



## Culture and Social Development

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*(Published online January 6, 2010)*

### **Topic**

*Culture*

### **Introduction**

Culture can be defined as “the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people, communicated from one generation to the next.”<sup>1</sup> Given that the majority of the world’s children do not reside in Westernized countries, and that culture influences development, cross-cultural research on child development requires special attention.

### **Subject and problems**

The focus of this essay is on the role of culture on children’s *social* development. Importantly, the *form* that behaviors take may appear identical across cultures. Yet, given that cultures vary in their customs and beliefs, the same behavior may be interpreted differently across cultures.<sup>2</sup> It is likely that any behavior that is viewed, *within a culture*, as adaptive will lead to its encouragement by significant others including parents and peers; in contrast, if a behavior is perceived to be maladaptive, it will be discouraged. Moreover, the means by which the given behavior is encouraged or discouraged may be culturally determined and defined.

Most cross-cultural work on children’s social development has been dominated by an *etic* framework, which assumes that the constructs measured have relevance across *all* cultures.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, an *emic* framework refers to the specific ideas, behaviors, and values that are viewed as meaningful by members of a particular culture. The etic perspective may cause researchers to operationally define (and thus assess) constructs in the same ways (with the same methods and measures) across cultures. Thus, the etic approach may result in overlooking culturally-specific definitions of given constructs. For example, researchers may assume that social competence, as a construct, is universally relevant and that it can be measured by assessments created in, for example, North American laboratories. This etic assumption may be entirely correct; however one would clearly need to empirically test this assumption. It is likely that, to some extent, the study of social competence would require an emic belief requiring within-culture conceptualization and measurement. Some aspects of competence may be universally held and others not.

### **Research Context**

In addition to culture, other significant constructs need to be addressed. For example, broadly, researchers typically discuss two cultural phenomena: 1) independent, individualistic, or Western cultures, and 2) interdependent, collectivistic, or Eastern and Southern (e.g., Central and South American) cultures. Western cultures are often described as those for whom members value assertiveness, expressiveness and competitiveness; whereas Eastern and Southern cultures are often described as those for whom members value group harmony and cooperation. More recently, there has been agreement that most countries are a fine mix of both of these constructs, with some being relatively more individualistic and others relatively more collectivistic. Significantly, in the research area reviewed herein, there is relatively little known of Southern cultures (or differences between Northern and Southern cultures); thus, the review is focused mainly on comparisons between Western and Eastern cultures.

### **Key Research Questions**

- 1) What defines social competence in Western, Eastern, Northern and Southern cultures?
- 2) How do peers react to children and adolescents who fail to conform to cultural norms of social competence?
- 3) How do individual characteristics, social interactions and relationships, groups and culture interact to influence social development?

### **Recent Research Results**

#### *Individual Characteristics and Interactions*

*Temperament.* Generally defined, temperament is the biological basis of personality.<sup>4</sup> Research on the topic of temperamentally-based socially wary, reticent and inhibited behavior 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 behavior than the latter.<sup>5,6,7,8,9</sup> In Western cultures, which value independence and assertiveness, socially-inhibited and reticent behavior 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 behavior is viewed as reflecting compliance, obedience, being well-mannered, and thus, social maturity and accomplishment.<sup>10</sup>

*Prosocial behavior.* In general, prosocial (helping, sharing, caring, politeness) behaviors increase during the course of childhood, although the development and prevalence of prosocial behaviors varies across cultures.<sup>11</sup> For example, researchers find that prosocial behavior, 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).<sup>12</sup>

*Cooperation/competition.* Whereas competition can damage group harmony, cooperation is necessary in relationship maintenance.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> Further, generational differences appear to exist within cultures. For example, third-generation Mexican Americans are more competitive than their second-generation counterparts.<sup>15</sup>

*Aggression.* Physical, verbal and relational aggression have been identified as distinct entities in many cultures and countries.<sup>16,17,18,19,20</sup> Typically, physical aggression is viewed as unacceptable by parents and is associated with peer *rejection* in most countries.<sup>21,22,16,23,24,25,8,26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup>

*Social withdrawal.* There is increasing evidence that fearful, wary, inhibited behavior among toddlers predicts early childhood social reticence and anxiety.<sup>9</sup> Although inhibited toddlers in North America and East Asia are at increased risk for social reticence as preschoolers, the prevalence of reticent behavior is higher among East Asian than Western children.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup>

From a Western perspective, researchers have argued that friendship serves different functions for children at different points in development.<sup>31</sup> For example, young children's friendships serve to maximize excitement and amusement during play and to aid in the organization of behavior. 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.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33,34</sup>

