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Culture and Social Development: Explanations and Evidence

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For the human species, adaptability has been the key to success in a wide variety of different ecologies. From the icy coasts and plains of the arctic to the jungles and savannahs of the equator, we encounter families and communities of people living recognizably human, yet strikingly different, lifestyles. Nowhere is this plasticity more evident than in social development, as children grow and learn to be members of a myriad of different culturally organized milieus. How to explain the ways that culture shapes children's social development has been a central task of social anthropology, and more recently social and developmental psychology. This chapter will review selected frameworks for understanding how culture affects children's social development from early through middle childhood. Beginning with anthropological formulations of the early twentieth century, we will trace the historical progression of explanatory frameworks, including those that have emerged more recently within psychology. Since the measure of a theory's adequacy is its usefulness for understanding the reality it addresses, we will also consider the kinds of evidence associated with each model.

“Patterns of Culture”: The Role of Childhood Socialization

Although anthropological studies of other, “primitive” cultures traditionally included chapters on family life including ceremonies related to birth and various developmental transitions, recognition of children's social development as adaptation to the culturally structured environment is first evident in the writings of Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, beginning in the 1920s. As Benedict wrote in her seminal work *Patterns of Culture*, first published in 1934:

The life-history of the individual is first and foremost an accommodation to the patterns and standards traditionally handed down in his community. From the moment of his birth the customs into which he is born shape his experience and behaviour. By the time he can talk, he is the little creature of his culture, and by the time he is grown and able to take part in its activities, its habits are his habits, its beliefs his beliefs, its impossibilities his impossibilities. Every child that is born into his group will share them with him, and no child born into one on the opposite side of the globe can ever achieve the thousandth part. There is no social problem it is more incumbent upon us to understand than this of the role of custom. Until we are intelligent as to its laws and varieties, the main complicating facts of human life must remain unintelligible (Benedict, 1934/1959, pp. 2–3).

By “custom,” Benedict and Mead meant the practices of childcare that were part of the everyday fabric of life, not just the ceremonial events that had heretofore been the primary focus of anthropological research. In describing daily routines of 3 year olds in the Pacific society of Manus, Mead evokes the image of a morning outing in heavy dugout canoes:

Early in the morning the village is alive with canoes in which the elders sit sedately on the centre platforms while small children of three punt the canoes which are three or four times as long as the children are tall. At first glance this procession looks like either the crudest sort of display of adult prestige or a particularly conspicuous form of child labour. The father sits in casual state, a man of five feet nine or ten, weighing a hundred and fifty pounds. The canoe is long and heavy, dug out of a solid log; the unwieldy outrigger makes it difficult to steer. At the end of the long craft, perched precariously on the thin gunwales, his tiny brown feet curved tensely to keep his hold, stands a small brown baby, manfully straining at the six foot punt in his hands. He is so small that he looks more like an unobtrusive stern ornament than like the pilot of the lumbering craft. Slowly, with a great display of energy but not too much actual progress, the canoe moves through the village, among other canoes similarly manned by the merest tots. But this is neither child labour nor idle prestige hunting on the part of the parents. It is part of the whole system by which a child is encouraged to do his physical best (Mead, 1930/1966, p. 29).

Activities such as a daily outing with father in the family canoe, sleeping arrangements for the young child, and the organization of dinner were all customs that, in Mead and Benedict’s thinking, were the bearers of cultural “messages” which the child would learn over and over in multiple contexts, distilling from these experiences the essence of what it meant to be a good member of his or her society. As Benedict pointed out in her analysis of Japanese culture and personality, written for the US government during World War II, these customs need not necessarily seem consistent over the lifespan. For example, she noted that although Japanese adults were expected to subordinate their own wishes for the good of the group, Japanese infants were highly indulged (Benedict, 1946). In this regard, the work of Mead and Benedict foreshadowed more recent recognition that what appear to be the “same” parenting practices may have different meanings and therefore different developmental consequences in varying cultural contexts. Mead and Benedict also presaged current research on culture and temperament in their recognition that the particular kinds of personal qualities encouraged by a given culture might not fit equally comfortably for all individuals. Mead proposed that “an individual whose temperament was incompatible with the type (or types) emphasized in the culture in which he was born and reared

would be at a disadvantage – a disadvantage that was systematic and predictable for that culture” (Mead, 1972, p. 219); and Benedict (1934) went so far as to suggest that mental illness itself might be an extreme example of misfit between the individual and the demands of the cultural milieu.

