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The Influence of Local Television News Frames on Attitudes about Childcare: An Evaluation Report to the Benton Foundation

Drastic changes in American lifestyles have called into question the future of America's children. For instance, the lack of kinship networks—a product of urbanization and increased individual mobility—limits the traditional childrearing functions performed by members of the extended family. Rising divorce rates and an increase in “out-of-wedlock” births produce more single-parent households. And as more women enter the workforce—particularly outside of the home—the role of women in the family is at odds with the historical pattern of men being the primary “bread-winners” and women taking care of the home and the family. The net result is that finding suitable childcare services is now a central feature of American family life.

This claim is nicely supported by a number of national public opinion polls. A recent Harris survey found that 55% of those surveyed believed it was “extremely” or “very” difficult to “find affordable high quality childcare”. And over one-half of the respondents said that a lack of acceptable childcare reduced their job performance (Taylor, 1998). Likewise, a national opinion survey sponsored by Reader's Digest reports that 68% of adult respondents think that the availability of good day care is “very” “fairly” important to them (Institute for Social Inquiry, 1996). In short, cost-effective high quality childcare is important to the American public.

Advocates, however, have found tough sledding in their efforts to get the country to act on behalf of children). A lukewarm public has met large-scale advocacy efforts such as the Children's Defense Fund and other high-profile initiatives (National Commission on Children, 1999; Takanishi, 1998). And while there have been obvious success stories—Head Start and school lunches quickly come to mind—they are dwarfed by a dominant paradigm that demonizes America's youth (Males, 1995). Television is among the chief purveyors of this imagery. On an almost nightly basis the news airs stories about troubled “superpredators” (Dorfman, Woodruff, Chavez, and Wallack, 1997). The consequence of this type of coverage according to media effects research is that exposure to teen crime (particularly minority crime) increases public support for the most punitive public policies

(Gilliam and Iyengar, forthcoming). Even in cases where the dominant paradigm about kids is not invoked, stories about issues such as childcare often rely on simplistic storylines. Common examples are news segments dealing with “daycare horror stories”. This frame depicts childcare as simply a matter of finding a secure place to keep the kids during the workday. It says little about the possibility that childcare enhances children or improves adult job performance. In all, this raises an important point -- what role does the media play in the public’s understanding of the childcare issue? Answering this question is the primary focus of our report.

The remainder of the document is broken down into four sections. In the first we discuss the influence of television news on the viewing public. Particularly relevant is the significance of “framing” as a new tool. The second section details the methods of the study. Here we describe an experimental design that allows us to discretely assess the impact of various news frames on attitudes about childcare. The third section presents the results from the empirical work. The final section considers the implications of the findings and their connection to future communications strategies employed by children’s advocates.

The Power of Television News Frames

There is little doubt that television plays an important role in the lives of most Americans. The research literature tells us that the news has the power to set public agendas, direct attention to particular issues and ultimately influence how we think about those issues (Lippmann, 1922; see, also Iyengar and Reeves, 1997). In short, television is an important link between citizens and their government. And local television news -- whether measured as audience share, advertising revenues, or hours of programming -- is now the public’s primary source of public affairs information (Hess, 1991; Paper and Gerhard, 1997; Roper - Starch, 1994).

In this report we are particularly interested in the impact of media framing. That is, the media practice of constructing news stories in ways that call attention to particular aspects of an issue. A plethora of studies confirm that how the media covers a given subject has a significant impact on the public’s understanding of that subject (see, Gitlin, 1980; Iyengar,

1991). The basic dynamic is that the included elements constitute a frame of reference for comprehending a particular story or topic. Moreover, what is excluded from the frame also carries significance because it narrows the range of salient and pertinent information. Media scholars have identified two basic types of framing – episodic and thematic. Episodic news frames concentrate on particular events involving specific acts and actors. Little effort is made to connect the elements of the specific instance to any broader set of concerns. Most television news stories about (violent) crime are prototypical examples of episodic frames – a single crime, a single perpetrator, a single place and time (Gilliam, Iyengar, Simon, and Wright, 1996; Gilliam and Iyengar, 1997). On the other hand, thematic news frames present a much broader picture by incorporating contextual elements into the story. Going back to our crime example, thematic coverage might focus on the availability of guns in that particular neighborhood, the area's history of violence, the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim, or the unemployment rates in the surrounding communities. The nature of the news frame, therefore, can measurably influence the way that people come to understand an issue. ^{i[1]}

