Chapter 5
Cultural Routines and Reflections: Building Parent–Child Connections—Hair Combing Interaction as a Cultural Intervention

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The hair combing experience provides a culturally based intervention to support parent–child relationships that need therapeutic support. Hair combing interaction (HCI) offers a time for parent and child to be present with one another, to talk, to laugh, and to engage positively. It is also an opportunity to build the young child's feeling that they are cared about, lovable, beautiful, all leading to positive self-esteem.

HCI can involve talking with a trained therapist using hair as a focus to help a parent or primary caregiver sort out relational difficulties with children or personal conflicts. HCI can also explore how family and societal culture influences what we think about ourselves and others; what we think about hair in general; and what cultural values can be passed on while engaging in the everyday routine of combing children's hair.

What Is Family and Societal Culture?

Most definitions suggest culture includes "the beliefs, language(s), and behaviors valued in a community" (Barrera & Corso, 2002, p. 104). Barbara Rogoff (2003) states culture is dynamic, not static. Culture changes as we participate in it. Cultural communities evolve through processes by which "[i]ndividuals and generations shape practices, traditions, and institutions at the same time that they build on what they inherit in their moment in history" (Rogoff, 2003, p. 62). Culture is a powerful source of belonging—belonging to a family, a group of people, and/or to a place.

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Place can be a specific geographic location or more broadly encoded in memories. For example, for the Potawatomi Indian nation, "place" is where sweetgrass grows and can form part of the smells and tribal traditions to represent the hair of Mother Earth (Kimmerer, 2013).

There are many aspects to this belonging or culture—not only race/ethnicity, but also gender/sexual orientation, age, refugee or immigrant status, socioeconomic status, education level, religion. Many of these factors exist in the same person. We call these "intersectionality." A single, White, lesbian woman with a high school diploma and an income from multiple sources inhabits a different cultural niche from a college educated male living in a refugee camp with his whole extended Muslim family. Intersectionality blends together to influence how we live our lives and what cultural norms influence our actions, values, and beliefs.

When families are formed by the joining of two people in marriage (of whatever form) and children are born/adopted/reared, how parents care for the children transmits culture—those values, beliefs, and everyday routines that pass on belongingness. How parents care for children—and their hair—can become a battle to belong or an easy opportunity to learn family cultural norms. This chapter discusses how the act of hair combing can be a dominant cultural function in the development of children and their relationships with caregivers.

Hair Is Personal. Hair Is Social

Hair reflects both an individual and the norms of the collective society. Hair—how it is styled, combed, covered, or not—influences and is influenced by cultural norms. Cultural norms are dynamic, evolving as humans interact with each other and their environments (Rogoff, 2003). Envision this as a mobile, hanging from the child with all other elements moving around the child on the same level. The parts can bump into and bounce off each other, including the elements in the outer ring (see Fig. 5.1). How hair is combed, protected, and styled, particularly in early childhood, reflects this cultural evolution and the subject of this chapter.

Our lives are steeped in culture. Hair care is part of how we learn about, are influenced by, and revise our inner self and our own culture. Mothers and other primary caregivers are the first architects of how our hair reflects us. Through hair combing interactions, parents have many opportunities to express pride in their child, to celebrate—or denigrate—the child's developing self, and even reinforce cultural messages about the importance and appearance of one's hair.

Growing up, who first took care of your hair? Probably this person was your Mother or another primary caregiver. She washed it, dried it, combed it, and when there was enough to tie up some way, you may have sprouted a palm tree or two little tuffs out of the top of your head, or a ponytail in the back. Or, may be your hair was cut short to make caring for it easy. Where you lived as a baby, who composed your close family, and what the cultural norms said about children's hair all influenced how your Mother or other caregiver cared for your hair. These same elements still influence your hair care—either due to your continued conformance, or your rebellion.

