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A STUDY OF CULTURE & CHILD REARING PRACTICES

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Introduction

Culture shapes experiences and influences children's development. Culture can be defined as "the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviours shared by a group of people, communicated from one generation to the next." The children's rearing practices are differential over the world and greatly influenced by the culture of that social groups.

Parenting Across Cultures: A Global Perspective

Child-rearing in different cultures can be as varied as the countries from which they come. Some practices can appear neglectful by American standards, while others just seem unusual.

Norwegian parents let their kids sleep in the freezing cold. The French don't cater to "fussy eaters," instead serving children the same meals they themselves eat. And in the Polynesian Islands, it's not uncommon for "older" children (think toddler and preschool age) to take care of younger ones — even those who are not their siblings.

"Argentine parents let their kids stay up until all hours. "Japanese parents let 7-year-olds ride the subway by themselves; and Danish parents leave their kids sleeping in a stroller on the curb while they go inside to shop or eat."

Sara Harkness, a professor of human development at the University of Connecticut, discovered a trait that appears unique to American parents: their belief in the importance of early age cognitive stimulation. Her study on cultural

models and developmental agendas for early infancy concluded that American mothers were more likely to emphasize the importance of maintaining high levels of mental arousal and activity than their counterparts in other countries.

"The most salient themes for the American mothers were Stimulation of Development, and, relatedly, Cognitive Processing," the study states. "Together, these two themes capture these mothers' concern with getting their babies off to the best possible start in maximizing their potential as actively thinking persons, a concern underlined by popular promotion of the importance of early brain development."

The study also included mothers from the Netherlands, Spain, Italy and Korea. Mothers in these countries placed emphasis on markedly different practices than Americans, including self-regulation through a restful and regulated environment, attention to the baby's physical and emotional needs, emotional closeness, and protecting and educating the child.

Notable Cultural Differences in Parenting: The Individual vs. the Collective

One of the most widely debated issues in parenting is whether and to what extent a child's individuality should be nurtured. There are two fundamental patterns in child-rearing, individualistic and collectivist, explains communication expert Marcia Carteret on Dimensions of Culture. Individualistic cultures emphasize self-sufficiency, while collectivist ones emphasize the dependence of individuals on the group of which they are a part.

American parents embrace the former. "In study after study, cultural anthropologists have found that the overriding goal of American parents is to make a child independent and self-reliant," Carteret says. "Babies are bundles of potential and a good parent is one who can uncover the latent abilities and talents in their child, encourage the good while discouraging the bad."

Furthermore, the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture published a report on the culture of American families. Out of the four types of parenting modes Americans tend to practice, just 20 percent belong to the mode most likely to emphasize tradition. The other 80 percent of parents were defined by factors unrelated to custom or conformity, such as an emphasis on personal freedom, a lack of a particular child-rearing agenda and the desire to raise children more materially successful than themselves.

Through this lens, the gap between parenting styles in America and many parts of the world gives more of the impression of a chasm. Collectivist cultures, by far the global norm, train children in dependent behaviours including obedience, calmness, politeness and respect toward others. Ultimately, these child-rearing practices emphasize feeling responsible for behaviour and avoiding shaming both personally and for the family, clan or community.

Specifically, collectivist values can often be observed in many Asian-based cultures. The Frances McClelland Institute for Children, Youth, and Families explains that Chinese and Filipino traditions regard adhering to the status quo as paramount in importance.

Children raised with Chinese values are instilled with an obvious and accepted duty toward their family. As part of their child-raising technique, Chinese parents are also expected to teach their children the specific practice of how to live harmoniously with others. Therefore, individual emotional expression is considered harmful, as it is a threat to maintaining harmony. This in turn creates a culture of "saving face," which leads to shame on the child if society's expectations for propriety are breached.

Filipino families have a similar system. They adhere to concepts like *hiya* (referring to "shame" or "sense of propriety") and *pakikisama* (getting along with others to create harmony, even if it conflicts with an individual's personal desires). Again, if these principles are rejected or breached, intense shame is attached to the act.

Causes of Differentiation

Parents generally raise their children with the goal of molding them into effective adults. But the definition of an effective, productive member of society differs from culture to culture: How important is happiness? Financial stability? Family connectedness? Faith? Generally, "success" is defined by what ethics, mores and standards of life practice the culture in question possesses.

Children stay up until 10 p.m. in Spain and Argentina because of the strong emphasis those countries place on the domestic unit. Sending children to bed earlier would mean they couldn't fully participate in family life, something that those societies consider particularly important.

Some African cultures, like those in Zambia and Malawi, treasure the passing down of unique cultural traditions, considering it the job' of elders to continue this practice. The Kisii people of Kenya give weight to eye contact. They refuse to look their babies in the eye, believing it will cause them to grow up thinking they are in control of their caretakers.

For many cultures, a strong intergenerational family unit is critical to the success of a society. Children provide the social safety net for elderly parents. The United States, in contrast, places a premium on job success and individuality, which can mean children moving far away to pursue careers.

Indeed, societal philosophies and their influence on families can prove both substantial and, at the same time, enigmatic. It can be hard to understand just how significant an impact culture has on child-rearing because those norms are so embedded in what parents consider to be "normal" or "right" behaviour. But knowing how culture ties people together, for better or for worse, can have a significant impact on raising well-adjusted children.