With regard to the media, children's advocates have focused most of their attention on the impact of commercial programming on America's youth (Children Now, 1998; Kunkel, 1994). While these efforts are not worthy, they leave an important issue unresolved. Namely, the impact of news programming on adult attitudes about children's issues. In other words, the focus on entertainment has concealed the consequential effect of television news on public perceptions. Moreover, it neglects the importance of adult attitudes to the public debate about kids. The underlying purpose of this report is to marry a focus on the power of television news programming to the dynamics of public opinion on children's issues. In the next section we describe an experimental procedure which allows us to test the impact of news frames on public attitudes about childcare.

Method

We employ a novel experimental technique to assess the impact of childcare news frames on the viewing public. We designed the experiments in this study so that the only differences between any two groups of viewers concerned the particular news frame to which

they were exposed. Four levels of the manipulation were established. First, participants watched a news story depicting child care as the responsibility of employers. Subjects viewed a segment about a company that provides subsidized, on-site day care services for their employees. Second, some participants watched a story featuring early childhood as the most important point in human development. The story highlights a woman who is a mother and an elementary school teacher. While interacting with her child at a day care center she remarks about the importance of the early years to the performance of school-age children. A third set of participants watched another story about child care that depicted the issue as a simple matter of finding a safe place to keep children during work hours. The story featured a government inspector and a basic checklist telling parents to look for such things as a posted license, clean facilities, etc. ^{ii[2]} Finally, the control group did not see a child care story. Participants watched an eleven-minute videotaped newscast (including commercials) described as having been selected at random from news programs broadcast during the past week. Depending upon the condition to which they were assigned (at random), they watched a news story on child care (approximately 45 seconds). The report on child care was inserted into the middle position of the newscast following the first commercial break. The study was administered at a major shopping mall in Los Angeles. On their arrival, participants were given their instructions and then completed a short pretest questionnaire concerning their social background, political ideology, level of interest in political affairs, and media habits. They then watched the videotape of the newscast. At the end of the videotape, participants completed a lengthy questionnaire probing their political and social views. After completing the questionnaire, subjects were debriefed in full (including a full explanation of the experimental procedures) and were paid the sum of \$15. ^{iii[3]}

Analysis and Findings

The post-test questionnaire explored respondents' attitudes on a wider range of issues related to child care. Four sets of items are examined in this analysis. The first is a battery of questions about the saliency of various issues including the well-being of children. The second series focuses on basic questions of attribution of responsibility. The third classification concentrates on policies, programs, and spending patterns of the public sector. The last portion looks at the related issue of the role of women in family life.

Two specifications are performed in the analysis. ^{iv[4]} At the broadest level, a comparison is made between the control condition and seeing any news story about childcare. This tells us whether or not exposure to the “average” news story influences people’s attitudes above and beyond the control group. The analysis is further refined to permit a more stringent test of each individual news story. Here the comparison is between the mean of a given condition versus the average mean of the other three conditions (including the control mean). This gives the independent effect of each news condition -- from both the other news stories and the control condition. ^{vi[5]} We are now in a position to examine the joint and independent effects of childcare news frames on public opinion. ^{vi[6]}

Table 1 presents the impact of childcare news frames on attitudes about the saliency of children’s issues. Respondents were presented with a list of five social issues and asked to rate them in terms of “how important that issue is to you personally”. The issues are “the needs of children”, “early childhood education”, “crime and violence”, “drugs and alcohol abuse”, and the “environment”. The basic expectation is that exposure to any of the childcare stories should heighten the saliency of the two items related to children’s issues. In addition, we expect exposure to the early childhood development frame to be particularly important to attitudes about early childhood education. The findings indicate mixed results. Seeing any of the three childcare news frames marginally increases the percentage of subjects who cite the needs of children as an important issue (compared to the control condition). And exposure to the “employer responsibility” condition raises the number of people who believe the “needs of children” is an important issue by 7% over the composite mean and 6% over the control mean. On the other hand, exposure to the childcare news frames has little effect on the perception that early childhood education is important (if anything the stories actually reduce support for early education). Unexpectedly, but perhaps most interesting, exposure to any news frame decreases crime and violence as an important issue by an average of around 18%. Exposure to the “employer responsibility” condition reduces the saliency of crime even further. This is especially noteworthy given that the news frames did little to change attitudes about drugs or the environment. It would appear that exposure to childcare news frames has a modest impact on the saliency of children’s issue. Less expected, however, is the finding that exposure to childcare news stories lessens the importance of crime and violence. It is if the public believes that any program that keep kids off the streets lowers the crime rate.