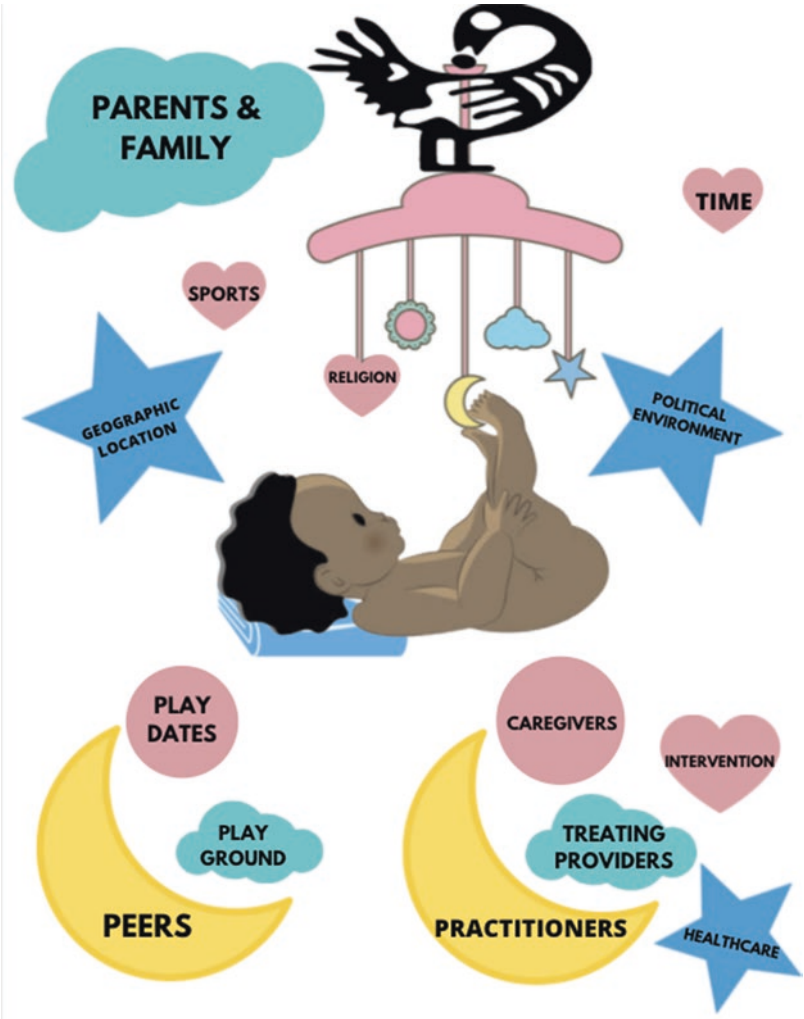

Fig. 5.1 The sociocultural influences on parent–infant interactions during hair combing time

How Is Family Culture Instilled?

The daily routines of living together, keeping house, feeding, and clothing family members all establish the family's culture (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Often, these routines are passed down intergenerationally. They may change over time with the addition of children, moves to different geographic locations, deaths of grandparents. How parents think of their roles, sometimes based on typically gendered roles, sometimes fixed due to employment schedules, perhaps changing with social norms,

all influence who typically cares for the children's hair. Religion, school, and the celebrations that these institutions may generate—like baptism, graduation, prom—affect a family's culture, and certainly how hair is combed and styled.

Why Is the Culture of the Family Important?

Family connotes cohesion, a sense of belonging, a safe place. We know the importance of secure attachment between child and caregiver as the inception of learning, exploring, and building trust. Trust in the comfort and safety of the mother or primary caregiver's continuous care sets the stage for the child's ability to grow and build relationships with others throughout life. Beginning in the first days of early caregiving, the child's attachment to his/her parent comes from daily interactions; routines that are predictable and that involve "serve and return" conversations or dialog where caregiver responds to child's bids for attention and interaction and the caregiver is sensitive in response (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard, 2013). When a caregiver is contingently responsive to a young child and responds in timely, positive, nurturing ways, the attachment relationship begins to unfold, over the first years of life, to be a secure one for the child. The young child learns to trust that the caregiver is a loving person, available for affection, comfort, and ongoing response. Hair combing interactions can reinforce the attachment relationship for the child—or not.

As part of a family, children learn to rely on predictability (first we get dressed, then comb hair), the fun of anticipation (hurray! next week we get to go to Disneyland!), how to negotiate the hierarchies of power (should I ask Mom or Dad about this?). Family stories are passed on during meals, bedtime routines—and during hair combing. How one's family handles disruptions like moves, divorce, death, job loss may be explained and talked about during hair care activities. Learning about expressing emotions, coping with uncertainty, and the changing strategies for managing people and actions are valuable lessons that can be picked up during hair combing. Parenting and culture are intertwined with the primary goals of successfully transmitting the culture across generations and embedding the next generation into the existing culture (Bornstein et al., 2011; Rogoff, 2003).

Hair care is influenced by family, of course, but today's child grows up in multiple environments (childcare, church, playground) that can influence how the child and caregiver perceive norms around hair. Research findings suggest that cultural practices are "not stable within racial or ethnic contexts, or even within country of origin, language/dialect, social class, gender, religion, immigration history, experience with racism and segregation, and neighborhood" (Reid et al., 2019, p. 979).

