

A Corpus-based Study of the Conceptualizations of Childhood in the Iranian Culture and their Implications for Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

This study investigates the conceptualizations of childhood in the Iranian culture through a linguistic analysis of three Persian lexical items for a child (*bache*, *kudak*, *tefl*) and their implications for Early Childhood Education (ECE). Employing a corpus-based approach supplemented with ethnographic insights, the study investigates how the Persian speaking members of the Iranian culture understand childhood as a cognitive cultural concept. The findings highlight a divergence between traditional and modern conceptualizations of children, where a traditional, socially determined, non-chronological definition coexists with an age-based definition. It is shown that the concept of 'evil' child as understood in Western societies is absent in the Iranian culture. Diverse cultural conceptualizations of childhood are identified, including children as a source of joy, playful and mischievous, innocent and vulnerable, naïve and simple-minded, compliant subordinates and, in some cases, out-of-control beings, who also attempt to negotiate their agency. The study highlights the heterogeneity of Iranians' conceptualizations of childhood that are shaped by ongoing negotiations between tradition and modernity. This heterogeneity has direct and vicarious implications for ECE, which highlight both the role of parents and educators in dealing with children and educational materials.

Keywords

child, childhood, cultural conceptualization, Iranian culture, Persian, ECE

1. Introduction

In recent decades, there has been considerable debate regarding the various ways children and childhood are conceptualized. These differing perspectives lead to conflicting views on what it means to be a child (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Mayall, 2002; Qvortrup, 1994). These perspectives influence not only societal attitudes and beliefs about the role of children but also the educational practices closely connected to their everyday lives.

Moreover, it is generally believed that early experiences have an enduring impact on an individual's later life. People's early experiences are shaped by their caregivers' and significant others' perceptions and conceptualizations of what a child is and should be. These perceptions and conceptualizations may appear to be individual, formed in a person's mind based on their personal experiences. However, research into conceptualizations has shown that many are culturally shared due to common experiences

within the same community (e.g., Sharifian, 2017; Quinn & Holland, 1987).

Despite the resurgence of studies on childhood concepts in Western culture over the past 30 years, most previous research on the concept of the child has focused on Western culture and the English-speaking world (James & James, 2008, among others), with scant research on non-English-speaking communities. This research attempts to fill this gap by focusing on the conceptualizations of the ‘child’ and childhood through a linguistic analysis of the polysemy of words denoting a child in a non-European culture, namely, the Persian-speaking members of the Iranian culture. It is assumed that lexical items and expressions in a language provide insights into the cultural cognition of a people, much of which is shared and perpetuated among members of a cultural group, often beneath their level of consciousness. By focusing on the uses of the words denoting a child in Persian in a large corpus of chiefly novels and autobiographies, as well as spoken Persian, the authors aim to explore emic, folk understandings of children and childhood among the Persian speaking members of the Iranian culture, rather than etic, theory-oriented understandings based on some pre-conceptions and pre-fabricated categories.

In the following paragraphs, first, a brief review will be provided in Section 2 of the conceptualizations of the child and childhood in sociology. Then, we will briefly explore the field of cultural linguistics and the concept of cognitive cultural conceptualizations. Next, the main Persian words for the concept of the child will be introduced in Section 4. After describing the methodology in Section 5, Section 6 will present the findings and analyze the conceptualizations of the child and childhood. Section 7 will discuss the implications of the multiplicity of conceptualizations for early

childhood education. Finally, Section 8 will conclude the paper.

2. Sociological theories of childhood

Over the past few decades, the study of children and childhood has gained momentum in various disciplines including psychology, sociology, anthropology and cultural studies (Gittins, 1998; Montgomery, 2009; Kehily, 2015; Corsaro, 2018; Allerton, 2023; among others), resulting in new understandings of childhood. A classical dichotomy in the conceptualization of children has been the distinction between the ‘evil child’ and the ‘innocent child.’ The evil child concept originated from the 16th-century Puritan belief that all children are the product of the original sin by Adam and Eve and the result of a sinful relationship between parents (Jenks, 2005; James & James, 2012). A corollary to seeing children as inherently evil by nature was that they needed moral supervision and were subjected to harsh and strict discipline with corporal punishment as a necessary requirement so that the evil would be beaten out of them, and they could turn into decent and virtuous adults. The concept of the innocent child was raised by Rousseau in his groundbreaking book *Emile* to counter the evil child concept (James & James, 2012). As innocent beings, children are assumed to be blank slates or *tabula rasa*, incompetent and ready to be educated into competent adults. In this view, the child is conceptualized as essentially passive recipient of education, acquiring skills and knowledge to become a competent adult.

A common consequence of the above concepts is that a child is visualized as an ignorant and incompetent being that needs supervision or protection to turn into a good or a competent adult human being. In these views, adults conceptualize children “in a forward-looking way,” envisioning them as “future adults

with a place in the social order and contributions to make to it” (Corsaro, 2018).

Research in sociological theory has shifted attentions from the dichotomy of innocent and evil child to “the diversity of children’s experiences” (James, 2007; Norozi & Moen, 2016; Kehily, 2015). It has been shown that “biological immaturity is a *fact* of ‘childhood’; innocence is a *socially constructed phenomenon* (James & Prout, 1990, cited in Woodrow, 1999). Children are seen as active agents in their social environments, with the ability to shape their world in a number of ways by reflecting on their environment and their position with respect to other actors, other children and adults, within it (James, 2007). In the constructionist view, children are constituted within socially and historically situated discourse. According to Jenks (2005, p. 29) child is “a status of person which is comprised through a series of, often heterogeneous, images, representations, codes and constructs.” In line with the diversity of conceptualizations and experiences of child and childhood, Woodrow (1999) explores the three major frames: child as innocent (the dominant frame), as threat, and as embryo adult. Sorin (2005) identifies ten constructs in the literature on childhood, namely, the innocent child, the evil child, the child as adult-in-training, the miniature adult, as well as the noble/savior child, the snowballing child, the out-of-control child, the child as commodity, the child as victim, and the agentic child. In this research, we attempted to identify the conceptualizations of the child in Persian through the study of a number of lexemes as cognitive cultural concepts. Section 3 will briefly explore our understanding of cognitive cultural conceptualizations.