In retrospect, the work of Mead and Benedict seems surprisingly modern, although some aspects of their theoretical approach were not fully developed. The “customs” they described constituted the informal education through which the lessons of the culture were implicitly taught and equally implicitly learned. Both parents and children were seen as active participants in this process, and individual differences among children and their families were documented along with description of the larger cultural patterns. The “patterns of culture” they proposed, in which certain themes were seen as general organizing principles of whole societies, resonate with the observation of “thematicity” in cultural models across a wide range of domains, as noted by today’s cognitive anthropologists (Quinn & Holland, 1987). In contrast, explanations of culture and children’s social development that dominated anthropology during the “culture and personality” era of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, based largely on either Freudian psychology or social learning theory, now seem outdated. Nevertheless, this work led to some important advances in understanding of the relationships between culture and individual development.

“Culture and Personality”: Monocultural and Cross-cultural Studies

Whereas Benedict introduced the idea of “patterns of culture” and Mead showed how children’s life and development varied with the larger ethos of the parent society, anthropologists of the “culture and personality” school that followed (although there was some historical overlap) were concerned with finding psychological explanations for cultural variability. We should note that this work was focused not on understanding why childhood socialization practices vary across cultures, but rather how such practices might lead to culturally shared differences in adult personality and beliefs. Following traditional anthropological methods, much of this work was based on field research in a single society. Thus, Spiro (1953) suggested that beliefs in ghosts among the people of Ifaluk, a Pacific atoll, could be explained as the result of certain childhood experiences such as a daily cold-water bath and the abrupt transition from indulged infancy to relatively neglected toddlerhood, following the birth of the next child. Such experiences, Spiro hypothesized, might lead the child to “develop the hypothesis that their world is threatening and, therefore, predispose them to believe in these threatening ghosts” (p. 245). Although intriguing, such explanations tended to lose their persuasiveness when the relationship between particular childhood socialization practices and cultural belief systems was examined in other contexts, where exceptions often proved the rule. For example, many traditional societies, including those of sub-Saharan Africa, are characterized by an abrupt transition from infancy to toddlerhood, yet they do not have similar beliefs in the pervasive presence of ghosts as described for the Ifaluk (Harkness & Super, 1991).

The logical solution to this methodological problem was to seek wider samples of cultures with which to test relationships between childhood socialization practices and other

aspects of the adult culture. Since individual anthropologists could not carry out fieldwork in more than a handful of cultures at best, it became necessary to rely on the pooled knowledge acquired over years of research by many investigators. The Human Relations Area Files (HRAF) provided such a resource by making available a vast archive of ethnographic information on over 200 societies, coded paragraph by paragraph into some 700 categories so that investigators interested in any particular topic could find the relevant information without having to search through the entire original document. There were complications, of course. Ethnographies were individual works whose content was dictated by the interests of the investigators and although there was a standard template of ethnographic topics, information on any given one might be scanty or altogether absent. Samples of cultures could not be drawn completely randomly around the world because relationships that held in one cultural area (for example, the Pacific islands) might not work the same way in other areas. Nevertheless, cross-cultural studies of childhood socialization using the HRAF provided some valuable new insights into the ways that culture and children's social development are linked (Whiting, 1976).

Notable in this literature is Barry, Child, and Bacon's (1959) analysis of the relationships between subsistence type and childhood socialization practices. Ethnographic studies of simple agricultural or peasant societies had repeatedly found that children were socialized for obedience and conformity to the rules of their society as mandated by elders. This observation seemed to support a general social evolutionary perspective in which egalitarianism and democracy gradually supercede more ancient authoritarian regimes. Research among technologically simpler and evolutionarily older cultures of hunter-gatherers such as the Kung San of the Kalahari, however, presented a rather different picture, in which parents were not particularly authoritarian and children were not especially industrious or obedient.

Barry, Child, and Bacon hypothesized that there is a functional relationship between particular kinds of societies as characterized by their mode of subsistence and the ways that children are socialized. Specifically, they suggested that in farming societies where "food accumulation" is necessary to tide the family over from one growing season to the next, children would be socialized to be responsible and obedient, to defer to the better judgment of their elders. In contrast, hunting and gathering societies in which food must be found on a daily basis would need individuals who could exercise initiative and imagination in the hunt or the search for wild vegetables; in such societies, the investigators suggested, children would be socialized toward achievement, self-reliance, and independence. The hypothesized relationships were found to be so reliable across a worldwide sample of cultures that the authors concluded that knowledge of the economy alone would be sufficient for predicting any given society's relative emphasis on socialization for compliance or assertiveness.

Much has been written about the inadequacies of both the "culture and personality" school and cross-cultural studies of that era (see Harkness, 1992), but this research left a vitally important legacy in the form of three principles. First, it established the fact that different parts of a culture are systematically linked, even though the mechanisms of that linkage may not be reducible to any single explanation. Second and more specifically, this research showed that there are consistent relationships between childhood socialization and the socioeconomic organization of the wider culture. Finally, research across a wide

variety of cultures in different parts of the world also established the fact that features of childrearing, like linguistic features, can be essentially mapped onto different culture areas. Thus, armed with knowledge of both the way of life of the larger community and its place on a map of world cultures, today's researchers of culture and child development can approach any given new group with certain well-founded expectations about how children are likely to be brought up and how these patterns both support and recreate the parental culture.