How might young children be exposed to cultural norms? What parents and caregivers believe about children, about their own role as parents and caregivers and about hair demonstrate cultural norms. Have you heard early childhood professionals or parents suggest any of these practices?

1. Children learn by observation. "Do as I do, vs. do as I say." (Rogoff, 2003)

2. "Use your words!" to encourage children to label emotions and feelings as communication to others as well as self-learning about the impact of actions.
3. "Let's get something to get that hair out of your face."

Hair combing can incorporate lessons on vocabulary (barrettes, ribbons, scrunchies), math ("Let's measure the length of your hair." "How many rows can we braid on the side of your head?"), colors ("Mom's hair is brown, and your hair is blonde."), and shapes ("We can make a round bun with your hair.").

Lessons from current events might influence how hair is cared for and styled. Episodes like the COVID-19 virus pandemic of 2020 dramatically affected how hair was styled. When salons were closed, people had to cut their own hair. As months passed during the pandemic, women adopted extreme hair styles, for example, pink or green highlights (Bosworth, 2020).

How males versus females wear their hair demonstrates many variations between the sexes, and similarities. These gender norms begin in early childhood. Usually, males wear their hair cut short, while females may grow their hair longer. Hair length and styles vary significantly among the sexes depending on immediate social, ethnic, religious, and generational norms. For those identifying as nonbinary, not fixing one's hair consistent with prevailing hair care norms can be a statement of independence from adherence to norms. How celebrities and sports figures wear their hair can form models for children to emulate—or entreat parents to allow them to emulate. Celebrations like dances and other social get-togethers can provide opportunities for extra care and consultation around hair care products, fancy designs, and creative accessories. Or both males and females may prefer to wear their hair long.

Rituals and Routines and Therapeutic Intervention

Therapists may use observations of hair combing interactions (HCIs) as opportunities to understand the cultural influences being passed on in the family through daily caregiving routines, including hair combing. Eliciting the responses to the methods suggested in the questions below can be ports of entry through observation into understanding the parent–child relationship and identifying opportunities for helpful interventions when needed.

1. Who combs the young child's hair? Grandma? Mama? Daddy?
2. Is the child invited to bring barrettes, comb/brush, ribbons to the parent to comb or style the hair? Is this part of the daily routine or does the parent ask the child every time?
3. Is the young child expected to sit still and not fuss as the parent combs and styles his/her hair? How does the parent/caregiver let the child know this? What is the facial expression and/or tone of voice of the parent/caregiver? Is the child physically and/or verbally reminded to sit still? What is the experience like for the young child? The parent?
4. Is the child entertained by an electronic device while sitting to have her hair fixed? What are the parameters around device use? Which device/s is the child

allowed to use? Which software programs or internet links are allowed? Can the sound be heard?
5. Do the child and parent engage in conversation while sitting to fix hair? Are both the child and parent sitting? Do they seem comfortable with one another? Is the child standing in front of the parent?
6. Is the child allowed to comb his/her own hair, using barrettes/ribbons at will?
7. How does the parent talk about the child's hair? Is it beautiful just the way it is? Does the caregiver refer to the child having "good" hair or "bad" hair? Does it need to be "tamed"? (See personal recollections.)

Conversations and Personal Recollections for Exploring Therapeutic Assessments and Interventions

Our childhood experiences influence how we feel about ourselves and how we will care for or nurture our child/children. When working with parents, social workers or other practitioners may have opportunities to engage in conversations about a parent's memories of early care, relationships with those who took care of them, and, of special interest to this book, hair combing interactions. This section discusses multiple childhood memories that may be fruitful for parents and practitioners to explore to strengthen the therapeutic relationship and lead to greater understanding of the past as it enters or influences the present.

Scandinavian Roots?

A grandmother remembers, "My daughters' Scandinavian hair, fine and very straight, was hard for me to braid. To this day my girls are upset with me for not teaching them to braid their hair." (Personal Communication, B.W., 2019).

A social worker or professional might ask how Grandmother views her Scandinavian cultural roots. Are these terms ("fine and very straight") applicable to her Scandinavian cultural norms? In what ways? Does this mother continue to worry or wonder about her daughters' upset? Does the upset affect how her daughters now parent their own children? As grandparent and professional reflect together, does grandmother express feeling sad or incompetent as a mother to her girls?

Multicultural Hair

A mother of 2 biracial (Canadian and Caymanian) boys in the Cayman Islands says:

> In our culture people talk about 'good hair'...which is hair that is more like white people... straighter, easier to comb. Our boys have very different hair and people will comment...'oh, this one got the good hair' (Personal Communication, S.S., 2019).

