

# Particular Forms of Independence and Interdependence Are Adapted to Particular Kinds of Sociodemographic Environment: Commentary on “Independence and Interdependence in Children’s Developmental Experiences”

Patricia M. Greenfield

*University of California, Los Angeles*

**ABSTRACT**—In “*Independence and Interdependence in Children’s Developmental Experiences*,” C. Raeff (2010) sensitively depicts the interrelations of varying sorts of independence and interdependence within a given culture while showing the distinct ways in which these 2 overarching variables are structured across different cultures. Based on a new theory of social change and human development (P. M. Greenfield, 2009), the claim is that certain forms of interdependence and independence are well adapted to simple, small-scale, relatively poor, subsistence-based, isolated rural community settings in which lifelong extended family relations are central, large numbers of siblings are the norm, and education takes place informally at home, whereas other forms of interdependence and independence are well adapted to complex, large-scale, relatively rich, commerce-based, urbanized societies with multiple ties to the outside world, many opportunities for transitory relations with strangers, small families, and a highly developed system of formal education.

**KEYWORDS**—social change; culture; human development; independence; interdependence; children

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Patricia M. Greenfield, Department of Psychology and FPR-UCLA Center for Culture, Brain, and Development, University of California, Los Angeles, CA 90095; e-mail: greenfield@psych.ucla.edu.

© 2010, Copyright the Author(s)  
Journal Compilation © 2010, Society for Research in Child Development

Catherine Raeff (2010) has, in a beautifully written article, made an important contribution to our field by outlining the complexity of the concepts of independence and interdependence in children’s developmental experiences across cultures. Raeff shows the interrelations of varying sorts of independence and interdependence within a given culture while demonstrating the distinct ways that these two overarching variables are structured across different cultures.

Now that Raeff has shown us the multiple varieties of independence and interdependence in children’s psychological functioning, I would like to present a theory that classifies these varieties according to the type of sociodemographic environment to which they are adapted (Greenfield, 2009). In the course of developing a theory of social change and human development, I have utilized the sociological concepts of *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society) to characterize two ideal types of environment (Tönnies, 1887/1957; cf. Keller, 2007).

At the extreme, a *Gemeinschaft* environment is a simple, small-scale, relatively poor, subsistence-based, isolated rural community in which lifelong extended family relations are central, large families are the norm, and education takes place informally at home. At the extreme, a *Gesellschaft* environment is a complex, large-scale, relatively rich, commerce-based, urbanized society with multiple ties to the outside world, many opportunities for transitory relations with strangers, small families, and a highly developed system of formal education. Each of these contrasting characteristics becomes in my theory a continuous dimension.

At the extremes, one can label environments *Gemeinschaft* or *Gesellschaft* in an absolute way. However, many intermediate forms exist, and social environments are far from static in the modern world. My theoretical formulation and my research take

note of the fact that the dominant trend of social change in the world today is in the *Gesellschaft* direction, with specific consequences for socialization and development (Greenfield, 2004, 2009; Greenfield, Maynard, & Childs, 2003; Kağıtçıbaşı, 2007).

In light of these considerations, the terms *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, as well as their constitutive dimensions, are most valid when used in a relative sense to compare the same environment over time or to compare different social environments at the same time. Along with Keller (2007), I therefore make common cause with Raeff, in that my theory of social change and human development shies away from dichotomies, replacing them with continuous dimensions such as years of formal education, income, and a rural–urban continuum. I then use these continuous dimensions to predict particular mixtures and forms of independence and interdependence. A given environment can be more *Gemeinschaft* on some variables, more *Gesellschaft* on others; under conditions of social change, movement is generally not synchronous across the various sociodemographic dimensions.

Based on my theory, I now make the claim that certain forms of *interdependence* are more adapted to *Gemeinschaft* environments, whereas other forms of interdependence are more adapted to *Gesellschaft* environments. Similarly, certain forms of *independence* are more adapted to *Gemeinschaft* environments, whereas other forms of independence are more adapted to *Gesellschaft* environments (Greenfield, 2009; Greenfield, Keller, Fuligni, & Maynard, 2003). My theory can both explain and predict what forms of independence and interdependence will arise under what conditions. Although Raeff rightly sees each culture as an organic whole with interrelated parts, she has no way of explaining or predicting what type of culture—including its valued forms of independence and interdependence—will occur under what environmental conditions.

