

Culture and Parenthood

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This chapter shows how culture and child development are inextricably intertwined. From a child's perspective, acquiring cultural knowledge is a vital aspect of development. Each child is exposed to a cultural surround that spans everything from sleeping arrangements and feeding practices to the child's value systems, school experiences, and interpersonal interactions.

In multicultural societies, the cultural surround in which a child develops can be divided into two broad categories, *home culture* and *societal culture*. Home culture refers to the values, practices, and cultural background of a child's immediate family. Societal culture refers to a child's interactions with schools, peers, community, and media from which the child learns the cultural values communicated by the dominant society.

The contrasting cultural models of *collectivism* (focusing on group harmony) and *individualism* (focusing on individual rights) provide a framework to account for cultural diversity in the United States.¹ Many immigrant and other minority groups bring a collectivistic frame of reference from their ancestral cultures when they enter the United States, which is built on individualistic principles. This produces a dialectical process between the collectivistic goals of a child's home culture and the individualistic goals of the societal culture.

CULTURAL VARIATIONS IN DEVELOPMENTAL GOALS

The collectivistic and individualistic cultural models generate specific cross-cultural differences in parenting practices. These models come into contact and influence each other. However, without considering each model separately, we cannot adequately understand cross-cultural variations in parental behaviors and parent-child relations.

In general, parents' goals for their children across cultures include the following: child survival and health, the acquisition of economic capabilities, and the attainment of culturally appropriate values.² However, cultural differences do exist.

In the collectivistic model, children are viewed as starting life as asocial creatures and as achieving increasing social responsibility and interdependence as they grow older.³ In this model, infants are often indulged, whereas older children are socialized to comprehend, follow, and internalize directives from elders, particularly parents. In the individualistic model, infants and young children are viewed as dependent on their parents and as achieving increasing independence from their parents as they grow older. The developmental outcome of the collectivistic model is the interdependent self; the developmental outcome of the individualistic model is the independent, individuated self.⁴

In the United States, guiding children to learn to make their own decisions and establish their separate individual existences is one of the most important parental goals; parents want their children to grow up to be independent and individuated adults.⁵ U.S. mothers tend to value skills in their children's behaviors that relate to matters of individual action, such as self-assertion and standing up for one's rights.⁶ These goals reflect the cultural model of individualism.

In contrast, parents in Japan "want their children to develop a sense of what can be loosely translated as dependence from the very beginning."⁷ Japanese mothers contrast with U.S. mothers in their greater concern about issues of self-control, compliance with adult authority, and social interaction in child development.⁸ These contrasting models of child development characterize other countries and other cultures as well.

CULTURAL VARIATIONS IN CHILDREARING PRACTICES

Within every culture, there are important individual variations around each cultural norm. Cultural typologies do not eradicate or minimize individual differences; they simply point to the norms around which those differences range. The following examples of childrearing practices illustrate contrasting cultural norms.

Sleeping Arrangements

In considering sleeping arrangements in the United States, parents and pediatricians alike are concerned about a child's physical well-being (e.g., reducing the risk of SIDS), emotional well-being (e.g., nighttime comforting), parental sleep patterns (e.g., parental privacy, nighttime feeding issues), practical constraints (e.g., housing situation), family ecology (e.g.,

single parenthood versus married parents), adult needs (e.g., for autonomy), and cultural goals (e.g., independence versus interdependence).

In the United States, most infants sleep alone in a separate crib, most often in a separate room from their parents.⁹ In many cultures (particularly non-Western cultures), however, cosleeping is the predominant sleeping arrangement.¹⁰ In fact, mothers in approximately two thirds of the world's cultures sleep with their infants in their beds, and this portion is much higher if mothers sleeping with their babies in the same room are included.¹¹ Examples of cosleeping cultures include Japan, where children typically sleep with their parents until five or six years of age.¹² This cosleeping is often referred to as *kawa*, or river, in which the parents form the symbolic riverbanks for the children who sleep in their own futons between them.¹³ Whereas the norm in the United States is adaptive for the childrearing goal of independence, the Japanese norm is adaptive for the childrearing goal of interdependence.

