The Cultural Construction of Child Development:

A Framework for the Socialization of Affect

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The search for explanations of cultural variation in expressive behavior has produced several generations of research on childrearing practices. As formalized in the Whiting model for psychocultural research (J. W. M. Whiting 1973) and applied to a large number of ethnographic and cross-cultural studies (see J. W. M. Whiting 1954), this approach has centered around an antecedents-consequences paradigm. Aspects of childrearing at a given point in the lives of children (for example, mother-infant sleeping practices) are related to aspects of adult life (for example, the practice of adolescent circumcision ceremonies). Childhood experience is seen as the independent variable, behavior in adulthood as the dependent or outcome variable.

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Two aspects of this well-known paradigm have seldom been noted by the anthropological community. First, although the focus of data collection in these studies may be childhood, the focus of theoretical interest is apt to be adulthood. It is almost as if the anthropologist were Freud talking to one of his women patients: the issue of concern is the functioning of the adult, not the life of the child. Second, the antecedents-consequences paradigm necessarily involves the isolation of events or stages in human development. Experience at a particular point in the development of the child is related to behavior at a specific stage in adulthood, without reference to previous, intervening, or subsequent development in the life span.

Research in the antecedents-consequences paradigm has produced a rich bounty of ideas about the cultural shaping of expressive behavior. We suggest, however, that further progress in understanding the socialization of affect—as well as the acquisition of culture in general—will require a synthesis of developmental and cultural perspectives. In this view, it will be necessary to look at the process of human development itself, as it interacts with the environments provided by different cultures.

Beatrice Whiting's recent work on culture as a “provider of settings” offers an interesting approach to this kind of developmental ethnography. She suggests that the most important role of parents in socializing their children is in assigning the children to different settings. Characteristics of settings—in particular the age and sex of the company children keep—are powerful determinants of the kinds of behavior which children develop (B. B. Whiting 1980). In our own work, we have used the term “niche” in comparing rural African and urban American patterns of infant care. The infant's niche, as we have used this term, includes “the physical and social settings which the baby lives in, culturally regulated customs involved in care and rearing, and the psychology of the caretakers” (Super and Harkness 1982). Whiting's work on culture as a provider of settings, and our descriptions of the infant's niche, represent a departure from earlier thinking of the “culture and personality” school in that the unit of analysis is neither the individual nor the cultural setting, but rather individuals in specified contexts.

The intersection between the culture and the individual can be described not only through the construction of the niche or behavioral setting, but also through interactions between the process of human development and culture. We suggest that a primary function of culture in shaping human experience is the division of the continuum of human development into meaningful segments, or “stages.” Developmental progress in the individual will be given less social recognition within culturally defined stages than will changes, real or imagined, which occur across stage boundaries. On the other hand, the comparison of individuals with each other—and thus, judgments of enduring personal qualities by members of the culture—will be made within the boundaries of culturally defined developmental stages. In the formulation of these judgments, of course, real developmental differences may be minimized or ignored.

The definition of developmental stages is in part a culturally shared response to the observable aspects of human development, and thus it seems reasonable to expect universal elements in stages as defined by all cultures. For example, all cultures, so far as we know, recognize infancy as a stage of human development. Cultures vary, however, in their choice of different aspects of development as the critical ones for defining growth. Further, the actual criteria for the beginnings or ends of stages may often derive from other events in the environment which are only indirectly, if at all, related to development of the individual in question. The result, we hypothesize, is that cultures will vary not only in the timing of roughly comparable developmental stages, but also in the developmental issues which are seen as primary to each stage.

The cultural construction of child development, thus, has three main dimensions: first, culturally derived criteria for the duration of each developmental stage; second, a set of characteristic physical and social settings; and third, culturally shared expectations for behavior by and toward individuals in each stage. We suggest that the developmental niche, as we shall term this structuring of the child’s environment, is the primary source for the child’s acquisition of culture, including the experience, encoding, and expression of affect. The regularities of the physical, social, and psychological parameters of the niche, as well as the thematic continuities from one culturally defined developmental stage to the next, provide the material from which the child abstracts the rules of culture, just as the rules of grammar are derived from the regularities of the speech environment. We will illustrate this theoretical approach with data.
from our field studies in Kokwet, a rural Kipsigis community of Kenya. We will then discuss the implications of the structuring of child development in Kokwet for the socialization of affect.