I will utilize one of Raeff's examples—conflict resolution—to illustrate my analysis, reinterpreting her example in the light of my own theory. Raeff draws on Mosier and Rogoff's (2003) findings concerning cross-cultural differences in handling conflicts between a 14- to 20-month-old and a 3- to 5-year-old sibling over a new object. In the United States, the researchers found that European-American mothers encouraged equality and turn-taking, whereas older siblings showed skill in asserting their rights over the object. In Guatemala, Mayan mothers generally requested that the older sibling defer to the younger and give him or her the object, whereas older siblings often found ways to share the object, so that both children could play with it at once.

Although I would agree with Raeff that both cultural modes incorporate individual agency (asserting rights over an object in the European-American context; trying to share an object in the Mayan context) and involve social coordination or interdependence (turn taking in the European-American context; giving up an object to a younger child in the Mayan context), I would also claim that each form of agency and social coordination is adapted to a particular sociodemographic environment. More

specifically, my claim is that asserting rights over an object and turn taking are adaptations to a more *Gesellschaft* environment, whereas sharing and giving up an object to a younger sibling are adaptations to a more *Gemeinschaft* environment.

How and why is this the case? Personal property is a value adapted to a relatively wealthy environment (a *Gesellschaft* characteristic), and learning to assert rights over an object is a developmental step in line with this value. Turn taking is that form of social coordination that maximizes the individual's control over the object and also maximizes separation of the two individuals, adaptive in the *Gesellschaft* world where many contacts are between strangers. In contrast, relative scarcity of goods (a *Gemeinschaft* characteristic) makes sharing adaptive, and prioritizing the younger child's wants is a part of sibling caregiving, a key feature of the caregiving environment in rural village settings where large families are the rule (Weisner & Gallimore, 1977). In fact, although Raeff does not mention this point, the social demographics of the Mosier and Rogoff (2003) study are in line with this analysis: They collected the Guatemalan data in a relatively poor, rural village setting, with very little schooling available at that time; in contrast, they collected the U.S. data in an urban middle-class setting from families with a much higher level of formal education.

Whereas the cultural models of individualism and independence and collectivism and interdependence have been of immense value in understanding the most fundamental cultural differences (Hofstede, 1980, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989), I agree with Raeff that these conceptualizations have their limitations. But my theory points to a different source of limitations than does Raeff's analysis. I think the major limitation is the assumption that cultural values are the governing causal level. In my theory, cultural values are an intermediate level, strongly influenced by sociodemographic factors in the macroenvironment (Greenfield, 2009); these sociodemographic factors also influence cultural pathways of socialization and development, both directly, through behavioral adaptation, and indirectly, through the mediating role of cultural values.

## REFERENCES

- Greenfield, P. M. (2004). *Weaving generations together: Evolving creativity in the Maya of Chiapas*. Santa Fe, NM: SAR Press.
- Greenfield, P. M. (2009). Linking social change and developmental change: Shifting pathways of human development. *Developmental Psychology, 45*, 401–418.
- Greenfield, P. M., Keller, H., Fuligni, A., & Maynard, A. (2003). Cultural pathways through universal development. *Annual Review of Psychology, 54*, 461–490.
- Greenfield, P. M., Maynard, A. E., & Childs, C. P. (2003). Historical change, cultural learning, and cognitive representation in Zinacantec Maya children. *Cognitive Development, 18*, 455–487.
- Hofstede, G. (1980). *Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

- Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kağitçibaşı, Ç. (2007). *Family, self, and human development across cultures: Theory and applications* (2nd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Keller, H. (2007). *Cultures of infancy*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion and motivation. *Psychological Review, 98*, 224–253.
- Mosier, C. E., & Rogoff, B. (2003). Privileged treatment of toddlers: Cultural aspects of individual choice and responsibility. *Developmental Psychology, 39*, 1047–1060.
- Raeff, C. (2010). Independence and interdependence in children's developmental experiences. *Child Development Perspectives, 4*, 31–36.
- Tönnies, F. (1957). *Community and society* (C. P. Loomis, Ed. and Trans.). East Lansing: Michigan State University Press. (Original work published in German in 1887; later English edition published in 1988 by Transaction Books, New Brunswick, NJ).
- Triandis, H. C. (1989). The self and social behavior in differing cultural contexts. *Psychological Review, 96*, 506–520.
- Weisner, T. S., & Gallimore, R. (1977). My brother's keeper: Child and sibling caretaking. *Current Anthropology, 18*, 169–190.