The next two tables concern the impact of news frames on attitudes about childcare. In particular, they ask subjects who is responsible for ensuring access to childcare and what programmatic options are preferable. We have three main hypotheses. One, because much of early childhood is spent with the family (as opposed to the schools), we expect exposure to the story about early human development to increase the proportion of subjects citing the family as the primary institution to ensure access to childcare. Two, exposure to the employer responsibility frame should increase the number of people preferring that option. And third, subjects whose story about finding a safe place to put children should favor the government as primarily responsible for childcare (recall that the story featured a state inspector and talked about licensing).

Table 2 reflects the percentage of subjects citing the family, employers, or government as primarily responsible for access to childcare. ^{vii[7]} Our expectations are generally met. Exposure to the early childhood news frame increases the percentage of people who say the family is responsible by an average of ten percent over the average of the other conditions (and 12% over the control group). Similarly, exposure to the employer responsibility frame increases by about 10% over the average of the other three means. And while watching the government regulation story does not increase the number of people citing the government when compared to the control group, it does produce much higher percentages than the other two news frames. In sum, exposure to our three stories about childcare changes opinions about attribution of responsibility.

Subjects were also asked to rank three childcare options – flexible employers, providing trained teachers, and providing caring adults – in terms of what was most important to them. In addition, they were asked if they would be willing to pay \$100 more per year to support the option they ranked as most important. ^{viii[8]} These questions were asked relative to two scenarios – whether children are under 2 years of age or, alternatively, between 3 - 5 years of age. Our expectations are the same as before: caring adults represent family; flexible employers indicate employer responsibility; and “trained teachers” and “tax increase” suggest government involvement.

Table 3 presents the percentage of people who rank the option most important and the percentage of people who would pay a tax increase. ^{ix[9]} Once again, our basic hypotheses are

supported by the data. Regardless of the age of the child in question, exposure to the early childhood frame raises support for “caring adults” as the most important childcare option (by about ten percentage points). Likewise, exposure to the employer responsibility frame increases support for that option by up to 14% (in the case of children 3–5 years of age). Finally, although exposure to the government regulation frame did not increase the number of people choosing “trained teachers” as the most important option, exposure to this frame did increase a willingness to pay a tax increase. Apparently, people’s attitudes about childcare policy options are influenced by how the issue is framed.

The next pair of tables concern the role of government in providing for children and families. Subjects were asked to rate the effectiveness of several programmatic options that might possibly be undertaken by the federal government. ^{x[10]} The options are:

1. 1. providing tax credits to parents
2. 2. providing tax credits to businesses
3. 3. require that employers allow leave from work to care for a new baby
4. 4. require that employers allow leave from work to care for a sick child
5. 5. subsidized childcare for poor mothers whose leave welfare to work.

Our expectation is that exposure to the early childhood frame should increase support for tax credits to parents (*the family*); exposure to the employer responsibility frame should increase support for tax credits to businesses and requiring employers to allow leave from work to deal with the health of the children (*employer responsibility*); and exposure to the government regulation frame should give the greatest boost to subsidized care for poor mothers whose leave welfare to work (*government*).

Table 4 gives the impact of childcare news frames on attitudes about the effectiveness of various government actions. It is worth mentioning that the most preferred option is subsidized childcare for mothers whose leave welfare to work. The least favored option is providing tax credits to businesses. Nonetheless, between one-half and three-quarters of the sample supports some type of government intervention.