3. Cognitive cultural conceptualizations

Following cultural linguistics (Sharifian 2008, 2017), we assume that lexical items and linguistic expressions in any language offer insights into the collective cultural cognition of a community. By cultural cognition is meant “a multidisciplinary understanding of cognition that moves beyond the level of the individual mind.” Cultural cognition “comes about as a result of social and linguistic interactions between individuals across time and space” (Sharifian 2017, p. 3). It is a form of distributed cognition in the sense that cognition is not just situated within an individual's mind but is distributed across objects, artifacts and other individuals in the environment. Cultural conceptualizations are not uniformly imprinted in the minds of individuals within a cultural group but are “heterogeneously distributed across the minds of a cultural group”, i.e., they are shared and represented across multiple minds within that group in varying degrees (Sharifian, 2011, p. 8). With their polysemy and as cultural conceptualizations, words and linguistic expressions contain knowledge produced over generations of people. In this sense, the concept of ‘child’ and words referring to the child are emergent schemas that “result from the interactions between the members of a cultural group across time and space” and are ‘heterogeneously distributed’ in the sense that there are variations between individuals in how they conceptualize them (Sharifian, 2017). This view of language is in line with the social constructionist perspectives on language where language and culture are viewed as deeply interconnected, with language serving as both a medium and outcome of sociocultural processes (see Berger and Luckmann, 1966). In the social constructionist view, ‘child’ is a socially constructed concept that is heterogeneous (Jenks, 2005; among others), as is the case in cultural linguistics with any cultural concept

embodied through words and linguistic expressions.

4. On Persian words for ‘child’

In Persian, the official and historically dominant language in Iran, there are a number of lexical items that denote a child or stages in childhood. The most common words that refer to a child in Persian are *bache* (‘a’ is pronounced as in ‘bag’, ‘ch’ as in ‘church’, and ‘e’ as in the vowel in ‘bed’), *kudak* (with *u* pronounced as the vowel in ‘root’), and less frequently *tefl*. Below is a brief description of the etymology, meaning and the most common compounds and collocates of each:

bache ‘a child,’ ‘an infant,’ ‘a kid’.

Etymologically of an Indo-European origin attested in Middle Persian (since around the 3rd century BCE to 9th century A.D.) (Hassandoust, 2014); In current usage, it refers to the offspring of both humans and animals. It is the one used most widely both in spoken and written Persian and in various contexts. Some of its compounds are *bachedozdi* ‘kidnap’ (lit. ‘child-theft’), *bachebāzi* ‘child molestation’, ‘pedophilia’ (lit. ‘child-play’), *bachedusti* ‘love of children’, ‘being kind to children’ (lit. ‘child-liking’), *bache nane* ‘crybaby’ (lit. ‘child-mother’ or ‘mummy’s child’). The opposite of *bache* is *bozorg* (“[adj] 1. big, large 2. grand 3. great 4. major 5. grown-up, adult 6. [n] a chief, an elder 7. an important person, a VIP” (Emami, 2006).

kudak ‘a child,’ ‘an infant,’ also has an Indo-European origin meaning ‘little,’ ‘small’ and ‘young one.’ In Avestan and Old Persian (before 300 BCE), as well as in Middle Persian, it referred to human children as well as some animals’ young ones (Hassandoust, 2014). In contemporary usage, its meaning is restricted to the ‘human child’ only. It is defined in the dictionary as “human offspring till the age of

puberty/maturity” (Anvari, 2002), and is used in compounds such as *kudakāzāri* ‘child abuse’ (lit. ‘child harassment’), *kudak hamsari*, roughly ‘child marriage’ (lit. ‘child spousesness’), *kudakyāri* ‘professional babysitting’ (lit. ‘child assistance’), *kāre kudakān* ‘child labor’ and *kudake kār* ‘working child’ (lit. ‘child of work’), and *hoghughe kudakān* ‘children’s rights’-all denoting modern ideas about children. The equivalent of *kindergarten* in Persian is *kudakestān* which literally means ‘children’s place’. *Kudak* is mainly limited to spoken and written styles suitable for formal situations. This implies that although every speaker of Persian knows and understands *kudak*, it is unlikely to be part of the active vocabulary of an illiterate or lowly educated person. The opposite of *kudak* is *bozorgsāl* “adult, grown-up” (lit. ‘big year’).

tefl ‘a child’ is a word of Arabic origin meaning “a child before puberty age” (Dehkhoda, 1998). *Tefl* is limited in usage and has little or no productivity in the sense that rarely any new words can be made with it. Only three forms of it have been used in Persian, namely *tefl*, *atfāl* ‘children’ and *tofuliyat* ‘childhood period’. Its most common collocates in Modern Persian are *tefle masoom* ‘innocent child’, *tebe atfāl* ‘children’s medicine’, *motekhasese atfāl* ‘pediatrician’, *falaje atfāl* ‘polio’, and *dādgāhe atfāl* ‘children’s court.’

There is a series of other words denoting a child including *farzand* (‘a child,’ ‘a son or a daughter,’ ‘an offspring’), and *owlād* ‘children,’ ‘offspring,’ both defining a child in relation to parents. To give a taste of how some of these words are understood by native speakers, we offer some examples. In Persian, it is ok to say “I have 3 *baches/farzands*” but not “I have 3 *kudaks*”. One may hear “Three *kudaks/baches* are playing in the yard” but not “Three *farzands* are playing in the yard”. In none of these

sentences can *tefl* be used in Modern standard Persian.

There are other words that refer to different stages of childhood such as *nowzād* ‘infant’ (lit. *now*, pronounced like English ‘no’ meaning ‘new’, ‘fresh’ plus *zād*, ‘born’), *nowpā* ‘toddler’ (lit. *now* plus *pā* ‘foot’, ‘leg’), *khordsāl*, with *kh* pronounced like ‘ch’ in the Scottish *loch*, meaning ‘a little boy or girl’ (lit. *khord* ‘small’, ‘little’, plus *sāl* ‘year’), *nownahāl* ‘a young boy or girl’ (lit. *now* plus *nahāl* ‘sapling’, ‘a young tree ready for planting’), *nowjavān* ‘adolescent, teenage, teen’ (lit. *now* plus *javān* ‘young,’ ‘youth,’ ‘juvenile’) and *javān* ‘young,’ ‘youth.’ As mentioned previously, of all these terms, the most general is *bache*, followed by *kudak* and *tefl* which will be the focus of this research. *Javān* is also very general but it covers years way beyond childhood as conventionally understood.

5. Methodology

The data for this research were collected from the corpus of Persian constructed by the *Academy of Persian Language and Literature* at <http://dadegan.apll.ir>. The corpus consists of all poetry and many prose texts written in Persian since the 10th century A.D. We limited the scope of our searches for words equivalent to ‘child’ to untranslated prose texts originally produced in Persian over the past one hundred years, i.e., since 1921, the beginning of the 14th century in Iranian calendar. The extracted tokens were mostly from novels and autobiographies and, in a few cases, newspaper articles and film scripts. A potential critique is that because the majority of tokens are from novels, the situations are constructed and inauthentic. However, we argue that although a novelist often creates fictional characters in fictional worlds, and the language of literature is representational, “representation is a strongly conventionalized process upon which the

medium ... exerts some restricting influences” (Fowler, 1977: 71). One restriction on the literary content is that it “is made out of a conventional stock of processes, roles and semantic features ... deriving ... from the structure of the institutions and preoccupations of particular societies” (p. 72). In other words, literary writers, if they want their work to be appreciated, ought to commit themselves to the ideological and the discourse norms and conventions of the particular society for which they write. As a result, dialogs and characterization in fiction are shaped by and reflect the norms of language use in everyday real situations (Short, 1996; Culpeper, 2001). Thus, albeit the data for this research are largely based on tokens of the use of the selected concepts in novels and autobiographies, we can safely assume that they are representations of conventional understandings of these concepts in the Persian speaking communities in Iran. We also argue that the selection of a corpus of this sort provides us with an advantage, because in no other means of data collection, such as sociological interviews or questionnaires, can the selected words be examined in a wide range of contexts and situations because the novels included characters from a variety of social groups and classes in a large number of contexts. This variety of contexts is also appropriate for a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse cultural conceptualizations that are both emergent and distributed across the minds of individuals (Sharifian 2008, 2011, 2017).