Culture as a “Provider of Settings” for Children’s Social Development: Multi-Site Ethnographic Studies

As Barry, Child, and Bacon’s study illustrates, cross-cultural studies of culture and childhood socialization shed light on both the ways that culture shapes child development and how such development forms the basis for adult functioning. Further research, especially the work of John and Beatrice Whiting and their associates, produced a veritable harvest of new knowledge about children’s social development in cultures around the world, including the home culture of the researchers. The explanatory framework for this research, known simply as the “Whiting model” after its originator John W. M. Whiting, posited that children’s environments of learning and development are determined largely by the “maintenance systems” of their cultures such as social and political organization and principal means of subsistence. Mediating between the larger society and the child’s own environment are parents’ daily routines including women’s workload (Whiting, 1977). Children, according to this view, are assigned to settings of socialization that stem naturally and inevitably from the necessities of their parents’ daily lives as well as the cultural beliefs and values that permeate them.

This explanatory framework, first set out in the Six Culture Study (Whiting & Whiting, 1975) and further elaborated in B. Whiting and Carolyn Edwards’ analysis of “children of different worlds” (Whiting & Edwards, 1988), guided analysis of ethnographic and psychosocial data collected using similar sampling and methods. Ultimately, the material on socialization and behavior of children in the first decade of life included a worldwide sampling of societies including five different ethnic groups in Kenya as well as one from Liberia, two communities in India, and sites in Mexico, the Philippines, Okinawa, and the United States. With in-depth observations of children’s social behavior with their parents, siblings, and others in these varied cultural settings, the researchers were able to analyze not only cultural differences among samples but also behavioral typologies related to culture, age, and gender.

Whiting and Edwards’ analysis of mother and father involvement illustrates these features. Observations made at many different times of day show that in all cultures, children were with their mothers two to four times more frequently than with their fathers, and that children aged 6 to 10 were less frequently in the company of their mothers than younger children. In contrast, boys’ time with their fathers increased with age in those cultures (particularly the Kenyan and Indian communities) where sons were expected to help out with male tasks such as cattle herding. Fathers’ time with children seems to be mediated by

several factors, among which the spousal relationship is particularly important. As Whiting and Edwards explain:

The norms and rules pertaining to intimacy between husband and wife and their division of labor influence young children's contact with parents. In all our samples mothers have the primary responsibility for infant care, but the amount of paternal involvement varies widely. For example, in the Six Culture communities, participation of fathers in childcare is lowest in Khalapur (India) and Nyansongo (Kenya); many of these fathers actually sleep in different buildings from their wives and young children. Fathers are most involved with lap children [infants] and knee children [toddlers] in Tarong (Philippines) and Juxtlahuaca (Mexico), societies where fathers share a bed with their wives and children, and in Taira (Okinawa), where all the members of the household sleep side by side wrapped in their quilts (Whiting & Edwards, 1988, p. 62).

Sleeping arrangements such as those described above are important not only in terms of the actual opportunities for father-child contact they provide, but also because they index social relationships among various family members. The Kenyan samples, in which father involvement in care of young children was judged lowest, are typical of polygynous sub-Saharan societies in which marriages are arranged and the husband takes turns attending to each of his wives. In these societies, there is a strong division of social roles between men and women, and men are excluded from childbirth (except in emergencies) and prohibited from seeing their newborns for up to a month (Harkness & Super, 1991). The Rajputs of Khalapur, as described by Minturn (1993) in a later monograph, also construct very different worlds for men and women, in which husbands and wives have few opportunities for intimacy in the multigenerational extended family households. In contrast, fathers in more egalitarian societies with nuclear family households and greater sharing and intimacy between spouses are more involved in the care of young children. Father *presence*, as opposed to father involvement, however, is influenced by others factors such as the nature and location of fathers' work. U.S. fathers in the cross-cultural samples were generally employed outside the home, in contrast to the Kenyan fathers whose work was tied to their homesteads. In a comparison of these two groups of fathers, Harkness and Super (1992) found that fathers in these two widely differing settings were actually present in the lives of their young children about the same amount of time.