This portion of the analysis presents more modest results. Exposure to the early childhood development story, for example, does not increase support for tax credits to parents. While the employer responsibility frame fares a little better, it only has a significant effect on requiring employers to allow work leave to care for a sick child (although it is in the right direction for the other two items). On the other hand, watching the news story about finding a safe place to keep children during the day (government regulation) does significantly boost support for a program of subsidies for mothers whose welfare to work. And finally, it is noticeable that exposure to any news segment on child care increases the percentage of people who favor providing tax credits for businesses. The perceived effectiveness of different programs, it seems, is not wholly dependent on how news stories are framed.

Another way to get at policy attitudes is to tie specific proposals to levels of government spending. In other words, perceived programmatic effectiveness may be a vague measure by which to judge policy preferences. Table 5 examines the impact of child care news frames on the percentage of people who support social welfare spending on a range of children's programs.^{xi[11]} Given that all of the programs listed represent government action, our simple expectation is that exposure to the government regulation frame will produce the greatest increase in support for higher levels of spending. In the main this hypothesis is supported -- exposure increases calls for higher spending in three of the four cells, two of which are significantly different from the control group). But the data also reveal an unanticipated result. Namely, that exposure to the employer responsibility frame has a large effect on attitudes about spending on children's programs. The most notable instances are the effects for food stamps (an average increase of 16% over the other three means) and Headstart (+9%). Thus not only does the frame that invoked the government (government regulation) increase support for spending but the employer responsibility story also leads subjects to support higher levels of governmental outlays.

The final table tests the impact of child care news frames on a related issue -- the role of women in the family. At the beginning of the report we noted that the exodus of women from the home to the workplace is one of the prime factors for changes in American family life. This trend has called into question traditional gender roles and has fueled a great deal of public discussion. Our expectation is that exposure to the early childhood development

frame, with its implicit attention to family matters, will produce more progressive attitudes about the role of women in the family.

Table 6 reports the impact of child care news frames on the percentage of people who hold progressive attitudes about the role of women. ^{xiii[12]} Our basic expectation is not supported. Exposure to the early childhood development frame does not promote progressive attitudes about the role of women. On the other hand, watching the story about finding a secure place to keep children significantly influences attitudes about the role of women. In the most extreme case, exposure to this story increases support for women by 23% over the control condition and 14% over the composite mean (of the other three conditions). There is at least one plausible explanation for this finding. Because much of the responsibility for securing child care falls on working women, it is possible that the concerns about licensing and regulation raised in the story invoke empathy. That is, people may feel that given the precarious state of child care services having to navigate this uncertain terrain is a thankless task. In response, therefore, the public holds less harsh attitudes about the role of women in the family.

To conclude, in some instances seeing any news story about child care increases the public's willingness to act on behalf of children. However, these effects are scattered and weak. More to the point, the evidence suggests that how the story is framed makes a great deal of difference for public understanding of the child care issue. Perhaps the strongest and most consistent finding is that exposure to the employer responsibility frame not only increases support for the role of employers but also increases the saliency of child care and the willingness to spend more money on child care programs. Moreover, exposure to this frame also decreases the saliency of crime and violence as an important social issue.

Conclusion and Recommendations

There is little doubt that the state of America's children is in precarious condition. While it is easy to overstate the case (see, Males, 1995), it is equally important to understand that there are troubling warning signs on the horizon. Rising poverty, infant mortality, and juvenile arrests for violent crimes are typically cited as the important indicators. Against this backdrop children's advocates have struggled to move adult opinion in a way that encourages

public willingness to act on behalf of children. Part of the problem has to do with the public's perception of young people. A recent national poll conducted by Public Agenda finds that large numbers of adults think today's youth are "rude", "irresponsible", and "wild". This imagery is in no small measure fueled by regular media accounts of violent, anti-social youths. This is important because public opinion is shaped as much by news images planted in our heads as it is by real-life experiences.

How the news is told is just as important as what is told. These effects, commonly known as "framing", are related to viewer preferences on matters of public policy. In this report we test the impact of three different news frames on attitudes about childcare. Each frame represents a different view. The first sets the childcare issue as a matter of early childhood development. The second argues for employer responsibility. The third represents government regulation of childcare services. Using a novel experimental method, we were able to assess the relative strength of each news frame on viewer's attitudes about childcare.