Although the dominant culture in the United States adheres to separate sleeping practices, many minority and immigrant groups still hold on to cosleeping practices from their ancestral cultures. For example, 20 percent of Hispanic American families slept with their children at least three times a week in contrast to 6 percent of European American families.¹⁴ In a similar pattern, more African American than European American infants and toddlers regularly coslept with their parent or parents.¹⁵

From the perspective of a neurologist, Richard Restak's research shows that "physical holding and carrying of the infant turns out to be the most important factor responsible for the infant's normal mental and social development."¹⁶ However, infants in the United States are not held during bedtime hours. Hence, we must strongly consider the possibility that sleep problems are a major cultural problem in infant care in the United States precisely because the professional advice of pediatricians and the culturally dominant practice are fighting the biology of the human infant that has evolved over hundreds of thousands of years.¹⁷

Sleeping arrangements are an integral part of whole systems of cultural meaning and ecological constraints. Cosleeping of mother and infant is part of a meaning system that emphasizes interdependence, whereas separate sleeping in a crib or another room is part of a meaning system that emphasizes independence as a developmental goal.

On the one hand, a cross-cultural look at these practices opens up new options for potential cross-cultural exchange. However, to borrow one part of a cultural system and insert it into a totally different system often brings on problems in itself. For example, T. Berry Brazelton warns parents from the dominant U.S. culture who "sleep with a small infant and

a toddler but then become desperate to assign the child to a separate room and bed and may desert the child by letting him or her 'scream it out.'"¹⁸ Perhaps this outcome stems from a mismatch between the child's socialized dependence on cosleeping and the parents' own culturally shaped needs for independence. But, whatever the reason, Brazelton notes, "This anger and desertion are not deserved, and leaving the child to cry it out only blames the victim." Hence, the long-term and systemic implications of cross-cultural borrowing must always be taken into account.

Attachment Behavior

Closely related to cross-cultural variations in infant sleeping practices is cross-cultural variation in attachment behaviors. Both domains reflect cross-cultural differences in parental goals.

Cultural variation in parents' perceptions of attachment behavior was studied by Robin Harwood.¹⁹ She compared European American and Puerto Rican parental reactions to separation situations and their relationship to parental goals for their children. European American mothers focused on issues of individual autonomy for their children in the context of their attachment behaviors; they wanted a balance between autonomy and relatedness.²⁰ Puerto Rican mothers, on the other hand, placed a greater emphasis on their child's ability to maintain "proper demeanor" in a social context, even when the child is separated from the parent; they wanted a balance between respect and caring.

Each cultural model has its own set of benefits and costs in the attachment domain.²¹ These can still be seen in adulthood, the endpoint of development. For example, the mother-child bond remains strong throughout life in Japan, but the husband-wife tie is of a less romantic and close nature than in the United States.²² By the same token, while European American mothers generally subscribe to the benefits of autonomy as a developmental goal, its cost to them could be seen as the "empty nest" syndrome.

Parent-Child Communication Behaviors

Parental goals for child development also are reflected in the communication patterns of parents toward their infants. For example, the European-based way of socializing children can be seen as geared to the goal of technological intelligence, and the African way can be seen as geared to the goal of social intelligence.²³ The early socialization of technological intelligence focuses on objects and their manipulation with an emphasis on cognitive development in isolation from social development. In contrast, the early socialization of social intelligence focuses on interpersonal

relationships, including triadic or group relationships. These different emphases are expressed in the communication patterns used in parent-infant interaction within each culture.