The words *bache* and *kudak* and their adjectival and adverbial derivatives *bachegāne* and *kudakāne*, as well as the word *tefl* were searched in the corpus. The tokens with only referential value, i.e., ones that identified a person or persons in the context with no further associations, were excluded. All the other tokens were scrutinized for their associative, non-referential meanings in the context. The corpus

presents every token in at least one full sentence and cites the source and page numbers. In many cases, the original source was consulted to obtain further contextual information. On various occasions, the selected words described adults or adult behavior. These cases were best for uncovering hidden ideologies about children, some of which may even be denied if explicitly pointed out. Over 330 instances of the use of *bache* and *bachegāne*, out of a total of about 3,500 tokens, and more than 150 instances of *kudak* and *kudakāne* out of a total of about 1,400 tokens were semantically and pragmatically analyzed, using both the linguistic co-text and the wider discourse context. A number of tokens containing the selected words in daily interactions among native speakers were also used to supplement the selected corpus. As natives to the Persian language brought up in Iran, the authors also drew on their cultural insider knowledge to provide a more nuanced description. Based on this type of knowledge, we can claim that all the examples in the corpus represented possible situations in modern Iran, and albeit some may sound more popular and some marginalized and old-fashioned, they all represent existing ideologies and conceptualizations by at least some members of the culture. Section 6 presents and discusses the findings in a classified manner.

6. Analysis and Discussion

6.1 Defining a child in the Iranian

culture: The word *kudak* mainly denotes an individual below puberty age. However, *bache* is more complicated. This difference is also reflected in their definitions as shown in Section 4: while the opposite of *bache* is *bozorg* ‘big,’ ‘large,’ ‘elder,’ ‘grownup,’ and ‘adult,’ the opposite of *kudak* is *bozorgsāl* that has ‘sāl,’ the word for ‘year,’ in it. An important factor other than chronological age in categorizing someone as a *bache* is physique in the sense of general

body size and strength. In the following extract, after Mamadu, a 16-year-old boy, has physically assaulted Ghadam in a local teahouse, others urge her to forgive Mamadu because ‘he’s a child.’ Ghadam rejects the idea referring to Mamadu’s physical strength:

(1) “Anvar Mashadi places his cup before Ghadam and says: ‘forgive him. He’s a child [*bache*]! Ghadam’s eyes widened: ‘Is he a child [*bache*]? I’m 40 and he has a stronger physique than me.”

In (2) the mere reference to size shows the implicit expectation that size counts in labelling someone a child or an adult:

(2) “We were both as tall as big people [*ādam bozorghā*, i.e., adults] but were children [*bache*] anyway.”

After having made a mistake about love, the 13-year-old narrator describes himself and his beloved, a girl of 14, as children ‘*bache*’ despite their height, which indicates the greater significance of the ability to make the right decision than simply height in describing somebody as an adult. Moreover, any young or middle-aged person may be labeled a child, depending on the context and in relation to others, witness the following extract from a conversation in a novel:

(3) “She said: ‘I want to name him *Enāyatollāh*’. I laughed out loud. A little child [*bache*] and such a long name! Mum hurriedly said: ‘Stop it! Stop the playing. It’s not a children’s game [*bachebāzi*]. Normally elders choose a child’s [*bache*] name.”

Here the parents of a newborn baby are considered children/*bache* simply because they are going to select their baby’s name. Until a few

decades ago, and still so in some small towns and families with a more traditional structure, selecting a newborn's name was the prerogative of grandparents. Even in large cities where young parents are free to select their children's names, they are expected to consult their (grand)parents as a gesture of respect, which in turn shows they are competent adults. In (3), the young parents in their 20s, are labeled "children" because they are not mature enough to show respect for the tradition, which in turn implies that having developed the competence to act in society in conformity with traditional values is sometimes considered a rite of passage into adulthood.

Similarly, a chronological child may be labeled a grownup based on manners and how they handle difficult situations. In other words, the shift from childhood to adulthood may sometimes be a sudden shift that comes about with a significant event in one's life such as marriage or the death of a major caregiver, primarily a parent, regardless of chronological age, as in the following examples:

(4) *"Sohrab cried. Kamran's aunt whispered: It seems as if he has grown 10 years bigger [i.e., older] since his father's death."*

(5) *I saw her in a strange condition: You see a girl who has painted her fingers with ink, her knees are dirty, who boisterously runs about chasing boys. And then, suddenly she's not a child [bache] anymore; the feeling in her eyes changes, her walking style changes—she can't live without love. The curve in her eyes show this.*

In (4), Sohrab, an early teenager whose father has passed away recently and he has been forced to endure both the sorrow of his loss and some

of his late father's responsibilities is described as 'big' or grownup. The description as 'bigger' (*bozorg*) does not imply older (in which case the word *pir* 'old' would be more appropriate); rather, it implies the transition from a carefree child into someone carrying responsibilities, who shows the self-restraint and wisdom expected of adults. Excerpt (5), describing a girl of 14, indicates that the experience of love may also transform a child into an adult.

A child is defined in article 1 of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) (1989) as "every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier." In the Iranian culture, however, no particular age is defined as the limit of childhood. There is only a puberty/maturity age: the Persian word for 'puberty' is *bolugh*, borrowed from Arabic, which also means 'maturity.' The two are separated by the collocations *bolughe jesmi* 'physical maturity', i.e., puberty' and *bolughe aghli* 'intellectual maturity.' *Bolugh* is defined according to Sharia law according to chronological age, which is 9 (or 13 for some modernist religious leaders) for girls and 15 for boys, at which age they will be responsible for performing religious duties such as daily prayers and fasting during Ramadan. This religious perspective is reflected in Iran's Civil Law where in the first note of article 1210, *bolugh* age is defined as 15 and 9 lunar years for boys and girls, respectively. The legal marriageability age is defined as 13 in article 1041 of the same law but marriage of someone above 9 is allowed with the father's permission only, and in cases of dispute, a judge's verdict on the intellectual maturity of the girl should be sought. Surprisingly, conventionally, the age for many economic and political acts requiring sound judgment and responsibility is 18. A person under 18 cannot sign contracts, have an

independent bank account, vote in public elections and is not allowed to own property or drive. The discrepancy between the religious and legal institutions, on the one hand, and the modern institutions influenced by international laws, on the other hand, shows itself in public discourse, and sometimes disputes, concerning ‘child marriage,’ ‘child execution,’ and ‘child labor’: while the legal system follows a local definition based on perceptions of maturity, the modernist children’s rights activists insist on a definition based on chronological age, as in the UNCR.