A social worker or practitioner might ask the mother if she can say a little more about "good hair" or "bad hair" and what it means to her. She may ask if there are other stories about hair in her family and empathize about either the "good" or "bad" hair or how it relates to feelings of self-worth or self-esteem carried today.

Sibling Relationships/Jealousy

A Chinese-American adult female says, "My sisters and I all have different textured hair. Chinese 'good' hair is straight and silky. Mine is coarse and curly. I wish I had my sister's good hair." (Personal Communication, J.M., 2019)

Canadian/Caymanian mom says "My friend has two daughters both with *very different hair texture and curls*. There were a lot of tears growing up around the issue of hair" (Personal Communication, S.S., 2019).

A social worker or practitioner might ask about the mom's daughters' rivalries/jealousies due to their different hair textures. Why was this important to them and how was it played out in their developing sibling relationship? What was the mom's experience around these struggles about hair?

Ribbons Today

An adult female from Panama City, Panama says,

> My mom used to say, "We are poor, but they don't have to see that we are pigs." We were not poor, but how your child looks, that idea of having clean clothes, pressed uniforms for school, this was all part of how others could judge and perceive you and your family, and infer how good a mother you are.
>
> I absolutely hated everything about hair care growing up. My mother used to buy expensive ribbons to match my uniform color, and I would always lose them because my hair is so straight and fine. My mother would be enraged and pulled on my hair "to teach" me not to lose my hair ties; I still got home without them. The first time I had a haircut my mother cried, because my long hair was cut to shoulder length. (Personal Communication, R.L., 2019).

A social worker or practitioner might help the adult caregiver reflect on how she felt as a child and today about ribbons and rules, or how solidly cultural norms influence parent emotions about being a "good" parent.

*Questions Social Workers or Practitioners can use to tease out issues affecting society and/or family culture to work towards resolution***.**

1. Ask how Mother or Grandmother views her country's cultural roots. Are her terms to describe her daughters' hair ("fine and very straight") applicable to her country's cultural norms? Might these words reflect a political or societal view in general?
2. Ask Mother/Father to say a little more about "good hair" or "bad hair" and what it means to her/him. Empathize about either the "good" or "bad" hair, or how it relates to feelings of self-worth or self-esteem carried today.

3. Are there other stories about hair in the family?

    1. Ask about sibling rivalries/jealousies due to their different hair textures or abilities to work with or style their hair. Why was this important to them and how has it played out in their developing sibling relationship?
    2. Help the adult caregiver reflect on how she felt as a child, as well as today, about ribbons and rules around hair, hair coverings, hair colors. Might these feelings be coloring her interactions with her child?
    3. Can the adult recognize that a child is upset with how her/his hair is combed or styled?
    4. What is the mom's felt experience around struggles about hair? Does she express feeling sad or incompetent as a mother to her children?
    5. Reflect with adults how solidly cultural norms influence parent emotions about being a "good" parent.

Cultural Socialization: How Children Learn Cultural Norms

Behaviors arise out of beliefs. Parent behaviors are the foundation of daily routines that pass on cultural beliefs to the child. Children are active participants in the cultural processes that constitute interactions between child and adult. As Rogoff (2003) suggests, culture is dynamic, the result of people interacting with other people, technology, objects, and thoughts. The child's agency (Reid et al., 2019, p. 979) in these interactions can be observed in the daily activities around caring for hair, bedtime routines, and feeding.

Is Hair Combing part of the bedtime routine? *Does the family demonstrate:*

a. Affectionate bedtime routines—Child bathes as play, brushes teeth, combs hair, reads, cuddles, enjoys hugs. Child sleeps in own bed.
b. Instrumental bedtime routines—Child bathes to get clean, says prayers, and sleeps in own bed.
c. Permissive bedtime routines—Child takes bath, roughhouses, has a snack and water to drink. Child sleeps where he or she wants.
d. Bedtime as an extension of waking time—Child is expected to finish meals and chores, and wash hands and face. Child sleeps with parent.

Is Hair Combing Part of the Feeding Routine? *Does the family demonstrate differences in the way children are treated:*

e. Special Needs—Child has special food, special feeding chair, spoon/cup. Hair is combed away from the face. Food is part of conversation time, can be played with, and textures explored.
f. Part of family—Child's food is made from the family meal. Child is expected to wash hands and comb hair prior to coming to the table. Child is a silent observer, food can be explored to an extent, but not wasted.

g. Begged to eat—Child's appearance is chubby, desirable; so, food holds critical daily importance. Child is begged to eat.
h. Fed—Food cannot be wasted. Children are not allowed to touch food until physical dexterity can be tested and food not dropped.