Mothers' behavior with their children, in Whiting and Edwards' analysis, was also shown to reflect the culturally organized reality of their own lives, which the authors defined in both pragmatic and symbolic terms. On the pragmatic side, women's workload, including such aspects as average family size and help with childcare in addition to the nature and amount of women's work, was found to be a powerful predictor of maternal behavior across cultures. On the symbolic side were mothers' cultural beliefs about the nature of the child and the roles of parents, or "parental ethnotheories" as Harkness and Super (1996) have called them. For example, Whiting and Edwards contrasted the fatalistic view of Indian parents that a child's destiny is "written on his brow" with the belief of the Orchard Town mothers that "their infant was a bundle of potentialities and that it was the task of the mother to assess these potentialities and to direct the training of the child so as to maximize them" (p. 91). Whiting and Edwards predicted that cultural variability in mothers' social behavior with their children would reflect the differences in both the pragmatic and symbolic domains.

Systematic observations of mothers and children across the Six Culture samples showed that maternal social behavior could be described in terms of the relative proportions of four basic types of behavior: nurturance (including actual caretaking as well as giving attention and emotional support); training (including teaching and assigning chores); controlling behavior (dominance intended to correct undesirable behavior); and sociability (including friendly conversation and physical affection). Three distinct maternal styles were evident.

The first, the “training mother,” was found in all the sub-Saharan groups. These mothers, who labored hard on their farms and homesteads in addition to raising large families, taught their children early to be helpful and responsible. The second profile, the “controlling mother,” was found in the two Indian samples as well as Mexico, Okinawa, and the Philippines. In these societies, men were the farmers whereas mothers provided support in the form of food preparation and housekeeping. Children were less needed to help out with basic economic activities although they were expected to be helpful when asked. On the other hand, children could also be a nuisance by virtue of their constant demands for attention and care, especially in the north Indian samples in which women were confined to their courtyards by the custom of *purdah*. Finally, the “sociable mother” profile was found only in the Orchard Town sample. Although controlling behavior was also high among these mothers, the addition of frequent social behavior with children made them distinctive. This behavioral profile is explained in terms of cultural beliefs – the desire to support children’s individual development by teaching them from an early age – but also the social isolation of the mothers themselves. As Whiting and Edwards noted, these mothers were by far the most residentially isolated of all the samples. Lacking the company of other adults, the Orchard Town mothers turned to their children for companionship.

Children’s behavior toward their mothers is shown by Whiting and Edwards to be the reciprocal of mothers’ behavior toward them. Corresponding to the four most frequent maternal behaviors were a predictable set of child behaviors: maternal nurturance elicited children’s dependent behavior; obedience or cooperation was the reciprocal of mothers’ training behavior; dominance and aggression appeared (although not frequently) in response to mothers’ controlling behavior; and mothers’ sociability was matched by child sociability. Although all these behaviors were present across the samples and showed age-related changes, there were interesting differences in the ways and extent that they were expressed. For example, children’s dependent behavior in the north Indian samples was characterized as “active, insistent, almost aggressive” (p. 142), a style attributed to their mothers’ delayed and inconsistent responses to children’s bids for care and attention, and related to both cultural values of interdependency and the immediate social ecology of these crowded Indian households. Children in the African samples were generally more compliant, corresponding to their mothers’ training behavior. Finally, children in north India and Orchard Town, where mothers were most frequently controlling, showed the highest rates of dominance and aggression to their mothers.

The reciprocity between maternal and child behavior in the different cultural samples illustrates Whiting and Edwards’ central focus on the “eliciting power of one’s social partner” (p. 133). Children’s social development, in their view, is the product of the social settings they inhabit and the people with whom they interact, including other children as well as their parents. Thus, children who were assigned to take care of younger siblings, as

in the Kenyan samples, had more opportunity to learn nurturant behavior, whereas children who spent more time with peers, such as the children of Orchard Town once they reached school age, learned competitive and attention-seeking behaviors. Because the behaviors themselves were only observed in context, it is not possible to conclude that they became internalized as personality traits; but this research shows that at the very least they were well practiced.

In summary, the work of the Whitings and their associates, which altogether spanned over five decades, contributed both new ideas and new methods for the study of culture and children's social development. The Whitings' initial theoretical framework, in which children's learning environments are the product of a series of contextual factors from the most general to the most immediate, has often been mischaracterized as purely functionalist, lacking in recognition of cultural belief systems (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998). On the contrary, the Whitings recognized the importance of meaning systems and, in a 1960 chapter for Mussen's *Handbook of Research Methods in Social Psychology* (Whiting & Whiting, 1960) stated that anthropologists' "unique contribution" to the study of human behavior was "in the formulation of the shared symbolic determinants of behavior, which, in our view, is the essential feature of the concept of culture" (Chasdi, 1994, p. 48). In B. Whiting's later work, as we have seen, the role of belief systems in parenting behavior becomes even more evident.