The African emphasis on social intelligence is seen in research on the !Kung hunter-gatherers in Botswana.²⁴ In !Kung society, no toys are made for infants. Instead, natural objects, such as twigs, grass, stones, and nutshells, are always available, along with cooking implements. However, adults do not encourage babies to play with these objects. Adults are unlikely to interact with infants while they are exploring objects independently. For example, they are not concerned about labeling objects and their functions. Thus, technological intelligence for its own sake is not actively encouraged. It is only when a baby offers an object to another person that adults become highly responsive, encouraging and vocalizing much more than at other times. For example, when babies are between six and twelve months old, !Kung grandmothers start to train them in the importance of giving to others by guiding them to hand beads to relatives. Thus, the !Kung cultural emphasis on the interpersonal rather than the physical aspects of existence is reflected in how adults communicate the importance of objects as social mediators in their interactions with the very youngest members of their community.

In another study, Jacqueline Rabain found that West Africans in Africa and West African immigrants in Paris respond more to child-initiated social activity than French mothers, who focus more on their infants' technological competence, i.e., object manipulation.²⁵ Compared with the African mothers, they respond more frequently to child-initiated object manipulation. In these ways, French mothers display a heavier emphasis on technological than on social intelligence.

Japanese mothers also display a preference for social intelligence by talking gently and using sounds that the infant can easily imitate.²⁶ Japanese mothers are less interested in object labeling. Instead, they focus more attention on acting out polite verbal exchanges. The following example also involves objects used in the social context of giving: "Here! It's a vroom vroom. I give it to you. Now give it to me. Give me. Yes! Thank you." Japanese mothers also are more likely to engage in routines that arouse empathy with the object, encouraging positive feelings toward the toy by saying things like, "Here. It's a doggy. Give it love. Love, love, love," while patting the toy. As in Africa, social intelligence seems to be a developmental goal in Japanese mothers' communication pattern.

Later in development, Japanese mothers (and nursery school teachers) rely more on empathy and nonverbal communication, whereas mothers in the United States rely more on verbal communication with their children.²⁷ The physical closeness of the Japanese mother-child pair in infancy

may well be connected to the development of empathy as a mode of communication in later years. Verbalization is necessary when there is greater physical and psychological distance between parent and child. Empathy as a mode of parent-child communication may be linked to social intelligence as a developmental priority. Emphasis on verbal communication may, in contrast, serve the developmental goal of technological intelligence.

Parenting styles also may be related to priorities in social versus technological intelligence.

Parenting Styles

Although not generally acknowledged in the developmental literature, Diana Baumrind's typology of permissive, authoritarian, and authoritative parenting is closely tied to the normative goals for child development in North America.²⁸ Authoritative parenting is considered to be the most adaptive style because it is associated with children who are "self-reliant, self-controlled, explorative, and content." These are the qualities of the independent individual valued in the cultural model of individualism in countries such as the United States.

Different ethnic groups within the United States and many Eastern and developing countries have been found to utilize an authoritarian parenting style to a greater degree than do middle-class European American parents in the United States. Authoritarian parenting is common in East Asia,²⁹ Africa,³⁰ and Mexico,³¹ as well as in ethnic groups derived from these ancestral cultures: Asian Americans,³² African Americans,³³ and Mexican Americans.³⁴

Under Confucianism, standards that may be viewed as authoritarian are used, not to dominate the child, but rather to preserve the integrity of the family unit and to ensure harmonious relationships with others.³⁵ The Chinese version also emphasizes high concern and care for the children. Thus the goals and behaviors behind this form of authoritarian parenting are quite different from those originally posited by Baumrind.

Even Baumrind found that, in lower-middle-class African American families, authoritarian parenting seemed to produce different effects on child development than in European American families.³⁶ Rather than resulting in negative outcomes, authoritarian parenting by African Americans was associated with self-assertive, independent behavior in pre-school girls.

One possibility is that African American parents use so-called authoritarian means because, through the retention of some African values at an implicit level, they are more interested in instilling respect and obedience than are parents in the dominant North American culture.³⁷ From the socialization perspective, an emphasis on obedience and respect is achieved

by strictness and the use of parental commands as a communication strategy.³⁸ Such a socialization pattern would fit Baumrind's authoritarian parenting. Similarly, immigrant Latino families bring from Mexico and Central America the developmental goal of respect and the socialization mode of authoritarian parenting to achieve respect for parents.³⁹

Authoritarian parenting, as seen in Africa,⁴⁰ Mexico,⁴¹ and Latino populations in the United States,⁴² has an associated style of parent-child communication. Directives and imperatives are frequent, along with encouragement of the social values of obedience and respect. The imperative style elicits action (e.g., carrying out chores) rather than verbalization from the child.