Social workers and other practitioners can talk about routines such as these to assess family cultural beliefs, interactions, and relationships. Sometimes beliefs that the therapist or professional and parent have may clash. Acknowledging this clash as part of a Reflective Supervision session can be helpful. (see Wilson, Weatherston & Hill, Chap. 6, Reflective Supervision).

Therapists Exploring Personal Connections with Hair

Behavioral Health practitioners, social workers, and other child and family practitioners, first of all, must be self-aware. They must learn to know their own culture and biases (St. John et al., 2012; Diversity-Informed Tenets, 2018). Discussing personal beliefs about ethnicity and race, as well as cultural values, with a reflective supervisor may strengthen understanding of one's own biases that could interrupt the work with a child and family. These biases, as well as differences in cultural practices that are unseen and unacknowledged by the professional, may create barriers between family and professional and lead to a disruption in the professional–family relationships (See Wilson, Chap. 9).

Social workers, therapists, and mental health practitioners will find themselves interacting with others not of their same culture. *What do you do when you don't feel like you belong 'in the room', like you can't 'speak the language'*? A good place to start is to be curious about the cultural meanings of children's and families' own feelings, thoughts, and actions, and their feelings and thoughts about your culture. Curiosity may lead to greater self-awareness and understanding about how others ascribe meaning to their own (the practitioner's) feelings, thoughts, and actions (Bowman & Stott, 1994). As suggested earlier, talking with a reflective supervisor about your own feelings and biases or perceived conundrums working with this child/family can be helpful.

Using what the therapist learns about the child/family culture and "taking into consideration the family goals for children's development and learning, leads to positive family engagement and relationships between practitioner and family." (Reid et al., 2019, p. 985). HCI offers a template for the child to develop positive relationships with peers and other adults, even when the parent may not incorporate the gentle, nurturing efforts suggested. Continued modeling and talking about HCI can be a powerful force to change current patterns of interaction between parent and child, and therefore for the child to learn to do with others.

Social workers and other professionals may also benefit from dialog with each other about the varied family cultural patterns they find, the approaches, values, and strategies families use when interacting with children, and the effects thereof on the

children and on themselves (See Byars & Subramaniam, Chap. 12). Using humor and patience with themselves, the parents, and the children will further embody the HCI program.

Conclusions

Children develop in all domains as they interact with their parents and other primary caregivers. Hair combing interactions offer opportunities to maximize children's development in language, cognition, social-emotional development, interoception, proprioception, and fine motor control. When parent or primary caregiver interactions are positive, nurturing, and contingent, the child learns to trust that mother, father, or caregiver—and by extension the world—is positive, affirming, and responsible to care for the child's well-being. When a child experiences such a safe haven, his environment is a place worth exploring and learning about. HCI offers practices for children and parents or caregivers to interact positively and build a safe haven, a secure and trusting relationship, a strong foundation for a child's social and emotional development across the lifespan.

It is vital for researchers, interventionists, and other outside observers to understand how a family's culture contributes to a child's resiliency. The family history and connections to people and places, and the child's current participation in a safe and secure home environment, set the stage for our children to be coconstructors of cultures around the world that promote peace, equity, and inclusion. Caregivers and their attitudes are key. HCI provides a culturally enriched and informed way to create and reinforce this trusting environment.

Reflective Questions

1. *Culture is a powerful source of belonging—belonging to a family, a group of people, and/or to a place.* Take a few minutes to think about how you have developed a sense of belonging to your family. What cultural beliefs, practices, and traditions have helped to shape who you are and how you perceive the world.
2. The consideration of personal beliefs about ethnicity and race, as well as cultural values, is an important part of professional growth and development. What are some of those beliefs or values and how do they influence your practice with children and families if you are from another culture?
3. Do you have a personal story about hair combing or cultural rituals as they relate to your current professional identity or self-esteem?
4. Consider how you might informally invite parents to share stories about their hair combing experiences as a child or with their current children. Explore with them any differences in their child's individual response to

having their hair combed. For example, one child was tender headed and another was not. Was their response to getting their hair combed consistent with the child's personality?

5. Thinking about the ways that culture was defined in this chapter, try to identify a core value or belief you currently hold about parent's responsibilities. How similar or different are these beliefs from your family of origin? Reflect on what occurred that led to you continuing to practice or led to your ending a cultural practice from your family of origin.

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