Cultural-Ecological Frameworks

Although *Children of Different Worlds* was published in 1988, it was the culmination of field research initiated in the 1950s. In the meantime, a new generation of theories was emerging, informed by the work of the Whitings but also shaped by the "cognitive revolution" and other developments across a broad spectrum of disciplines including linguistics, psychology, and ecology. Of particular relevance to children's social development are the cultural-ecological models developed by Charles Super and Sara Harkness, and by Thomas Weisner and his associates. Both of these models build upon the Whitings' idea of "settings" as a primary focus for the study of cultural effects on child development, in combination with other theoretical perspectives.

Culture and the child's developmental niche

The developmental niche as proposed by Super and Harkness "is a theoretical framework generated specifically to foster integration of concepts and findings from multiple disciplines concerned with the development of children in cultural context. . . Two overarching principles reflect its origins in social anthropology and developmental psychology: First, that a child's environment is organized in a nonarbitrary manner as part of a cultural system, including contingencies and variable flexibility, thematic repetitions, and systems of meaning; and second, that the child has an inborn disposition, including a particular constellation of temperament and skill potentials as well as species-specific potentials for

growth, transformation, and the organization of experience into meaning. Both the environment and the individual are seen as open systems in the formal sense, that is, ones that participate in structured interchanges with external systems” (Super & Harkness, 1997, p. 26).

The developmental niche, thus, conceptualizes both the child and the environment as active and interactive systems. Taking the perspective of the child’s place in this system, the niche is seen as consisting of three major components or subsystems: 1) The physical and social settings of the child’s daily life; 2) Culturally regulated customs of childcare and rearing; and 3) The psychology of the caretakers, especially their cultural belief systems or “ethnotheories.”

The developmental niche is further defined in terms of three corollaries. First, the three subsystems of the niche operate together as a system, with homeostatic mechanisms that promote consonance among them. This feature is the joint result of individual needs for reducing cognitive dissonance (as in a poor match between ideas and practice) and of the characteristic redundancy in cultural themes across domains. Second, each of the three subsystems of the niche is functionally embedded in other aspects of the larger ecology, making them open channels through which the niche can be altered from without. Thus, for example, the physical and social settings of children’s lives are routinely altered by such things as seasonal changes and school vacation schedules; and they may be more profoundly altered by changes in the economy necessitating different patterns of parental employment. Third, as mentioned above, the child is conceptualized as an active contributor to his or her own developmental niche by virtue of temperament and other individual characteristics which modify parental decision making about daily routines as well as influencing social interaction directly.

From a methodological perspective, it is important that each of these subsystems represents a different kind of data, which can then be used to achieve convergent validity. For example, observational data on siblings’ social interaction (physical and social settings) can form the basis for understanding customs regarding sibling care (customs and practices); interviews with parents about the meaning of everyday routines and practices can inform the investigator’s interpretation of how parents think about children’s roles in the family (psychology of the caretakers).

An example of coordination among the three subsystems of the developmental niche comes from a study of sleep and arousal in infants and young children in the Netherlands and the United States (Super et al., 1996). The samples in each cultural site were parents of children in several age groups from 6 months to 4.5 years (total $n = 54$ families). Parental interviews covering a wide range of topics related to child and family revealed that Dutch parents in the community of “Bloemenheim” (a fictitious name) were very concerned about the importance of a restful and regular schedule to support children’s healthy development in infancy and childhood. This cultural belief also had the endorsement of the national well-child care system as communicated to parents through their local clinics, and had been formalized in the “three Rs” of good childcare: *rust* (rest), *regelmaat* (regularity), and *reinheid* (cleanliness). As the Dutch parents explained to their American interviewers, rest is important for children’s growth, and an adequately restful and regular schedule is the foundation of the child’s daytime behavior, promoting a calm yet cheerful and active disposition. In fact, the most frequent reason given for children’s difficult behavior was

disruption of this schedule by a late evening out or too much excitement.

A tabulation of themes in the Dutch parents' talk about this topic showed that by far the greatest emphasis was given to explaining the importance and consequences of rest and regularity; however, the parents did not experience establishing a regular schedule for sleep and eating as problematic. In contrast, American parents of same-age children from the Boston area emphasized different themes concerning the development of sleep. For these parents, biological maturation and individual differences were the prime determinants of children's sleep behavior. Many of these parents struggled with getting their children to sleep through the night, and (unlike the Dutch parents) had developed a repertoire of strategies to deal with night waking.

Data on daily routines of the children, based on parental diaries, showed that the Dutch children were actually sleeping more than the American children (at least as far as their parents could tell). The differences were quite dramatic, with a 2-hour average difference in total sleep per 24 hours at 6 months, diminishing to a still-noticeable 20-minute difference for children at 4.5 years of age. Furthermore, the Dutch children were consistently put to bed earlier and on a more regular schedule. Systematic behavior observations of the Dutch and American mothers and infants revealed a correspondence between ideas and action: the American mothers were more actively stimulating to their infants, talking to them and touching them more than the Dutch mothers. Finally, the infants themselves also showed differences in state of arousal during these observations, with the Dutch babies in a quiet alert state two thirds of the time and active alert one third, a pattern that was reversed for the American sample.