One basic finding emerged from our analysis: **how the issue of childcare is framed has a significant impact on viewer's preferences**. Several pieces of data support this claim. A simple comparison of means between the control group and the average of the three experimental conditions, for instance, showed that in only a few instances did seeing any news story about childcare significantly alter attitudes. On the other hand, all three news frames had significant effects in the domains where we expected they would. Exposure to early childhood development primed attitudes about the role of the family; watching the story about employer participation increased support for employer responsibility; and seeing the segment about government regulation led viewer's to see an expanded role for government.

A second major finding is that: **exposure to the employer responsibility frame had the largest impact on viewer attitudes**. As we expected, this frame had robust effects on attitudes about the role of employers. Less anticipated however was the finding that this frame also had a significant impact on attitudes about the saliency of childcare (and the saliency of crime) and levels of government spending for children's programs.

These findings should be taken as preliminary rather than conclusive. The failure of the other two frames to perform as consistently as employer responsibility may be a function of a

couple of factors. In the first instance, the employer responsibility story was extremely clear and coherent. The other two stories, however, were a little more ambiguous. The story about early childhood development was an especially weak treatment. Although the storyline makes clear mention of the importance of the early years, it is easy to imagine a better treatment (e.g., interviews with researchers working on early development, sidebars with child psychologists and teachers, etc.). The same might be said about the government regulation frame. While the story briefly shows a state inspector and mentions questions of government licensing, a better treatment might feature interviews with government officials responsible for enforcing guidelines, child care advocates seeking changes in policy, and parents stating their desire for better regulation. In fact, we are pleased that the latter stories actually produced changes in attitudes given their relatively weak production values.

Recommendations:

1. **Get your story out**. Mayhem and violence, to be sure, dominate the local television news market. Stories about other relevant public issues therefore are often “crowded out”. And too many stories about youth focus on the negatives. To gain any traction with the public requires an alternative to the “bad seed” paradigm most prominent in local news. To this end, it is important that child care advocates develop contacts with assignment editors, producers, and reporters. By this we mean that advocates should maintain relationships with the media, even when there is not a specific story or event to “sell”. Journalists are always happy to expand their Rolodexes.
2. **Pay attention to how your story is framed**. The lesson from our study is that framing matters. Develop frames that accent the major elements of your proposal, program, or policy. Blanket stories are not nearly as effective as ones that take special care to clearly delineate the problems and solutions.
3. **Create, produce, and test your own news frames**. One important means to find the proper elements for your story is to make and test pilot news stories that feature the central message you wish to convey. While the standard is to conduct focus groups, we urge consideration of an experimental method that allows for much tighter comparative analysis.

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^{i[1]}In this study all childcare news segments are thematic. It is generally believed that thematic news frames lead viewers to the belief that the causes of and solutions to social problems are collective rather than the responsibility of individuals.

^{ii[2]}Below is a transcription of the three news frames on childcare.

**Frame#1:
Early Childhood Development**

Video: Two anchors at desk -- one male, one female.

Male anchor : “The message is loud and clear -- children are falling through the cracks.”

Video: Split screen. Reporter on site. Graphic:

“Top Story”

“Children in Trouble.”

Male Anchor : “Larry Miller is at the Boys and Girls club, just one place offering solutions in these hard times.

Larry?”

Video: On site -- mother and father playing with toddler, other adults supervising children.

Reporter (voice -over): “Debbie Soufers says she and her husband are fortunate. They have two incomes and their daycare is subsidized. But as a part-time middle school teacher, she sees many students whose problems can be traced to inadequate or non-existent child-care.”

Video: Debbie playing with toddler

Debbie (voice -over): “We talk about needing to put money into education and I think that these are the most important years, you know, for kids. You know, I wish that we made this more of a priority as a society, and we don’t.”

Video: Toddler playing.

Reporter (voice -over): “But those priorities may yet change, with more people entering the workforce, and childcare costs continuing to rise.”

Frame#2

Employer Responsibility

Video: Splitscreen --anchor on left; graphic on right “ Solutions”.

Anchor: “Lots of parents are finding it hard to afford quality daycare. People at one company think they may have a solution, though, and April Zepeda joins us tonight to live at Kid’s Hutch Center.”

Video: Pan out to two anchors at desk, reporter on screen in back left.

First Anchor : “April, what’s so different about this, uh, childcare center?”

Video: Reporter on site.