In summary, it appears that in Islamic Sharia laws, someone below puberty age is generally known as a child but other factors such as manners, the way a person behaves in the face of difficulties, including demonstrating maturity in one’s choices as well as physique have a significant impact in real situational contexts on describing someone as a child or an adult. In other words, childhood is socially constructed and situationally negotiated. In Persian, this is more true of *bache*, which is the more common one in everyday discourse, and less of *kudak*, which is more about chronological age and is more, but not exclusively, used in academic and bureaucratic discourse on children and childhood. This non-chronological definition of ‘child’ in the Iranian culture and the emphasis on intellectual maturity challenges the universalist definitions of childhood based solely on chronological age and lends support to perspectives that advocate a social constructionist view that focuses on historical and cultural variations (e.g., James and Prout, 1997; Gittins, 1998; Montgomery, 2009). The confusion over the non-age-based, traditional and the age-based, universalist definitions is reflected in, and is the locus of, an ongoing discursive and political conflict in the Iranian culture between tradition and Western style

modernity (see Adelkhah, 1999 for the complexities of modernity in Iran).

In sections 6.2 to 6.14, we will present the varied conceptualizations associated with child and childhood based on our corpus. We will use the word ‘child’ as a general term to refer to both *bache* and *kudak*, as well as *tefl*. However, the original Persian words will be added in parentheses or after a slash mark in the translations and where differences are important.

6.2 Child as the source of light, love, joy and happiness:

Children, especially newborns, are generally thought of positively in the Iranian culture. When someone is pregnant or has recently had a baby, people would say ‘*May light be in your eyes*’ as a cliché form of congratulation. Until recently, and still in many families, not having a child was equated with unhappiness because a child is considered the source of light in the household and cause of happiness of an individual or a family, as in the following comments:

(6) “*Anyone who hasn’t had a child [bache], who can’t have one, their house is dark (i.e., gloomy) and desolate.*”

(7) “*Āmirzā Abdozzaki didn’t have a child [bache] and that was an incurable pain.*”

(8) “*You don’t understand it now. Hopefully, when you die for your child [bache] [i.e., when you love your child], I’ll remind you of today. Boy, life without a child [bache] is like hell.*”

In these examples, a child is described as ‘light,’ and ‘delight’ and a childless life is described as ‘gloomy and desolate,’ ‘incurable pain, and ‘hell.’ In other expressions in the corpus, a child was described as “*happiness,*” “*light in the eyes,*”

“God’s bounty,” “one’s survival” both in marriage and the continuation of life and “*seal of love*”, i.e., creating love between husband and wife.

Thus, one of the most widespread, though not uncontested (see 6.10), conceptualizations of a child in the Iranian culture is that a child is a precious being, God’s bounty, that brings joy and happiness to parents’ and the extended family’s life, strengthens marital love, and helps the survival of the family.

6.3 Child as a lovely, joyful, curious and energetic being: Perhaps the reason why children are seen as a source of joy in the family, other than being God’s bounty, is that they are frequently envisioned as joyful and lovely creatures with inexhaustible energy and natural curiosity as in (9) to (11):

(9) *You don’t want children [bache]! That’s a lie.... Children are lovely. What do you mean I don’t want one?*

(10) *“Childhood [kudakāne] curiosity impelled me sometimes to open it and read it in the absence of my uncle”.*

(11) *“I was a child [bache], and full of energy, like any other child [bache].”*

The collocation “childhood/*kudakāne* curiosity” in (10) implies that curiosity is a natural characteristic of children. In still other examples from the corpus, not presented for space limitations, children are described as “blissful,” “gleeful,” “delightful,” “joyful,” “excited,” “ingenious,” and “imaginative” almost all with *kudak* rather than *bache*.

In many instances, the joyfulness of childhood is contrasted with the pains and sorrows of adulthood as in (12):

(12) *“Boys get old. Pains replace the childhood [kudakāneh] joys in their faces and then they die.”*

These uses conceptualize childhood as a period of freedom from responsibility as well (see 6.7).

6.4 Playful/Mischievous child: Children’s playfulness is sometimes referred to as *sheytanat* literally ‘deviltry’, which derives from the word *sheytān* (‘Satan’ or ‘the Devil’). A mischievous child may be described as *bacheye sheytun*, the spoken pronunciation of *sheytān*. This may trigger the “evil child” conceptualization for some people. However, no relation was found in our data between the Devil or Satan and the word *sheytanat*. *Sheytanat* is often used in relation to children to mean ‘mild mischief,’ ‘naughtiness,’ ‘pranks,’ ‘playfulness’ or ‘playful tricks’ mostly with a positive overtone, and collocates with the Persian equivalents of ‘freshness’ and ‘vigor,’ joyfulness, curiosity, frolicsomeness and esprit as in (13) to (15):

(13) *“Children [bache] immediately go on with their sheytanat [naughtiness] and playing. Their group is generally full of warmth and happiness. It’s as if they’re always partying.”*

(14) *“The children [bache] had gone to the bags and were inspecting them out of sheytanat [‘childhood curiosity or playfulness’], betting on their ability to guess at the contents by simply looking at the outside appearances.”*

(15) *“Well, dearest Khātun, he’s a child [bache] and sheytun [naughty/playful]. He’ll bother you and will disturb your convenience’, said Golchehreh.*

“What is all this nonsense talk! A child [bache] has to play, has to be free. The hustle and bustle of innocent and

simple-hearted children [bache] gives one deep joy and happiness', replied Nāzkhātun."

The idea of *sheytanat*, since it is often treated lightly and tolerated by adults as in (15), is in line with the conceptualization of children as source of happiness and lovely and joyful beings, and constructs childhood as a period of exploration and learning, testing the limits of society, and defying authority whether in the family or at school. This will give them a degree of freedom to act against the rules though only to a degree that the adult will permit. Going beyond the limits may activate the *tokhs* 'out-of-control' (section 6.11) conceptualization.

6.5 Carefree child: Children are considered not liable or responsible for their conduct as in the following excerpt where the concept of freedom from responsibility is explicitly referred to:

(16) "What can be done to a playful child [bache]? He's a child [bache]. What can be done to a child [bache] who has used a matchstick to set a house on fire out of playfulness or curiosity?"

This freedom from responsibility is seen as a significant element of contrast between a child and an adult as documented in (17):

(17) I feel unsettled, especially because I'm not a child [bache] any longer, not in the eyes of others, and cannot wander around in the alleys like I used to.