Cultural differences in parenting abound, and for marriage and family therapists, understanding cultural mores is even more important to effectively help clients with the complicated web of family and cultural dynamics.

Recent Research Results

Individual Characteristics and Interactions

Temperament: Generally defined, temperament is the biological basis of personality. Research on the topic of temperamentally-based socially wary, reticent and inhibited behaviour has reported differences in prevalence of this construct between East Asian (e.g., China, South Korea) and Western children and youth (e.g., Western Europe, Canada and the United States); the former group has demonstrated a higher prevalence of wary, inhibited behaviour than the latter. In Western cultures, which value independence and assertiveness, socially-inhibited and reticent behaviour is viewed as reflecting shyness, fearfulness and social incompetence; in East Asian cultures, which are dominated historically by Confucian and Taoist philosophies, socially wary and inhibited behaviour is viewed as reflecting compliance, obedience, being well-mannered, and thus, social maturity and accomplishment.

Prosocial Behaviour: In general, prosocial behaviours (helping, sharing, caring, politeness) increase during the course of childhood, although the development and prevalence of prosocial behaviours varies across cultures. For example, researchers find that prosocial behaviour, as observed among peers and in parent-child interaction is more prevalent among young East Asian children than among Western children. Researchers suggest that this difference results from the collectivist ideologies prevalent in East Asian cultures. In support of this contention, researchers have reported that Chinese mothers of preschoolers are more likely than European American mothers to believe that their preschool children should share and help other children for social conventional reasons (e.g., to fit in with the group and function well in Chinese society).

Cooperation/competition: Whereas competition can damage group harmony, cooperation is necessary in relationship maintenance. Children from interdependent communities are more cooperative and less competitive than those from Westernized cultures. However, competition and cooperation appear to

co-exist regardless of culture. For example, in East Asian nations, children are more cooperative with friends and family, but more competitive in educational contexts. Further, generational differences appear to exist within cultures. For example, third-generation Mexican Americans are more competitive than their second-generation counterparts.

Aggression: Physical, verbal and relational aggression have been identified as distinct entities in many cultures and countries. Typically, physical aggression is viewed as unacceptable by parents and is associated with peer *rejection* in most countries. Nevertheless, meta-analyses have demonstrated that cultures characterized by collectivistic and Confucian values generally show *lower* levels of aggression, regardless of type, towards peers than their Western counterparts.

Social Withdrawal: There is increasing evidence that fearful, wary, inhibited behaviour among toddlers predicts early childhood social reticence and anxiety. Although inhibited toddlers in North America and East Asia are at increased risk for social reticence as preschoolers, the prevalence of reticent behaviour is higher among East Asian than Western children. Relatedly, young Western children are more sociable (i.e., friendly and outgoing) than their East Asian counterparts.

Peer Relationships: Friendships

Friendship is often referred to as a close, mutual and voluntary dyadic relationship. The voluntary nature of friendships means that children are able to initiate, maintain and relinquish friendships that meet their expectations and/or needs. However, the notion that friendship is a voluntary, freely-chosen relationship may not be the case in all cultures. In some cultures, children rarely engage in non-familial friendships. For example, children in traditional Yucatec Mayan communities spend most of their time with their immediate and extended family.

From a Western perspective, researchers have argued that friendship serves different functions for children at different points in development. For example, young children's friendships serve to maximize excitement and amusement during play and to aid in the organization of behaviour.

Little is known, however, about the developmental course of the functions of friendship across cultures. Moreover, the functions and nature of friendship appear to vary across cultures. In cultures within which friendships are considered one of very few relationships guaranteeing societal success, both intimacy and exclusivity should be regarded as the most important aspects of a friendship. Reflecting this idea, researchers have found that intimacy is more important in the friendships of children in Korea and Cuba than in those of North American children.

It is also the case that across cultures, friends spend more time together than non-friends; one outcome is that friends are often observed to engage in more conflict than unfamiliar peers or mere acquaintances. If appropriately resolved, conflict can positively affect developmental growth. However, conflict is resolved differently across cultures. Researchers have reported that negotiation is often used to resolve conflict among Western children; whereas disengagement appears to be favoured among Eastern cultures.

From an early age, most children form friendships with those who are similar to themselves in observable characteristics, such as age, sex, ethnicity, and behavioural proclivities. Even children of preschool age are more likely to choose play partners who are similar to them in age, sex, ethnicity and behaviour.

The Group: Peer Acceptance and Rejection

Young, socially-accepted children are typically skilled at initiating and maintaining positive relationships, and are viewed by peers and teachers as cooperative, sociable and sensitive. These findings cut across cultures: friendly children tend to be accepted by peers across cultures; on the other hand,

researchers have found that across cultures, immature, socially unskilled and aggressive preschoolers are rejected by their peers.

In Westernized contexts, social withdrawal has been linked to peer rejection. But *recent* findings have revealed that social withdrawal is also associated with rejection among children in India and industrialized China.

Thus, the correlates of peer acceptance and rejection across cultures appear to be similar. Both aggressiveness and withdrawal are associated with rejection, whereas prosocial behaviour is linked with acceptance.

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