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Development

Culture and Social Development

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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."[1] 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, which comprises their social behaviors and peer experiences, including their friendships. Importantly, any consideration of the cultural meanings of children's social behaviors requires that one consider the distinction between the *form* that behaviors take (what the behaviors look like) and the *functions* of those behaviors (the reasons for the behaviors). For example, some social behaviors may *appear* identical (or have the same form) across cultures, but they may differ from culture to culture in these behaviors are interpreted vis-à-vis their underlying reasons or motivations (or their functions). Importantly, cultures vary in their customs and belief systems, and thus regardless of their form or function, social behaviors may also be interpreted differently

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across cultures.

Put another way, the psychological “meaning” attributed to any given social behavior (or social interaction) is, in large part, a function of the ecological niche in which it is produced and exhibited.[2] 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. For example, in some cultures, the response to an aggressive act may be to explain to the child why the behavior is unacceptable; in others, physical discipline may be the accepted norm; in yet others, aggression may be ignored or perhaps even reinforced.[3] In some cultures, parents and adult figures remain the most important judges of acceptable behaviors throughout childhood; in other cultures, the peer group becomes an increasingly important adjudicator of acceptable behavior and relationships with increasing age.

Most cross-cultural research on children’s social development has been dominated by an *etic* framework, which assumes that the constructs measured have relevance across *all* cultures.[4] On the other hand, an *emic* framework focuses on 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. Indeed, some aspects of competence may be universally held and others not.

Theoretical Frameworks in the 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 ideologies (e.g., United States, Canada, the Netherlands), and 2) interdependent, collectivistic, or Eastern (e.g., China) and Southern (e.g., Central and South American)

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ideologies. Western cultures are often described as those for whom members value assertiveness, expressiveness and competitiveness. Eastern and Southern cultures are often described as those for whom members value group harmony and cooperation. Notably, such differences are used to explain the "meaning" of social behaviors, and child development more generally, in different cultures.[5] 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.

In accord with Inglehart and Welzel's *World Values Survey*,[6] it has also been argued that countries can be further distinguished by their acceptance of traditional versus secular-rational values. Countries with more traditional values emphasize parent–child relationships, deference to authority (power distance; filial piety), and adherence to well-established and -recognized cultural norms. Alternatively, countries with more secular-rational values place less emphasis on authority and the primacy of parent–child relationships, and more tolerance of diversity in thought, opinion, and behavior. In these regards, the dimensions outlined in the *World Values Survey* appear to be associated, conceptually, with Hofstede's distinction between collectivistic-leaning cultures and individualistic-leaning cultures.

More recently, it has been proposed that cultures can be conceptualized along a continuum of *tightness* and *looseness*.[7] Cultures characterized as "tight" encourage strict adherence to social norms with respect to social behavior and relationships, whereas "loose" cultures tolerate broad socialization practices allowing a wide range of behavior and relationships to be acceptable. In some regards, tightness is associated with maintenance of order; loose countries are more open. Assessments of the tightness-looseness continuum[7] reveal that countries that cluster in the Confucian-Asian grouping on the World Values Survey (e.g., South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, China) have high tightness scores. Countries that cluster in the Catholic Europe grouping (e.g., Portugal, Italy, Spain, France) fall somewhere in the middle range; and those that fall in the English-Speaking cluster (e.g., United States, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand) have relatively low tightness scores. In this regard, the tightness-looseness continuum helps to distinguish countries that have been traditionally grouped together, such as Confucian-Asian and Catholic European countries.

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Key Research Questions

1. What defines social competence in Confucian-Asian, Catholic European, and English-Speaking clusters of cultures?
2. How do peers react to children and adolescents who conform and fail to conform to cultural norms of social competence?
3. How do children's social behaviors and culture interact to influence social development?

Recent Research Results

Social competence refers to the ability to achieve personal goals in social interaction while simultaneously maintaining positive relationships with others over time and across situations.[8] Whereas the specific social behaviors that facilitate successful and positive peer experiences are, for the most part, similar across cultures, the social goals that children wish to accomplish, and the frequency (or prevalence) in which specific social behaviors are displayed, do differ.

Prosocial behavior. In general, prosocial behaviors (helping, sharing, caring behaviors) increase during the course of childhood and are consistently associated with both positive peer responses and positive peer experiences such as peer acceptance. Prosocial behaviors also tend to be related negatively to peer rejection (or active peer dislike) in most cultures, although the development and prevalence of prosocial behaviors varies across cultures.[9] For example, researchers have reported that prosocial behavior, as observed among peers and in parent-child interaction, is more prevalent among young East Asian children than among Western children.[10] Researchers suggest that this difference results from the collectivist-leaning, Confucian, and tight ideologies prevalent in East Asian cultures.[11] In support of this contention, researchers have reported that Chinese mothers of preschoolers are more likely than European and American mothers to emphasize social norm adherence and 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).[12,13]

Cooperation/competition. Whereas competition can damage group harmony and threaten close relationships, cooperation is necessary for positive peer interactions and is often studied as an index of social competence across cultures.[14,15] In general, peers respond positively to those who are cooperative. Children from collectivist-leaning and tight cultures, however, are more cooperative and less competitive than those from more individualistic-leaning and loose cultures.