As this example illustrates, the developmental niche framework lends itself to systematic consideration of the ways in which the child's culturally structured environment of daily life can affect a wide range of issues in behavior and development. The social development of children is centrally involved in many of these, as it is through the child's experience in the social world that pathways of influence are established.

The ecocultural niche of children and families

The "ecocultural niche" construct, developed by Thomas Weisner and his associates (Weisner, 1984, 1996; Weisner, Gallimore, & Jordan, 1988), is closely related to the developmental niche – not surprisingly since both draw in part from the work of the Whitings. This model highlights the role of settings and routines of daily life as both the nexus of cultural transmission for children and families, and the measure of family adaptation to a variety of challenges. Settings are conceptualized as including the personnel present and their motivations, cultural scripts for conduct in the setting, the nature of tasks and activities in the settings, and the cultural goals and beliefs of the participants. In its emphasis on regularly occurring activities that are imbued with cultural meaning, the ecocultural niche framework draws also on sociocultural and activity theory in the tradition of Vygotsky (Cole, 1985; Rogoff, 1982; Wertsch, 1985).

The ecocultural niche framework has been used not only to study the effects of individual children's participation in cultural structured activity settings, but also the sustainability of daily routines for families. As Weisner, Matheson, and Bernheimer (1996)

explain its application to a study of American families of developmentally delayed children: “Ecocultural theory proposes that the adaptive problem faced by families with children with delays is the same as that faced by all families: *constructing and sustaining a daily routine of life that has meaning for culture members, and that fits with the competencies of available members of the family and community* [original italics] (p. 504). The families in this study were broadly middle-class, and although there was variability in the age at which the child’s delay was recognized, all families had recognized their child as delayed or possibly delayed by the time the child was three or four years of age. In answer to the question, “Is earlier recognition (and therefore intervention) better?” the authors provided evidence that within these first years of life, there was no developmental effect of earlier recognition. The reason, they suggest, is that all families in this sample already offered a protective environment to their children through their ongoing efforts to shape a sustainable and meaningful daily routine. For these middle-class American families, such routines already included parent–child play and book reading, activities that would be part of an early intervention program in any case.

A cultural mediational model of childcare

A third social-ecological framework is the “cultural mediational model” developed by Robert A. LeVine and used in a study of parenting and child development in a Gusii community of Kenya (LeVine et al., 1994). LeVine and his coauthors contrast their perspective to three other explanatory models that have been widely used in social science. The first model, the “biopsychological model,” claims that childcare is overwhelmingly determined by species-specific characteristics. The second model, which they term “economic utility,” has been typically used by demographers and economists to explain variations in childcare as they relate to socioeconomic conditions and birth and death rates. In the third type, the “semiotic models,” it is assumed that cultural meaning systems guide and direct parental behavior. In contrast to all three of these often exclusionary models, the mediational model that informs these investigators’ research is based on the premise that:

. . . parent–child interaction begins with the universal hardware of child care, that is, innate capacities for communicating and responding, but the child is born in a social environment into which the local conventions of interpersonal communication and kin relationship have been preinstalled as scripts for interactive performance. In attempting to understand parental behavior, then, our first task is to find out what script is being followed and what each action means in terms of that script; later we can learn how performance based on this script represents a choice among organic and economic possibilities (pp. 20–21).

In this approach, the “cultural script” is defined with metaphorical reference to computer programming as a “highly directive software program, prescribing the content and sequence of interaction as well as the code for interpreting performance” (p. 21). As LeVine et al. point out, however, cultural scripts do not fully determine parental behavior; rather, they create central tendencies within populations. Parental behavior in any given instance is thus the joint product of cultural scripts that parents carry some version of in their heads, and the demands of their own situation. In their Gusii research, LeVine et al. concluded

that the “cultural scripts” of parent–infant interaction are organized around the principle of ensuring the infant’s survival in a traditionally high-risk situation; developmentally, this is superseded by a mandate to train the toddler and young child to be obedient and respectful. These cultural scripts, they suggest, were well adapted to bringing up children to take their place in the extended household economies of Gusii society, but they are not so well suited to prepare children for school. Nevertheless, a return visit to the community when the study children were 13 years old revealed that all who were not burdened with health or family problems were attending the local primary school. The authors suggest that their apparent success in adapting to school is an indication of developmental resiliency. We could also note that the school attended by these children was organized and taught by people who came from exactly the same background as the children themselves.