In (17) it is the beginning of summer holidays and the speaker, 17 or 18, has completed his senior high school. He considers himself a child in the sense of wanting to be carefree but is aware that people expect him to act responsibly,

i.e., be an adult. In other words, and as seen in the social definition of childhood in section 5.1, preparedness to shoulder responsibilities seems to be the rite of passage into adulthood. There were several nostalgic comments in the corpus where adults longed to return to the carefree childhood paradise.

6.6 Innocent child: In the corpus of the present study, the concept of the 'evil child' in the sense of a being who is "a product of their parents' intimacy, who must have the evil beaten out and replaced by good" (Sorin, 2005) had no equivalent and was absent. On the contrary, infants are believed to be clean and pure at birth in both pre-Islamic Zoroastrianism and in Islam and, therefore, 'innocent' because their mind is believed to be a tabula rasa or a clean slate until the age of puberty when they are expected to have been equipped with the toolkit to distinguish between good and evil, from which time they will be considered liable for their speech and conduct. Before that age, people are advised to be careful about what they say and do before children:

(18) "The child's [bache's] mind was like a clean slate, susceptible to any design. They had to be more careful."

In (18), the narrator has narrated a situation where philosophical thoughts and ideas about a spiritual cult have been spoken to a 9-year-old girl who is deeply affected, although she does not understand them. Seeing a child's mind as a tabula rasa has significant implications in practices of socialization and education, one of which is that it will make them moldable as in (19) quoted from a book in the corpus by Samad Behrangi (1939-1967), a teacher, author and one of the first social activists writing about the education of children back in the 1960s:

(19) “The gist of the matter [...] is that a child [*bache*] should be given a precise worldview.”

Viewing children’s minds as clean slates will also make their minds pure and free from evil as in the following extract:

(20) “I answered all the questions as much as my knowledge allowed with children’s [*kudakāne*] cleanness of heart.”

“Children’s cleanness of heart” in (20) implicates truthfulness with no intentional deception in mind. There is a popular aphorism in Persian that says: “*Hear the truth from a child,*” implying that children are honest and more reliable in a situation where the truth is likely to be concealed by adults.

The words for innocent¹ in Persian are the Arabic *masoom* ‘guiltless,’ ‘innocent,’ and ‘immaculate’ (Emami, 2006) and the Persian *bigonāh* ‘without guilt/sin.’ In our corpus, *tefl* and *kudak*, but less so for *bache*, collocate with the adjective *masoom*. However, ‘innocent’ is used in describing children in a number of contexts with little to do with innocence in its religious sense. For instance, in (21) a boy is invited to attach a charm that dispels evil eyes to the abdomen of a pregnant woman beneath her dress, which will expose him to her private body parts:

(21) *Because I was an innocent Seyed child [bache] who, unlike today’s children [bache], was quite cheshm-o-gush baste [naïve/ignorant, lit. ‘eye-and-ear closed’], they forced me to attach it [i.e., the charm] to her belly*

from beneath her dress as a sign of good omen.

He is described as a *bache Seyed*, a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, that will make him, in popular belief, less likely to have evil intentions, and *cheshm-o-gush baste* ‘lacking knowledge of the ways of the world’ (lit. ‘eye-and-ear closed’) to imply that the boy is ignorant of intimate body parts and relations and, in popular and religious jargon, has not yet become *momayez* (lit. ‘able to distinguish’), i.e., not reached the age of puberty and unfamiliar with sexual matters, as well as unable to distinguish right and wrong. Thus, innocent in this context means ‘unaware of sex and sex organs,’ implying that conscious knowledge about sex organs will taint the child’s mind. It is partly this conceptualization that was behind the resistance against approving and applying the UNESCO’s *Education 2030 Document* (i.e., *Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action*) in Iranian educational system because of its advocacy of sexual education, which will prematurely open children’s eyes and ears, something that has turned into another locus of political and discursive disputes between traditionalist and modernist forces in the country.

In (22) simple-mindedness is placed against slyness and deceptiveness:

(22) *I looked at him. I couldn’t know him. I didn’t know if he was simple or clever. Sometimes he was as simple and innocent as a little boy, and sometimes sly and secretive.*

Innocence of a child in this context is understood as unsophisticatedness, simplicity

¹ Etymologically, the English ‘innocent’ means ‘not knowing’, ‘ignorant’ or ‘silly’, but *masoom* in

Persian is an Arabic borrowing that means ‘infallible’, ‘unable to sin’ or ‘guiltless’.

and freedom from deception and trickery, which is associated with their purity of heart.

In most other contexts, however, innocent/*masoom* collocates with *tefl*, and is used where a child has been helpless, vulnerable and unprotected, or treated unfairly as in (23) to (26):

(23) *“The innocent child [tefl] is probably missing his mother; He’s probably missing his father.”*

(24) *“Innocent child [tefl]! You don’t know that your mother is of noble birth and considers it beneath her to touch your nose to help you blow it. It’s the duty of servants.”*

(25) *“What guilt has this little, innocent, tongue-tied child [tefl] committed that nobody knows who her black eyes and black hair have taken after!”*

(26) *“The innocent girl, we brought so many accusations against her, but she is too innocent and too clean to be capable of wrongdoing”*

In (23) the child’s parents have abandoned her. (24) showcases a situation where a child does not have a caring mother (from the perspective of the housemaid and babysitter), and (25) illustrates a situation where a foundling’s parents are unknown. In (26), the child is innocent because false accusations have been made against her without her being able to defend herself. In all these and other examples, an innocent child is conceptualized as a vulnerable, unprotected, and helpless being at the mercy of, or oppressed by, adults; who needs support and protection; and is the object of the onlookers’ pity.

To summarize, ‘innocent child’ in Persian conceptualizes children as pure and guiltless beings who can be trusted because of their pure hearts, not yet stained with trickery and deception and not yet aware of sex and sexual relations. At the same time, ‘innocent child’ refers to children’s vulnerability and need for protection against evils of the adult world. As a result, growing up partly involves losing one’s innocence.

6.7 Naïve child: A corollary of conceptualizing a child’s mind as a blank slate is that a child is viewed as a simple-minded, inexperienced and incompetent being who is deficient in the practical wisdom that is a necessary requirement of adult life. This naivety is sometimes evaluated positively in the sense of purity of heart and cleanness as in (20) above and (27) below:

(27) *We were all like this and it was quite normal. It was like children’s [bache] fights. We fought but never held a grudge and five minutes later we were friends and colleagues again. Shared pain had cleaned our souls and we were all children [bache] once more. We fought over the slightest thing, sharply criticized one another and quickly forgave each other.*

Sometimes the same naivety is assessed negatively as a form of inexperience mingled with stupidity as in (28):

(28) *“I’m not that simple and a child [bache] [i.e., not stupid], I know what’s what. You get paid to lay bricks and when I help you, it makes your job easier.”*

(28) is uttered by a 14-year-old boy in order to demand that he should be paid for his role in the bricklaying job.