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That said, competition and cooperation do appear to co-exist regardless of culture. For example, in East Asian nations, most children engage in both cooperative and competitive behaviors, but most children tend to be more cooperative with friends and family and more competitive in educational contexts.[15] Further, generational differences appear to exist within cultures. For example, third-generation Mexican American children are more competitive than their second-generation counterparts.[16,17]

Aggression. Physical, verbal, and relational aggression have been identified as distinct entities in many cultures and countries.[18] Typically, physical aggression (which involves hitting, kicking, and pushing others) is viewed as unacceptable by parents and peers, and is associated with peer *rejection*, in most countries.[19,20,21,22,23] Similarly, relational aggression, which typically includes relationship-damaging, gossip, and rumor-spreading behaviors, also tends to be associated with peer rejection in many countries.[24] And yet, relational aggression is also related positively with popularity in many countries, especially as children move into adolescence. This may be because such behaviors are both admired (for their adult-defying and assertive nature) and disapproved of by youth across cultures.[25] Nevertheless, meta-analyses have demonstrated that children in cultures characterized by collectivistic and Confucian values generally show *lower* levels of physical aggression, and *higher* levels of relational aggression, towards peers than their Western counterparts.[26,27] This may be because collectivistic-leaning and tight societies do not tolerate physical aggression and, consequently, aggressive acts are more covert or indirect in nature.

Social withdrawal. There is increasing evidence that fearful, wary, inhibited behavior among toddlers predicts early childhood social reticence and anxiety.[28,29] Social reticence in early childhood, in turn, predicts social withdrawal (defined as the behavioral tendency to remove oneself from familiar and unfamiliar peers) during middle childhood and early adolescence. It merits noting that these findings derive from studies conducted in research laboratories. There remains little information pertaining to the developmental progression from inhibition-to-reticence-to-social withdrawal in more naturalistic settings.[30] Beginning in early childhood, socially withdrawn behaviors, as assessed in school settings, are related to such negative peer experiences as peer rejection and peer exclusion, likely because they are perceived negatively by many youth, in most cultures and countries, all of whom tend to value peer interactions, relationships, and group involvement.[31,32] Significantly, however, researchers have found significant differences in the extent to which wary, inhibited behavior is displayed among East Asian (e.g., China, South Korea) versus Western children (e.g., Western Europe, Canada and the

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United States). The former group has demonstrated a higher prevalence of wary, inhibited behavior than the latter.[33,34,35] In Western cultures, which value independence and assertiveness, socially-inhibited and reticent behavior are 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 behaviors are viewed as reflecting compliance, obedience, being well-mannered, and thus, social maturity and accomplishment. However, recent findings linking social withdrawal to peer rejection in China (and other East Asian countries) suggest that the cultural meaning of social withdrawal in this region of the world may be changing.[36]

Peer relationships: Friendships. The peer experiences described in the previous sections, including peer rejection and popularity, reflect how children fare with the larger peer group (usually assessed within a school classroom or a school grade). Another aspect of children's peer relationship experiences comprises their friendship experiences. 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. 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.[37,38,39] Across cultures, many of the same social behaviors appear to facilitate the formation of friendships and the development of high-quality and supportive friendships (e.g., prosocial and cooperative behavior). Perhaps surprisingly, neither aggression nor social withdrawal appear to interfere with the formation of friendships. However, such behaviors may prevent friendships from enabling positive relationship experiences across cultures.[39,40] It is also the case that across cultures, friends spend more time together than non-friends and are often observed to engage in more conflict with each other than non-friends.[41] If appropriately resolved, conflict can positively affect developmental growth.[42] However, conflict is resolved differently across cultures. Researchers have reported that negotiation is often used to resolve conflict among Western children. Disengagement appears to be favored among Eastern cultures.[43]

Another important cultural difference pertains to the notion that friendship is a voluntary, freely-chosen relationship. This notion is not supported by extant research across cultures.[39] To begin with, 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.[44] In such cultures, “friends” are oftentimes siblings or cousins or the children of close friends of the family. Moreover, the functions and nature of friendship appear to vary across cultures. For example, in cultures within which having many friendships is considered to guarantee societal success, both intimacy and exclusivity are regarded as the most important aspects of a friendship. Reflecting this idea, researchers have reported that intimacy is more important in the friendships of children in Korea and Cuba than in those of North American children.[45,46] Finally, findings from a recent study suggest potential differences in the *protective power* of high-quality friendships in tight versus loose countries, especially when low-quality parent-child relationships occur.[47]

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.[49] 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 neglect the social convention of *ren* and thus, may inaccurately construe and assess the construct of social competence in Chinese culture as involving only those social behaviors described previously. Such a study, however, would be incomplete and not culturally-sensitive. Therefore, it would behoove researchers to first consider their cultures of interest, and then 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. They would also do well to specifically assess cultural values and norms, including tightness and looseness, as many countries are diverse in religion, ethnicity, geography (e.g., rural versus urban versus suburban areas, climate), and socioeconomic status, and all of these factors likely impact cultural values and norms, and adherence to them.

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A related 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 the Unites States hold similar values to their Asian and Latin mainland counterparts.[15,49] 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. Ethnic discrimination and victimization, however, can challenge the acculturation *and* social development of immigrant children.[50] Thus, it would benefit researchers to examine the effects of both acculturation and discrimination (and in their interplay) in their studies 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

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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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