Research using social-ecological frameworks such as those reviewed here has produced a wealth of new knowledge about how children’s development is shaped by their cultural environment. Although the primary focus of these studies varies widely, they include ethnographic as well as individual-level information on the social interface between child and culture. The researchers who have carried out this work have been trained in social anthropology or have worked closely with anthropologists; typically, they have had extensive experience of living and working in other cultures. These researchers have been interested in understanding the role of culture in human development, as well as the ways in which cultures are recreated and changed through the course of individual lives. In addition, they have been concerned with the adaptive significance of different styles of culturally organized parenting and related aspects of children’s development.

In contrast to this research tradition which is rooted primarily in anthropology, the remaining two explanatory frameworks to be reviewed here come primarily from the disciplines of developmental and social psychology. Researchers from these backgrounds have been concerned with somewhat different theoretical challenges derived from the parameters of their own disciplines.

The Permeability of Culture and Psyche: Cultural Psychology

Beginning with William Kessen’s (1979) conceptualization of the child-in-context as the proper unit of analysis for research in child development, an increasing number of developmental psychologists have argued against the premise that the child can be studied without regard for the circumstances of development. At the same time, Vygotsky’s idea of the “zone of proximal development” (the difference between the child’s performance on any given task alone and with help) has become influential as a way to conceptualize the role of the social context in children’s learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985). The newly constituted discipline of cultural psychology takes a qualitative giant step further to assert that the person and the context cannot be considered as separate, distinct entities. As Rogoff, Baker-Sennett, Lacasa, and Goldsmith (1995) state:

Our perspective discards the idea that the social world is external to the individual and that development consists of *acquiring* knowledge and skills. Rather, a person develops through

participation in an activity, changing to be involved in the situation at hand in ways that contribute both to the ongoing event and to the person's preparation for other involvement in other, similar events (p. 54).

In a similar vein, Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, and Nisbett (1998) argue that "psychological processes are culturally contingent," and that therefore scientific attention should be directed to "the dynamic mutual constitution of culture and psyche" (p. 915). As they explain:

A premise underlying this work is that in order to participate in any social world, people must incorporate cultural models, meanings, and practices into their basic psychological processes. These psychological processes in turn constrain, reproduce, and transform the cultural system. So while each culture is constructed by the coordinated interaction of many psyches, these psyches are themselves oriented, structured, and motivated by the particular cultures in which they operate (pp. 915–916).

To date, studies of children using this approach have focused primarily on cognitive development, but this research entails observation of culturally structured practices and social interactions as they relate to learning school-related skills. The research methodology in these studies bears very close resemblance to traditional fine-grained ethnographic observation. For example, Rogoff et al. (1995) have analyzed an American Girl Scout cookie fund-raising project in relation to cognitive development, and Cole and his associates have studied children's activities in an after-school program as they reflect cognitive processes (Cole, 1996). In studies such as these, a major challenge has been to establish a way to cross-validate the observations of children's learning in particular contexts. In the most extreme version of this approach, this is an impossibility since the person and the context can never be separated. From this perspective, as argued by Shweder (1991), the only solution is for the research community to redefine its concept of "science." As he notes:

A cultural psychology studies precisely those causal processes that go on because of our understanding of and involvement with them. It would seem to follow that the truths to be formulated in cultural psychology are typically going to be restricted in scope, because the causal processes they describe are likely to be imbedded or localized in particular intentional worlds (p. 106).

Many developmentalists, however, seek further evidence that what has been inferred from naturalistic observation can also be seen in other contexts, whether naturally occurring or constructed by the investigator. This challenge remains to be met, in part because it appears that some skills evident in particular contexts are not assimilated in such a way as to be available for use in other situations; and in part because the exercise of individual skills in a social context is often distributed among the participants in a seamless fashion (Super & Harkness, 1997).

Individual and Collectivism: A Transcultural Explanatory Framework

The premises of cultural psychology would seem to imply commitment to contextualism as a general explanatory framework: that is, human behavior, including children's social behavior, can only be understood in the context of its own unique historical moment. It is thus somewhat surprising that some proponents of cultural psychology have also suggested that a single duality, that of individualism (or independence) versus collectivism (or interdependence) can be used to capture the most important contrasts between different populations (Fiske et al., 1998; Triandis, 1988). In a recent review, Kagitçibasi (1997) has explored the question of why the Individualism–Collectivism (I–C) construct has become so popular among researchers. She suggests that its simplicity as a single dimension, and its close relationship to economic development at the national level, may make it attractive to social science researchers. This writer would add that the I–C construct also fits nicely into preexisting psychological or sociological research strategies in which a “social address” such as socioeconomic status is used as an independent variable without involving investigation of the construct itself in the particular research context.