A further consequence of viewing children as naïve beings is that they are deemed ‘ignorant’ and ‘stupid’ beings incapable of distinguishing between right and wrong, or appropriate and inappropriate. In (29), a 16-year-old boy from a well-reputed family has engaged in political activity against the government. The local sheriff, an acquaintance of the family, suggests that the mother petition the high-ranking officials who would arrive the following day, and ask for forgiveness pleading that her son is ‘a child [*bache*]’ and ‘an ignorant person’:

(29) *“Tell her to write: ‘He’s a child [*bache*] and has done something childish[*bachegāne*]; he has been ignorant. Children [*bache*] err, elders [*bozorgtar*] implying both adults and ones higher in social hierarchy] forgive.’ I think this will help.”*

In the rest of the story, the young boy objects to his parents’ decision saying that he has selected his way knowingly, but the mother’s petition works and he is pardoned.

The type of knowledge expected of an adult presumably not found in children is not information but is a practical wisdom, a type of cleverness or cunning, that can save lives in difficult situations. In the following excerpt, a police officer is searching for a fugitive. He enters a young barber’s shop and threatens him in order to elicit information about the whereabouts of the fugitive. The barber, in his early 20s, acts defiantly and responds aggressively. After the officer orders him handcuffed, Rahman, an older citizen in his 50s, meddles and the following conversation ensues:

(30) *“Rahman held the captain’s hand: ‘He doesn’t know what he’s saying, Captain. He’s a child [*bache*].’*

*‘You call him a child [*bache*]?’*

‘Don’t look at his height, Captain.’”

Here, “he’s a child” implies that the barber is too young and inexperienced to know how to speak to a high-ranking officer. Later, after the officer leaves, Rahman advises the young barber that he should speak deferentially and obediently in these situations if he does not want trouble.

The idea that children cannot understand or do not have the power to distinguish is one of the most common conceptualizations often expressed with *bache*, rather than *kudak*. While *kudak* is more commonly used in the sense of simplicity and simple-mindedness positively, *bache* carries the negative connotation of stupidity too. This distinction becomes clear when we compare the not untypical pairs of collocations like *konjkāvi kudakāne* that denotes ‘children’s curiosity,’ as in example (10), and *konjkāvi bachegāne* denoting ‘childish/stupid curiosity.’

One other consequence of conceptualizing children as simple-minded is that they are seen as easily deceivable, something that was frequently observed in our corpus, only with *bache* rather than *kudak*:

(31) *“What is all this nonsense? Do you think you are deceiving a child [*bache*]?”*

Though this has changed dramatically in recent years and many see children, especially the younger generations, as intelligent and cunning:

(32) *“Now that I think about it, I realize that the intellect and sagacity of a modern child [*bache*] is greater than a hundred of those [older generation] adults.”*

Therefore, a child is conceptualized as someone simple-minded, both positively and negatively, inexperienced and ignorant of adult ways, unable to make sound judgments.

6.8 Intolerant child: Another conceptualization of children is that they are perceived to be intolerant in a particular cultural sense. In (33), that occurred on the night after presidential election in 2024, on a social media platform, a supporter of the winning candidate, Masoud Pezeshkian, writes an emotional comment and another person, a supporter of the losing candidate, evaluates it as childish, *bachegāne*, behavior:

(33) A: *Mr. Doctor Pezeshkian, you have been a good father to your children for 30 years. From tonight on you will be the nation's father. Please be a good father to us.*

B: *How childish [bachegāne]!*

A: *Dear friend, janbe dāshte bāsh [roughly, 'be a good sport']. A child [bache] is someone who cannot accept defeat.*

The use of *bachegāne* in response to the emotional comment constructs a child as someone sensational and incapable of rational thinking. In response to that, the first speaker says: *janbe dāshte bash*, 'have *janbe*' roughly translated as 'be a good sport.' The keyword here is *janbe* which appears to be a 'cultural keyword' (Wierzbicka, 1997) with, to our knowledge, no direct equivalent in English. *Janbe* literally means 'side', 'aspect' (Emami, 2006) or 'dimension.' It is defined as "the mental power and capability to accept something" (Anvari, 2002) often used in the positive adjective *bājanbe* (with *janbe*) and the negative adjectives *kamjanbe* 'of little *janbe*' and

bijanbe ('without *janbe*') to describe people's behavior, denoting:

"1. one who has no tolerance for unpleasant things or speech and shows illogical reaction to them; 2. The quality of someone who forgets his former [inferior] social position and looks down upon others when he reaches a high position" (Anvari, 2002).

Janbe covers many aspects of behavior, including showing tolerance, admittance to defeat, sportsmanship, open-mindedness, low sensitivity to criticism, ability to take humor and the like. As a result, when someone is described as a child who lacks *janbe*, it construes children as beings that have to learn these qualities to become adults. In other words, an adult without *janbe* is not a full adult and still resembles children.

6.9 Inferior, complaisant child:

Considering that a child is conceptualized as a naïve being still unacquainted with the ways of the world, it is not surprising that in many instances in the corpus, a child is considered as inferior to adults, expected to be obedient and comply with the desires and injunctions of adults because they know what is best for the child.

(34) *Mirzā was a modest and humble person who said hello even to a child [bache].*

In (34) the word 'even' implicates that a child is inferior in status to adults and has to say hello first rather than the other way around. Traditionally, it is the obligation of the younger person to say hello to an older person. This expectation is not limited to the relationship between adults and children but permeates other relations where status differences hold. By being obligated to say hello first to their superior

in age, the child is internalizing the rules of social hierarchy that run through almost any relationship in the Iranian culture (Beeman, 1986).

Moreover, a collocate of the word *bache*, but less so of *kudak* and *tefl*, and a positively valenced description of children, is *harfgushkon* (lit. ‘talk-listener,’ ‘obedient’) ‘someone who listens to, i.e., obeys, what is said’:

(35) “A child [*bache*] should not interfere in adults’ talk, shouldn’t argue about anything.”

(36) Listen to [i.e., follow] what is said, child! [*harf gush kon, bache!*] We know your best interests better.

(37) You’re his father and have authority. You certainly know better than the child [*bache*] what is good for him.

As illustrated in (35) and (36), a child is expected to obey their elders, especially their father (37) and avoid disagreeing with them because elders know what the child’s best interests are. Historically, though not in all families nowadays, one means of achieving this complaisance has been through inflicting fear in the child of elders, especially parents and teachers, as illustrated in (38):

(38) If they [i.e., teachers] do even worse than this [i.e., punishment] to a child, one should accept it. A child has to be afraid of teachers and elders.

A subtler, and perhaps more common, strategy for achieving complaisance is through keeping a distance between adults, especially parents and teachers, and children so they would know their place in the hierarchy:

(39) Parents have learnt by experience that when dealing with children [*bache*] they should not put the formalities aside [*nabāyad ru dād*]. There should always be a veil in between. A child has to be kept wavering between fear and hope.