On the other hand, authoritative parenting brings with it a communication style that encourages verbal self-expression and autonomy in the child. This parenting style often features a high rate of questions from the parent, particularly "test questions," in which the answer is already known to the parent,⁴³ as well as parent-child negotiation.⁴⁴ Child-initiated questions are also encouraged and accepted. This style is intrinsic to the process of formal education in which the teacher asks questions to which he or she already knows the answer and tests children on their verbal expression. An important aspect of the interrogative style is that it elicits verbalization from the child. Such verbal expression is an important part of becoming a formally educated person and is particularly functional and common in commercial and technological societies where academic achievement, autonomy, and creativity are important child development goals. This style is the cultural norm in North America and northern Europe.

CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOR TOWARD PARENTS

Children's behavior toward their parents is an important reflection of the way in which their social development is influenced by their cultures.

Asian American students, particularly those close to Asian culture in their acculturation levels, are significantly more likely than European American students to sacrifice certain personal goals for their parents. This finding reflects the collectivistic emphasis on filial piety and respect for parents found in the Confucian worldview of East Asia.⁴⁵ The Confucian value of filial piety deeply influences the desired behavior of children toward their parents. "[Confucius] viewed the parent-child relationship as the foundation from which interpersonal love and trust would grow, and thus interpreted filial piety as the virtue for every person to follow."⁴⁶ This multidimensional concept of filial piety is believed to be a virtue that every-

one must practice, since "the love and affection of a child for his or her parents . . . is the prototype of goodness in interpersonal relationships."⁴⁷

On the other hand, the behavior of European American children seems to reflect the importance of individual goals and personal property prominent in the dominant North American worldview. Implicit in the response is a certain personal distance between parent and child; this is consonant with a view of human development that emphasizes the achievement of autonomy by late adolescence.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS

Differing patterns of costs and benefits provide opportunities for useful cross-cultural exchange. From the perspective of both insider and outsider, each cultural model has its strengths and weaknesses, its costs and benefits, and its pathological extremes. For this reason, cross-cultural exchange of values and practices can sometimes serve as a corrective force to counteract the weaknesses, costs, and pathologies of any given cultural system. For example, cosleeping is a practice that many immigrants have brought with them from Mexico and Central America. Current experimental research documents the potential physiological benefits of cosleeping to prevent sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) in a society (the United States) with a relatively high rate of SIDS.⁴⁸ The findings therefore have direct relevance to pediatric advice on sleeping arrangements.

Brazelton suggests that practitioners should reevaluate their stance toward children's sleep.⁴⁹ Pediatricians have traditionally concluded that infant-parent cosleeping is a risk factor for healthy development. However, they should be cautious before imposing judgments about the child-rearing practices of persons with whom they do not share a common culture and should consider infant sleeping arrangements from all of the relevant angles: physiological, psychological, and cultural.

Teachers and childcare workers also should be aware of differences in infant-rearing practices. For example, crying or lack thereof when children are dropped off at daycare in the morning may be partially attributable to cultural differences in familiarity with separation. Through a better understanding of these differences, childcare professionals can become more understanding and helpful to the child's transition between home and daycare.

In the United States, where the learning of object names is culturally important, mothers spend a good deal of time labeling objects in their communicative interactions with their young children. Although this tendency seems perfectly reasonable in this cultural context, it would be important to understand that other parents may have other cultural goals for

their children. Teachers and childcare workers should be sensitive to the value of developing children's social intelligence, not merely their knowledge of the physical world, and of developing social skills for communicating with groups, not only with dyads. Through cross-cultural exchange, both styles of communication could be used to socialize children for both technological and social intelligence.