The I–C construct has been put to good use by researchers such as Greenfield, Raeff, and others in their studies of differences between Latino (mainly Mexican) and Anglo children, parents, and teachers living in the United States (Greenfield, Quiroz, & Raeff, 2000; Raeff, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2000). Even as this research has accumulated, however, its theoretical limitations are becoming increasingly evident. Several issues are of concern. First, the I–C construct can be used to build post-hoc explanations of a variety of behaviors, some of which may be inconsistent. For example, late weaning can be related either to a collectivistic orientation, as described for Korean mothers by Kim and Choi (1994), or to an individualistic orientation, in the context of American middle-class mothers' practice of letting the child decide when he/she is ready.

Second, the I–C dimension has been used to characterize both cultural groups and individuals. Although this might seem like a reasonable approach, it is necessary to distinguish between shared cultural values on the one hand and individual motivations on the other. Assuming that these two are the same leads to general statements such as the following contrast between North America or Europe and the rest of the world:

This orientation [individualism] seems natural and obvious to investigators and subjects – in North America and Europe. These people share a set of implicit and unexamined cultural values and practices that emphasize individual rights, independence, self-determination, and freedom. But many other cultures – indeed, most – place a higher value on interdependence and fostering empathic connections with others . . . In these cultures, people gladly emulate their associates and are responsive to others' wishes in order to sustain smooth social relationships (Fiske et al., 1998, p. 919).

Although differences in cultural values can certainly be observed across different social groups, it is a mistake to assume that all individual members of any given society “gladly” follow its behavioral prescriptions. Indeed, one element that has not received adequate attention is how the position of an individual in relation to the group may influence that person's feelings about societal norms.

A third issue not yet sufficiently addressed within the I–C paradigm is the relationships among cultural values, socialization practices, and actual social development in children. For example, Fiske et al. (1998) argue that the European American custom of offering frequent praise and compliments to children promotes high self-esteem and independence from the group. Indeed, this hypothesized relationship is at the center of an American cultural model of good parenting. The actual data on rates of independent and dependent behavior from Whiting and Edwards' study (Whiting & Edwards, 1988), however, tell a different story: the American children had *higher* rates of dependent behavior than did children from all the other (mostly non-Western) cultural samples. Furthermore, current research by this writer comparing American parents with parents of six different Western societies has found that the American parents are most concerned about their children's self-esteem, suggesting that this is a problematic area of development for them.

A final weakness of the I–C framework is that it attempts to reduce all cultural variability to just two categories. It is significant in this regard that the framework was originally developed, and in fact still mainly rests, on comparative Asian–U.S. studies. Although earlier cross-cultural work has generated some transcultural themes, the I–C characterizations go much further in specifying multiple ways that the two kinds of cultures (or individuals) vary; and these do not all “travel well” across major culture areas. “Collectivism” in Asian societies does not really resemble “collectivism” in Africa or Latin America, and neither is “individualism” the same in the United States and in Europe (Harkness, Super, & van Tijen, 2000).

From the perspective of the research traditions reviewed earlier in this chapter, it seems that the rediscovery of culture within the discipline of psychology has led to some of the same formulations, and the same problems, that were experienced earlier in anthropology. The application of post-hoc explanations within the context of one or two societies is not unlike the problem of ethnographers' monocultural analyses that could not be generalized to other cultures. The application of a single framework at both the cultural and individual levels replicates the problems that led to the demise of the “culture and personality” school. The assumption of developmental consequences of certain value systems as instantiated in parenting behaviors reflects a continuing ethnocentrism that has always challenged cross-cultural research. Finally, the creation of two global categories for cultures and individuals is reminiscent of Ruth Benedict's “patterns of culture” which were soon shown to be overly simplistic even for the societies they were supposed to describe.

Conclusions: Explanations and Evidence

This chapter has reviewed a historical sequence of explanations of how culture and children's social development relate to each other. Along the way, we have seen evidence for the utility of these explanations for helping make sense of cross-cultural variability in children's social behavior and development. The evidence suggests several lessons for future researchers. First, explanations based on only one or two cultural samples are unlikely to hold up over a wider array of world cultures. Second, cultural differences are easy to recognize but difficult to categorize: most generalizations about beliefs or behavior in any given

society turn out not to cover important facets of that society. Third, the prediction of future developmental outcomes based on the cultural structuring of child development at any given stage is perilous: until we understand more about the internal logic of specific cultural systems, we are likely to miss the mark. Finally, we should never assume that we have in hand all the relevant information about the cultural environment of children's development for any society, including our own. Even – and perhaps especially – for our own society, there are bound to be interesting surprises in store when we collect data on the environment of children's development that is as detailed and precise as what we collect on children themselves.

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