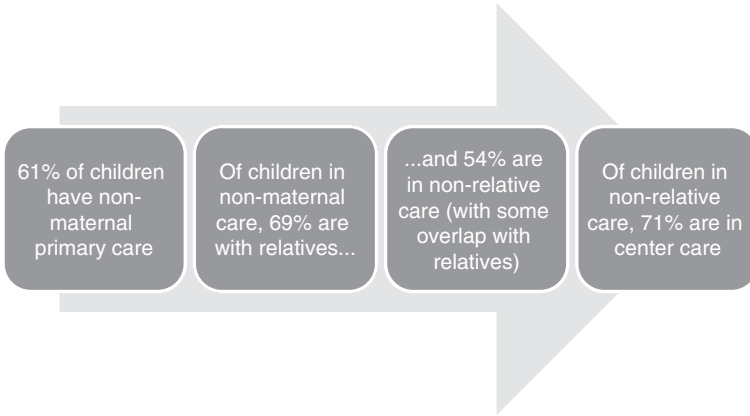
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FIGURE 1.2 Care arrangements for today's children from birth through age four

Source: *Study of Income and Program Participation* (Laughlin, 2013)

nonrelatives (usually in child care centers), with a substantial number of children experiencing both on any given day. When mothers are employed, the average young child spends 36 hours a week in some nonparental care arrangement, typically a child care center or, among older children, a preschool. Notably, early child care is so common these days that children with mothers who are not in the labor force spend about 21 hours a week, on average, in nonparental care – in other words, while driven by increased maternal employment, the expansion of the early child care market is not solely a function of this increase. These early child care trends cut across many socioeconomic and demographic lines; however, there are some group-specific trends: for example, low-income mothers tend to rely on fathers and grandparents more than child care centers; African-American mothers rely on grandparents and child care centers more than fathers; and Latino/as are less likely than other groups to use child care centers. Overall, however, nonparental care is the norm (Laughlin, 2013).

This surge in the number of young children in nonparental early care arrangements has been met with ambivalence at best and outright

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hostility at worst. In the 1970s, the growth of early child care was viewed as an undesirable social trend, perhaps even a symptom of the disintegration of society (the so-called American way of life) (Clarke-Stewart & Allhusen, 2005; Grossman, 1981; Scarr, 1998). In the early 1980s, another president of the Population Association of America, Samuel Preston, posed the question: "How, you might ask, can we talk about the neglect of children without mentioning their abandonment by mothers heading into the labor market?" (Preston, 1984: 451). Although his subsequent discussion empirically dismissed this fear of abandonment, his posing of the question suggests what the cultural and social atmosphere was like at the time. Attitudes have changed considerably in the ensuing years, but the debate is still alive and well – as our media analyses will show. This contentious battle over early child care has played out on two levels.

First, this battle taps into changing notions about what is in the best interests of the child. The notion that children, particularly young children, belong at home and should be raised by their parents (especially their mothers) is deeply rooted in American culture as well as in many other Western countries. Consequently, moving away from that notion triggers great concern that children are not getting what they deserve, even when the social and economic reasons behind this trend are recognized. For example, people might generally understand that the massive global economic restructuring of the last several decades has necessitated having two incomes in a family to meet middle-class standards of family life, which is generally seen as economically good for children, but still worry about how that necessity affects children in other ways. For many, these worries are enough to think that the necessity of mothers' working is not worth the sacrifice. As a result, their argument is that mothers should stay at home with children even when they have strong economic incentives not to do so (Clarke-Stewart, 1989; Morrissey, 2008; Waldfogel, 2006). This ambivalence about what is good and bad for children is visible in mainstream public discussions of maternal employment and early child care even today, as evidenced by the frequent comments of