What is rendered as ‘not put the formalities aside’ is ‘*ru nadādan*’ (lit. ‘face not give’) in Persian which has an important place in the presentation of self in the Iranian culture (Hosseini et al. 2018; Hosseini, 2022). *Ru* (lit. ‘face’ or ‘front part of the head’) as a cultural keyword, is sometimes associated with self-denial and the suppression of self but in (39) it designates keeping a distance between the adult and the child in terms of degree of relational closeness, and not letting the child get the upper hand in the relationship. This implies that the adult has to keep the balance in the power-distance equilibrium so that the child would not dominate the relationship. In cases where a child controls the relationship a likely criticism would be “*ru dādei ke porru shode*” (lit. ‘You have given face so s/he has become full-face’) ‘You have been too indulgent’ or ‘You’ve spoiled the child’ (on the concept of *ru* and its place in the Iranian culture see Hosseini, 2022). That is why a frequent piece of advice to young teachers in the Iranian culture is to keep their social distance from students, so that they can hold their control and dominance.

6.10 Child as a nuisance: Although children are generally conceptualized positively as a source of light, and full of energy, they may be seen as a nuisance, and annoyance as well, especially among some educated individuals:

(40) Instead of writing poems, I found [i.e., had] 18 or so children who are life pests [i.e., a nuisance], and early orphans [because they are late children].

(41) *I belong in a higher world, I'm a superior man. I'm happy I don't have a child. Mahmood says, 'a child means prison, it means sin'. 'Nobody is qualified enough to have a child, not even us' he added.*

In (40) a father who sees his children as the reason for his life failures labels them 'life pests' or a nuisance. In (41), having children is conceptualized as a jail that restricts parents' freedom and having children is considered a sin because they are difficult and no one is qualified enough to train them.

6.11 Out-of-control child: An uncontrollably mischievous child is described as *tokhs* (*kh* pronounced like *ch* in the Scottish *loch*) which is a word of unknown origin defined as "a vile and naughty child," denoting "a restless and mischievous child ... who has an insatiable greed for playing, and a tendency toward orneriness, and vexing others, used to describe children under around 14 or 16" (Dekhoda 1998). Collocates of the word in the corpus were *sharur* 'vile', *sarkesh* 'rebellious', *harfnashnow* 'disobedient', *nafahm* 'not amenable to reason', *kaleshagh* 'pigheaded', *badzabān* 'foul-mouthed', and *vahshi* 'wild'. Excerpt (42) offers an example description:

(42) *"While we were doing the construction work, the village's tokhs [vile] children pissed on the cement and plaster, out of malice. I wondered how much piss their bladders could hold!"*

Precisely what distinguishes a *sheytun* child from a *tokhs* one is a matter of ideology: for example, one may describe one's own child *sheytun* but another's *tokhs*, showing its social rather than biological nature. The adjective *tokhs* collocates only with *bache* and always has negative connotations.

6.12 Cursed child: Perhaps the closest concept to the evil child is *nahs* ('cursed', 'unlucky') child and only collocates with *bache*. A child is considered cursed that would bring bad luck when, for example, their mother dies in childbirth, a disaster coincides with their birth, or is the result of an extramarital affair:

(43) *My birth was in the latest cholera year in which it is said a third of Iran's population died. My mother caught cholera at the time of my birth and died. Every one said that the child [bache] is a jinx and, frankly, they were not totally wrong.*

An unwanted child may also be called a curse as in (44):

(44) *She held her protruded belly, which was really similar to an exploding mountain, between her hands and said: 'I don't want this child [bache]. I hate this cursed child. This child is malevolent, a disaster.'*

It is a common, but nowadays controversial, belief that a misbegotten child is unlikely to become a decent person, or a legitimate child whose parents earn all or part of their living through religiously forbidden methods may turn into a villain or criminal. Thus, a child's behavior depends on their parents' deeds. The following comment is made by an aunt after a nephew has stolen an expensive rug from her house:

(45) *"Gosh! what had my late older brother eaten that made this child [bache] such a degenerate person?"*

The belief that some children are born malevolent and cursed and bring evil to others' life is outdated and may be heard only in the speech of the uneducated elderly people.

6.13 Child-in-control: There was no direct reference to the snowballing child (Sorin, 2005), or “child in control in the adult-child relationship,” in our data. However, over the past two decades and in analogy with *pedarsālāri* ‘patriarchy’, the word *farzandsālāri* (‘filiarchy,’ ‘filiocracy’ or ‘pediarchy’) has been coined to describe a situation in which the child is the dominant figure in the family. A common complaint these days by parents who are in their fifties is: “*when we were kids, there was patriarchy and now that we are parents there’s filiarchy*” which reflects changes in the Iranian society in the status and conceptualization of children (see Adelkhah, 1999).

6.14 Agency and negotiation in child-adult relations: Even though our data was predominantly of a written type, we could still see traces of how children negotiate their position in relation to others and the situation, thus playing a more or less active role in their life. We argued in Section 6.4 that *sheytanat* involves a degree of agency by children in testing the limits of society and tolerance of adults. However, children’s agency is not limited to that. In (46), from a best-seller children’s novel, a 12-year-old boy is trying to negotiate his position by pointing to his competency as proof of his entrance into adulthood:

(46) *I’m not a child [bache]. I’m a poet. My poem has been published in this magazine. Come and see.*

“I’m a poet whose poem has been published” as the boy’s proof for the end of childhood, uncovers the ideology that showing competence in what adults normally do is the rite of passage into adulthood in the Iranian culture—as we saw in the definition of childhood based on the word *bache*. Moreover, children may use the multiple conceptualizations of childhood to their

advantage, thus negotiating their wants with major caregivers, as in (47):

(47) *“Grandma said [to Auntie]: I say may God protect him. He’s still a child [bache] and has a long time, he still has his education to finish.*

I said: ‘How am I a child [bache], Grandma? Frankly, I want it [i.e., marriage] very much!’

[...]

‘But as Grandma said, I’m still a child and my mouth smells of [mama’s] milk!’”

The conversation is from a novel in which the main character, the 14-year-old son of a landlord, has fallen in love with a live-in housemaid, though nobody yet knows who. When the grandmother calls him too young [*bache*] to marry, he resists by saying ‘*How am I a child?*’, implying that he is a grownup. However, when he realizes that his aunt has a different girl in mind for him, he prefers to be called a child/*bache*.

Even younger children may engage in negotiation with their parents and educators as the following not untypical conversation between the first author and his 9-year-old son shows:

(48) *Child: You and Mum don’t let me decide for myself.*

Father: Can you give an example?

Child: You don’t let me decide for my money.

Father: But you ARE free. Only you need to learn how to spend it.