A lack of cultural understanding can also lead to misinterpretations by social workers.⁵⁰ Negative judgments by social workers of cultural practices they do not understand, using criteria from their own culture, can lead to tragedy. For instance, social workers can misinterpret sibling care (a practice utilized in many cultures worldwide) as child neglect, leading to children being taken away from loving parents who may have been following a different cultural model of competent parenting and child development. One can imagine other situations in which cultural practices may be misinterpreted as abuse. Cosleeping or cobathing practices acceptable in many cultures may be misinterpreted as sexual in nature. Social workers and other clinicians should be trained to recognize differences between cultural variations in practice and truly abusive situations.

Multicultural understanding has direct implications for clinical work with families. Consider the following case:⁵¹ A child in an African American family is punished when a younger sibling, under her care, falls off the bed. The older child feels as though the punishment is unfair and complains of holding too much responsibility in the family. The family seeks family therapy for these issues. In this case, armed with unconscious cultural assumptions about the developmental goal and value of independence, the first reaction of the therapist is to blame the parents for "parentifying" the older child; in this framework parentification is considered pathological. Parentification of a child compromises the autonomy and opportunities for self-actualization that are implicit developmental goals in psychotherapy, itself an outgrowth of an individualistic framework. However, task assignment to older children is a component of a more authoritarian parent-child relationship featuring parental directives and child obedience. Assigning childcare to an older sibling is also a natural and important aspect of developing a sense of social responsibility.

Conversely, one cause of impulsiveness and immaturity may be an excess of family democracy in which all chores and tasks are either a matter of discussion and negotiation between parent and child or are simply left up to the child. Eleanor Maccoby notes that adolescent impulsiveness occurs when parents have not assigned tasks to their children.⁵² Clinicians could make parents aware of household chores as a potential tool to prevent child and adolescent problems in this area. Clinicians from ethnic groups in which chore assignment is already used can lead the way.

On the other hand, a disinclination to ask questions and assert opinions is a detriment to the school achievement of certain ethnic groups in the United States, such as Latino immigrant children.⁵³ Soliciting children's views, a component of the authoritative parenting style favored in the dominant U.S. culture, can enhance school achievement. By confining such routines to school-related activities such as reading, immigrant Latino families can strike a bicultural pose that enhances children's school achievement while maintaining the value of respect in other family situations.⁵⁴

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCHERS

The same behavior may have a different meaning and therefore a different outcome in other cultures. For this reason, assessments and measures must be used with caution in making cross-cultural comparisons. This is especially true when looking at the styles of parental interaction and discipline used by different cultural groups. For example, using a measure of authoritarian parenting developed in the United States to study parenting styles in China would provide an inaccurate and incomplete perspective on parenting practices there.⁵⁵ It is important to adapt methods of research to the cultural ideas and values of people native to the society under study.

CONCLUSION

Because parents often acculturate slowly to a host culture, there is a great potential for parent-child conflict when families immigrate from a collectivistic to an individualistic society. Parents may expect respect, but the dominant culture may encourage their children to argue and negotiate.⁵⁶ Those parents may see strictness as a sign of caring, but their adolescent children may see it as robbing them of autonomy and self-direction.⁵⁷

Because multicultural societies, such as the United States, contain many ethnic groups with varied childrearing practices, parents deviating from the dominant norm should not be made to feel they are doing something harmful to their child. Understanding that practices such as sleeping alone and cosleeping are two different cultural modes, each with its own set of risks and benefits, can lead to pride in rather than shame for diverse cultural heritages. For members of the dominant majority, such understanding leads to respect for rather than denigration of ethnic minorities. Similarly, understanding the reasons behind alternative practices can help immigrants understand norms in their new cultural surround.

In the United States, cultural diversity is such that parent-child relations are not limited to one model. Because the weaknesses of one model may

well be the strengths of another, cross-ethnic exchange can help to solve some common childrearing problems in our multicultural society.

NOTES

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