Reporter: “Well all the kids that you see at this center...”

Video: Cut to mother, father and child playing on site. Cut to scene of children interacting with other children and the daycare provide.

Reporter (voice-over)..... “are kids of employees who work for Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center. During the day they get to play on the computer, they get to do activities like science projects. You see, what this company is trying to do is make it a whole lot easier for parents to have affordable, quality daycare. Fortunately for parents employed by Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, there’s help. The company pays the building costs, rent, and utilities of this daycare center.”

Video: Cut back to reporter on site

Reporter: “And in all of this, Fred Hutch benefits too, because studies show that employees miss fewer days of work, and they’re more productive on the job because they’re not worrying about their kids.”

Frame#3

Government Regulation

Video: Anchor at desk, graphic :
“News 4 Special Report.”
“Day Care”

Anchor: “We’ve all heard the horror stories, stories about centers operating without a license, and in one disturbing and unusual case, a two-year-old left alone in a center that was locked up for the night. We set out to find out how Day Care Centers are licensed, and we went along with an inspector to find out what to look for.”

Video: daycare inspector on site; fade to graphic of checklist

Anchor: (voice-over) “Inspector Martha Pauley says parents should note whether the facility is ‘clean,’ ‘well staffed,’ has ‘first aid’ equipment, and a first aid trained worker. Note how the staff ‘communicates’ with your child. Look for prominently posted license or permit along with the last ‘inspection report.’ And look for ‘visible signs of safety.’”

Video: Cut back to anchor at desk

Anchor: “You should use that checklist. Also shop around and make unannounced visits before you choose. Your local social services agency can refer you to licensed facilities in your area.”

^{iii[3]} The sample consisted of residents of Los Angeles who were recruited through flyers offering \$15 for participation in “media research”. Fifty-three percent of the subjects were white, 16% were African-American, 12% were Hispanic, and 13% were Asian. In keeping with the area, 42% were Democrats and 49% considered themselves liberal. Fifty-three percent were women and 47% were men.

^{iv[4]} We utilize analysis of variance as the primary statistical test.

^{v[5]} In virtually every instance, when the mean of a particular condition was significantly different it was also significantly different from the mean of the control condition.

^{vi[6]} The analysis is performed for the entire sample. Random assignment ensures that factors such as race and gender are randomly distributed across the experimental conditions. Nonetheless, we performed the analysis with demographic controls and the results were unchanged.

^{vii[7]} The question reads:

“Who do you think should be primarily responsible for ensuring that families have access to childcare?”

^{viii[8]} The questions read:

“People have different opinions about childcare. For a child (under 2 years of age/3-5 years of age), which of the following childcare options would be most important to you. Please rank the three options in order of importance...”

“Would you be willing to pay \$100 more in taxes to ensure that all working families in your community were able to afford the kind of care you ranked as most important?”

^{ix[9]} At a descriptive level a couple of points are noteworthy. In reference to children under the age of 2 years old, “flexible employers” is the highest ranked option. For children between 3-5 trained teachers is the preferred option. In both cases, about two-thirds of the subjects say they would pay a tax increase for the option they

ranked most important. These differences, however, have little direct bearing on the impact of childcare news frames.

^{x[10]}The question reads:

“Next, we are going to list several actions the federal government might take to strengthen families and family values. For each one, please tell us whether you think it will be extremely effective, very effective, somewhat effective, not very effective, or not effective at all”.

^{xii[11]}The question reads:

“Here are some areas of government spending. Please indicate whether you would like to see more or less government spending in each area. Remember that if you say “much more”, it might require a **tax increase** to pay for it.

1. 1. Healthcare for children whose families don't have insurance
2. 2. Preschool programs like Head Start for poor children
3. 3. Housing for poor families with children
4. 4. Nutrition programs for poor children and families, such as food stamps and school lunches

^{xiii[12]}The question reads:

“Now we would like to ask you some questions about the role of women. Lately there has been a lot of talk about working mothers. Please indicate your opinion by circling the appropriate number (strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree).

1. 1. A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work.
2. 2. It is more important for a wife to help her husband's career than to have one herself.
3. 3. A preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works.
4. 4. It is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family.

Items 2-4 were reflected such that a progressive response is scored as high.