*Child: You think I'm not wise enough
(lit., You think I don't have the brain).*

In other words, children in modern Iran, as elsewhere in the world, are “active, creative social agents who produce their own unique children’s cultures while simultaneously contributing to the production of adult societies” (Corsaro, 2018). However, the precise mechanisms and the tools they use to shape their world and create their own culture is something that needs to be studied. As cultural insiders, we can add that conceptualizing children as active agents is a relatively recent understanding primarily found in some families with higher education. Children have now greater leverage in negotiating their positions in matters concerning their own life and sometimes the family’s life. However, the parents’ and teachers’ (sub)conscious conceptualization of children and childhood plays a more prominent role in the quality and quantity of this negotiation.

To sum up this section, in the Iranian culture, childhood as conceptualized in *bache*, as the more common word, is socially constructed, and reflects fluid, context-dependent definitions with emphasis on intellectual and physical maturity and responsibility. However, *kudak*, the formal term, emphasizes chronological age. Our linguistic analysis illustrates that, on the one hand, children are seen positively as divine blessings that bring light, joy and happiness to life; as innocent and pure beings viewed as clean slates that are vulnerable and morally untainted until puberty; and their curiosity, playfulness and mild mischief (*sheytanat*) is tolerated and even appreciated as exploration and energy. On the other hand, they are viewed negatively as naïve and inexperienced beings that lack practical wisdom, sometimes dismissed as ignorant or easily deceived; as inferior ones in the social hierarchy expected to be obedient; as

intolerant and emotionally driven lacking the patience and rationality expected of an adult; and as nuisance, and burden limiting personal freedom; as out-of-control and unruly (*tokhs*) creatures, and less commonly, as cursed (*nahs*) ones in cases of malevolence. Despite these, children increasingly assert agency by, for example, negotiating roles or challenging adults, particularly in more modernized households. Concepts like filiararchy (*farzandsālārī*), where children dominate the household, illustrate shifting power dynamics from parents, especially the father to children, in the Iranian society. These competing conceptualizations underscore the heterogeneity of the Iranian cultural schema of childhood (*kudakī*) shaped by competing discourses of tradition (e.g., Sharia-based injunctions and cultural values of obedience, purity, and respect for status) and modernity (e.g., self-assertion, individuality and agency, and children’s rights). As cognitive cultural concepts, these conceptualizations are emergent and are heterogeneously distributed in the minds of people, which means not everyone has all the concepts in mind at any given time. Instead, they are in the collective consciousness of the society and each, or some, is evoked/emerges in real time situations and can be negotiated in the context.

7. Implications for early childhood education

The findings of the study highlights the heterogeneity of Iranians’ conceptualizations of childhood that are shaped by ongoing negotiations between tradition and modernity. This diverse conceptualization is reflected in both parents and educators’ practices in dealing with children and the educational materials that they utilize with children.

The positive conceptualizations of children in Iranian culture, wherein a child is

seen as a source of light, delight, and happiness, might have had implications for childhood education. This cultural perspective fosters an environment where children are highly valued, leading to educational practices that emphasize the emotional and social well-being of the child. In early childhood education, this can translate to nurturing environments that prioritize the joy and happiness of children, recognizing them as essential to the emotional fabric of the family and society. For example, when a child is considered “God’s bounty” and a “seal of love” within a family, early childhood educators might be encouraged to reinforce the child’s sense of belonging and worth within the classroom. Activities that promote love, bonding, and a strong sense of community are likely to be emphasized. Moreover, the belief that a child strengthens marital love and family survival can lead educators to collaborate closely with parents, ensuring that the child’s educational experiences align with the values and happiness of the family. This partnership between educators and families underscores the importance of holistic development, where a child’s emotional and social growth is as critical as their cognitive development.

However, these implications and consequent actions in the curriculum and pedagogy of ECE are quite recent and as discussed by Talaee (2019), one sees a gap between this conceptualization of children and the real acts of the adults in regard to the education and upbringing of children in the early years of the 20th century in Iran. One can argue that the new child-centered educational approaches in ECE is under the dominance of transnational discourse of ECE in Iran and that might explain why some conservative policies, developed by highly centralized and religion-based education system, seek to go against the

hegemony of westernized, purely child-centered paradigms of childhood education.

Based on these conceptual analyses of children and childhood in the Persian corpus, we argue that in the Iranian cultural context, as echoed in the international discourse (e.g. Arneil, 2002; Mintz, 2018), one can see a diverse array of understanding of the child and/or childhood and its corresponding educational practices. This lack of homogeneity, primarily espoused by the negotiation between tradition and modernity, demonstrates itself in two primary ways of conceptualizing children: the “becoming” child which is viewed as an “adult in the making,” someone who is on the path to becoming rational and competent like an adult. In this view, education is centered around the teacher, with students seen as recipients of knowledge, expected to learn truths and facts established by adult society through a professionally designed curriculum. On the other hand, the “being” child is considered a social actor in their own right, capable of actively shaping their own childhood. In this approach, education is student-centered, requiring teachers to create an environment that allows children to develop in their own unique ways. Translating these two conceptualizations into pedagogical practices, one can distinguish an “either-or” and “both-and” educational approach at both policy and practice levels of ECE in contemporary Iran.

The former is highlighted mainly at the practice level where early childhood educators and leaders have competitive and sometime paradoxical factors to take into account, such as complying with the country’s centralized ECE national curriculum for official purposes and addressing family’s requests and needs. The latter is highlighted mainly at the research level where academics emphasize the “de-schoolifying” of early childhood pedagogy.

8. Conclusions

This study aimed to elucidate the uses of the Persian words for ‘child’ as cognitive cultural conceptualizations combining corpus-based data collection methods with ethnographic analyses in cultural linguistics. We were able to show the variability in understandings of the concept of a child as a distributed cognitive cultural conceptualization. The findings underscored the coexistence of competing, age-based and social definitions of a child that echo the ongoing clashes between tradition and modernity in the Iranian culture, thus, showcasing how the study of conceptualizations of childhood can contribute to uncovering some cultural values and conflicts (see Gilliam & Gulløv, 2022). We also noted that generally, children are positively conceptualized and the evil child as understood in the West is alien to the Iranian culture. Multiple, sometimes conflicting, conceptualizations were found that reflect the heterogeneity of society as well as the multiplicity of social contexts. The study contributes to the literature on childhood by showing the diversity of childhood concepts within a non-European culture, and how cultural values shape these understandings.

Since the selected corpus was primarily based on written materials produced over the past one hundred years, no statistical information could be provided on the prevalence of each conceptualization not only in the Iranian culture at large, but also in different social groups and through time. Moreover, because the Iranian society is a society in transition, we suggest, a historical analysis based on significant milestones in this society, e.g., before and after the 1979 revolution, after the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) when the development plans started, and after the digital revolution, could shed light on how socio-economic developments impact understandings of childhood and the

cultural values and conflicts behind them as well as educational practices founded on those conceptualizations.

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