The Kipsigis, a Highland Nilotic people of Kenya, are pastoralists and swidden agriculturalists, using cattle for bridewealth in polygynous marriage. Like other highland East African peoples, the Kipsigis are patrilineal and traditionally used age-set as the basis of military organization; today, male and female circumcision ceremonies remain the focal point of cultural solidarity. Kokwet, the community where we carried out anthropological and psychological fieldwork for three years (from 1972 to 1975), consists of 54 households established on land repatriated from the British in 1963. Although as a government-sponsored “settlement scheme” Kokwet was intentionally modern in some agricultural practices, the community remained traditional in many significant respects: most adults had little or no schooling, few men worked at salaried jobs away from the homesteads, cows were still used for the customary brideprice, and virtually all adolescents still chose to undergo the traditional circumcision ceremonies.

We believe that the people of Kokwet see the years from birth to about nine years of age in terms of three major developmental stages. For the growing child, each of these stages can be characterized as a developmental niche with the three dimensions we have mentioned: criteria for establishing beginning and end, physical and social settings, and parental beliefs and values. To illustrate the social reality of the developmental niche in Kokwet, we will show that in terms of daily activities, mothers' expectations, and styles of social interaction with others, the changes experienced by children from infancy to nine years of age do not occur at continuous rates, but rather go through spurts and periods of relative stability. An overview of these changes and stable periods in various arenas of the child's life, we believe, supports the idea of more general, culturally based developmental stages.

The first stage is, of course, infancy. Infants in Kokwet are cared for almost entirely by their mothers for the first three months of life, thereafter by a child nurse (often an older sister) in conjunction with the mother and anyone else present. During this whole period, infants are almost constantly in the company of several other people, usually either in physical contact or within arm's reach of a caretaker. At night, infants sleep in skin-to-skin contact with their mothers, and they nurse on demand. Back-carrying is used by mothers and child nurses both as a means of taking the baby along while at work or visiting, and as a way of calming a fussy baby. A great deal of affectionate attention is given to babies, by older family members and by the community at large. Crying in babies is quickly responded to by offers of the breast, holding or carrying, or entertainment.

Infancy ends when the next sibling is born. In this common East African pattern, there is no other wholly satisfactory way of moving the child on to the next stage. Our own data on mother-child interaction patterns show that speech styles typical of mothers with two-year-olds linger on to be used with three-year-olds if there is no younger sibling (Harkness 1977). Usually, however, the birth of a younger sibling pushes the former infant on to the next stage at about two years of age. This stage is characterized by a decline in attention from adults and an increasing proportion of time spent in the company of other children, generally older siblings or half-siblings (Harkness and Super 1982). Together, these children play, watch the goings-on of older members of the household, and help in the care of the next baby. This is also an age for beginning to learn about the work of the household, such as herding calves, carrying water, collecting firewood, or weeding in the garden. Figure 1, based on “spot observations” (see Munroe and Munroe 1971) of 54 households balanced over times of day and the course of a year, shows a rapid increase in the amount of time spent in “work” activities, accompanied by a corresponding decline in play and idleness, from ages two or three to six or seven. In terms of daily activities, early childhood in Kokwet is a period of rapid growth in commitment of time to activities related to the economic well-being of the household: herding calves, fetching wood, and other family chores. In contrast, after age six the overall amount of time spent in work activities levels off, although the repertoire of chores done by children continues to expand with increasing age.

The transition to middle childhood in Kokwet, beginning at about age six, is marked by a shift in mothers' expectations of their children, who are now seen as old enough to carry out some independent responsibilities. In interviews with the mothers of Kokwet about their children, the criteria most frequently mentioned were
whether the child could be trusted to take a message to a nearby homestead, or could reliably be sent to the shop for a small purchase. As can be seen in Figure 2, mothers’ responses to this question show a rapid shift toward unqualified “yes” answers up to age six, when most mothers judge their children old enough to be entrusted with these errands. A related measure of mothers’ expectations, also shown in Figure 2, is their judgment of whether the child’s personality has emerged. Interestingly, it is not until a year or two after the child is considered old enough to be entrusted with responsibilities such as errands that it becomes possible for the mother to judge “what kind of child” she has. Responsibility was seen as the core of character, and thus it was not until a child was old enough that he or she could reasonably be expected to act responsibly that a parent could make this judgment of character.