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.<sup>35</sup> If appropriately resolved, conflict can positively affect

developmental growth.<sup>36</sup> 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 favored among Eastern cultures.<sup>37</sup>

From an early age, most children form friendships with those who are similar to themselves in observable characteristics, such as age, sex, ethnicity, and behavioral proclivities. Even children of preschool age are more likely to choose play partners who are similar to them in age, sex, ethnicity and behavior.<sup>38,39</sup>

*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.<sup>21,40,41,42,22,16,23,24,25,8,20,26</sup>

In Westernized contexts, social withdrawal has been linked to peer rejection.<sup>40,22,43,44</sup> But *recent* findings have revealed that social withdrawal is also associated with rejection among children in India and industrialized China.<sup>45,8</sup> Thus, the correlates of peer acceptance and rejection across cultures appear to be similar. Both aggressiveness and withdrawal are associated with rejection, whereas prosocial behavior is linked with acceptance.

**Research Gaps**

As aforementioned, a salient problem in cross-cultural work is the belief that an etic approach is superior to an emic approach. In many respects, such a belief may result from the accompanying belief that measures created in Western countries can be “parachuted,” in valid and reliable ways, into different countries and cultures. To demonstrate the fallacy of this argument, we refer to a social competence construct specific to China: *Ren* or forbearance. *Ren* is a construct that encourages group harmony. When young Chinese children use *ren* in response to peer animosity, they disengage from, rather than do battle with, their peers.<sup>46</sup> This strategy is unlike problem-focused avoidance because it does not reflect the goal to escape or avoid the social situation. Instead, the goal of *ren* is to elicit restraint and tolerance from the peers with whom they are interacting. Western researchers may well overlook the social convention of *ren* and thus, may inaccurately construe and assess the construct of social competence in Chinese culture. Therefore, it would behoove researchers to consider their cultures of interest, and to collaborate with members of those cultures to conceptualize and operationally define social competence. Along the way, investigators should consider how the given construct may be defined at different developmental periods and how it evolves both in the short and long term.

Another consideration is the study of ethnic subpopulations within multicultural societies. For example, in the United States, the East Asian American and the Latino American

populations are continually rising in numbers. There is some indication that immigrant populations in these countries hold similar values to their Asian and Latin mainland counterparts.<sup>47,15</sup> Yet, for some youth, there appear to be generational and acculturation effects, whereby later generations are more acculturated to mainstream Westernized culture than previous generations. It would benefit researchers to examine the effects of acculturation in their assessments of cross-cultural or cross-ethnic variability.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, Western researchers who have interests in cross-cultural studies of young children's social development (and development in general) would do well to incorporate into their research programs the expertise of collaborators from other cultures. Only through conversations with their collaborators will they develop a better understanding of the constructs that truly matter in the lives of children and their peers.

### **Implications for Parents, Services and Policy**

Given that the majority of the world's inhabitants do not reside in culturally "Westernized" countries, cross-cultural work on the study of social development bears careful note. From our example of social inhibition or reticence, one can begin to understand that behaviors, when exhibited across cultural settings may take the same *form*; however, the *function* of these behaviors varies from culture-to-culture. Within any culture, children are shaped by the physical and social settings within which they live; culturally-regulated customs and childrearing practices; and culturally-based belief systems. The bottom line is that the psychological "meaning" attributed to any given social behavior is, in large part, a function of the ecological niche within which it is produced. All-in-all then, it would appear most sensible for the international community of child development researchers to not generalize to other cultures, their own culture-specific theories of normal and abnormal social development.

These statements are also relevant insofar as policy and "translation" are concerned. Practitioners, such as psychologists, social workers and teachers must begin to understand that normalcy is culturally defined. Criteria for psychiatric and psychological diagnoses must begin to take into account different cultural values. If criteria are not culturally sensitive, then a child who is reinforced to behave in *X*-manner by his or her immigrant parents, when *X* is viewed, within the larger cultural community as inappropriate or reflective of abnormality, all manner of difficulty may arise. Thus, policy makers and practitioners must be educated to understand the significance of cultural norms when interpreting the meanings of social behavior. Further, an understanding that social development is influenced by culture may aid host communities to develop sources of information (and possibly intervention) for parents (and children) whose belief systems may place children at risk for rejection, exclusion, discrimination, and victimization by members of the host community or country.

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To cite this document:

Rubin KH, Menzer M. Culture and social development. In: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, Boivin M, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development; 2010:1-9. Available at: <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/Rubin-MenzerANGxp.pdf>. Accessed [insert date].

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**This article is funded by the Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development (CEECD) and the Strategic Knowledge Cluster on ECD (SKC-ECD).**



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