We have described differences in children’s activities, and in mothers’ expectations for their children, as shown by spot observations and mothers’ interviews. Corresponding changes in social behavior directed to these children are reflected by a third data source, as illustrated in Figure 3. Running records of naturally occurring behavior in the home were written and later coded according to a modification of the system developed by Beatrice and John Whiting (B. B. Whiting 1971). Each social interaction or individual activity is scored as one of nearly one hundred kinds of goal-directed behavior. The social behaviors, of primary interest here, can be regarded as directed by an actor toward a target person. The data presented in Figure 3 summarize over 8,000 behavioral acts toward children of different ages. Behavior categories accounting for at least one percent of behaviors toward children in most of the age groups were selected or combined on the basis of their cross-age variation, their face content, and a cluster analysis. The resulting matrix of sixteen kinds of behavior directed toward nine age groups was submitted to multidimensional scaling by the MDPREF method developed by Carroll and Chang (1964). In addition, a hierarchical clustering was performed on the ages (Johnson 1967). As indicated
in Figure 3 by outlines around the ages, the cluster analysis formed three main developmental stages: one- and two-year-olds, three-, four-, and five-year-olds, and six- to nine-year-olds. Around the outer edge are shown characteristic behaviors. The youngest group is most frequently the target of nurturant and prosocial behaviors, while in early childhood there is a transition to socializing particular behaviors and encouraging cooperation and obedience. The oldest group, six to nine years, is primarily instructed to do chores (presumably by adults) and is the object of passive attention (presumably by younger siblings).

We have outlined three developmental niches for children in Kokwet: infancy, early childhood, and middle childhood. Each of these is realized in the same general physical and social surroundings, with the same overall cast of characters. Important differences have emerged in the daily activities, expectations by others, and social roles of children at these different stages, however. An understanding of the socialization of affect in Kokwet requires not only that we be able to relate any given stage, such as infancy, to affective behavior in adulthood, but also that we draw meaningful connections among the various culturally defined developmental stages. In this process, apparent discontinuities from one stage to the next must be reconciled within a larger framework of cultural values. The manifest content of childhood experience at different stages, as it were, must be analyzed for evidence of underlying thematic continuities.

The social agenda underlying all stages of Kipsigis child development offers one such theme. Training for obedience and responsibility is, as we and others have noted, a central aspect of childrearing in Kokwet and other similar East African communities (Harkness and Super 1982; LeVine 1973; Whiting and Whiting 1975). But the acquisition of these qualities requires a tightly interconnected community, where all individuals experience their dependence on each other. From this perspective, all three of the developmental niches we have described for Kokwet are well-structured sources of learning. The sharing of infant care, the close proximity of infants to others, and thus the necessity for the infant to adapt to the exigencies of other people's daily lives, is a set of circumstances which carries a message to the infant: You are part of a social group, whose needs will shape your life from moment to moment, just as your needs will shape theirs. The early childhood niche represents a difficult but necessary transition. With the distancing of the child from the mother and the establishment of stronger ties with peers, and with the beginnings of involvement in work activities, this niche also carries a message to the young child: You must begin to learn about respect for elders, and about responsibilities to the household. Middle childhood, once the transition to responsible participation in the family economy has been negotiated, brings the rewards of working in harmony with others for the benefit of all. We suggest that this agenda lies at the heart of Kipsigis beliefs and values regarding child development. The acquisition of social responsibility, as the prime criterion for adequate development, defines the beginnings, ends, and internal structuring of Kipsigis developmental stages and also provides a basis for the judgment of individual differences among children.
Just as the structure of each developmental niche carries a message for the learning of social behavior, so also does it teach the management of affective experience. Here, the underlying theme which we see can be described in terms of the management of state: who is in charge of it, and how it is to be dealt with. This dimension can be most easily expressed in terms of a contrast with the familiar: unlike American middle class parents, parents in Kokwet do not customarily engage in negotiations with their infants or children over the regulation of emotion, sleep-wake patterns, or eating. The infant care patterns which we have described involve management by others of the infant’s state: signals of hunger, tiredness, or fussiness lead to prompt responses by others to reestablish equilibrium in the baby. This kind of infant care practice has often been termed indulgent, and perhaps it would be in our American middle class context. A more accurate characterization of the Kipsigis approach in its own terms, however, is that other people, not the baby, are in charge of dealing with variations in the baby’s physical and emotional state. The transition to early childhood is a difficult one because it entails a substantial decrease in outside regulators of the child’s state. Now, if a child is fussy, that is “his business.” At a more abstract level, however, the two stages are similar in that the child’s state does not in itself become a focus of shared attention and communication between the child and others. By middle childhood, much of children’s lives at home is, as we have shown, oriented around household tasks. Now, the focus is what needs to be done, not what the child feels like doing. The management of state in the individual child becomes an accessory to the management of the social group as a whole. Unless the child has physical symptoms of distress, variations in his or her state will not seem consequential to anyone including the child.

In the subsequent developmental niches of Kipsigis culture, we could find other expressions of this theme. In each life stage, the physical and social parameters of the niche, and the beliefs and values attached to it, will add new elements to the cultural construction of human development. It is this framework which, we suggest, must be understood for an adequate study of the socialization of affect.

REFERENCES

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