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CHILDHOOD IN DIFFERENT CULTURES

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Introduction

The perception of childhood as a period of dependence and innocence has a long history. Being strongly associated with the Romantic Movement of eighteenth-century Europe it resonates with more recent Western theories of child development, ideas about child rearing and policies relating to the care and education of children. The advent of a global society, however, demands that we examine and reflect on our own belief systems and those which inform our individual and institutional practices with children. This chapter begins with a discussion of globalisation and culture (see Chapter 4) and then sets out reasons why a cross-cultural understanding of childhood, children and

child rearing is a prerequisite for any form of intervention in children's lives. Understanding the importance of culture can challenge our own preconceived ideas about childhood in a global context and help us to determine what we expect from children and their place and rights in society.

Globalisation

Globalisation is the extension of relationships and patterns of social practice and meaning across the world space; what happens in one part of the world has an impact somewhere else (Ritzer, 2008). Globalisation is a layered and uneven process which connects the local to the global (James, 2006) and in doing so brings a range of concerns and issues to the local context. The process of globalisation shifts societies and individuals closer together through the mediums of technology, transport and communication, moves both resources and people and is tied to consumption. Global products and brands and the (re)location of Western business interests to the developing world are all the outcome of globalisation, and the mechanics of globalisation mean that Western business and financial interests drive forward trade and exchange, arguably at the expense of the interests and benefits of local economies. The impact of globalisation is felt by non-developed and non-industrialised countries and it is maintained that power is retained by Western countries (Ritzer, 2008), although critics suggest that this perspective unhelpfully renders consumers as passive and powerless (Buckingham, 2007).

While there are clear benefits of globalisation, particularly in relation to communication and speed, there are disadvantages: specifically the 'hegemonisation' which occurs when one world view or one product/brand dominates. The US burger chain McDonald's provides a good example of hegemony at work in a global market. For example, McDonald's opened stores in China which had a big impact on the ways that families spend their disposable income. Marketing was child-oriented in the early days and China's 'Little Emperors' (a result of the so-called One-Child Policy) began to make demands of their parents in hitherto unseen ways. This changed traditional family dynamics and hierarchies and McDonald's not only brought a form of hegemony and change in dietary intakes but also cultural change that was more akin to family life in the USA than traditional Chinese families (Guo, 2000). Buckingham (2007: 44) suggests that: 'rather than relying simply on physical occupation, the US is now seen to sustain its hegemony through a process of ideological and cultural domination'.

As we can see, hegemony in a global context is not restricted to commodities but also extends to beliefs and ideas about social and cultural practices. There is thus potential for conflict in relation to childhood and ideologies and theories of child development and practice, where dominant views emanating from Western traditions and beliefs stifle local, traditional and culturally specific practices.

Culture, ethnocentrism and cultural relativism

Cultural theory suggests that a universal human culture is shared by all societies and that social practices support societies' structures (i.e. families, faiths) and fulfil individual needs. How then is culture defined?

Culture (see also Chapter 4) is how individuals understand who they are and how people give their lives meaning. Culture defines social groups – that is, the cultural group people belong to (macro culture). Culture is also understood as a set of practices, beliefs, plans and rules which a social group agree upon and which mark them out as unique. Culture gives groups a sense of identity and belonging and pride; it is learned, can be taught and acquired by members of the group (Rai and Pannar, 2010). Children acquire culture through exposure to, and observation and adoption of, behaviours and activities, as well as participation with their community and individuals, and by verbal and non-verbal communication.

Culture provides security and familiarity, is transmitted from one generation to another and is therefore dynamic: one generation may add or develop aspects and ideas about the world depending upon the context. Culture is patterned, uses symbols to convey meaning and continues over time, it is innovative and creative and can change in response to wider influences and societal demands (Rai and Pannar, 2010). For example, the provision of day care for pre-school children became the norm in the UK when the labour market required women to enter the workforce. The culture of child rearing practice being carried out largely by women in the home during the post-war period changed as the economic and political pressures were focused on female employment. This was not a straightforward process, as the development of day care for pre-school children was ideologically and politically opposed (Lewis, 2012) but by the start of the twenty-first century a childcare industry was fully established to provide a range of day care options for families, reflecting a significant cultural shift (see Chapter 11).

Cultures and cultural practices are studied by anthropologists; for example, Mary Douglas (1966, reissued 2006) studied the rituals and cultural practices and behaviours we know as taboos of the Lele tribe in Africa. Douglas argued that rather than being bizarre and primitive, beliefs about taboos, particularly those related to personal hygiene and the protection of females, developed to protect vulnerable members of the social group and to assure its future. Hendry (2008) explores cultures, traditions and their meaning and symbolism more widely drawing on anthropological research in Mexico, Japan and Morocco. Initiation rites, for example, vary widely but exist across many societies to signify a stage of development in childhood or in the transition towards adulthood. In some traditions these rites are gruelling physical tests or mutilations but they provide continuity and familiarity to the social group, tribe or clan.

It is not always easy for a 'newcomer' to learn the rules of the group; consider the example of a child in the UK who has been looked after at home before entering a

reception class. In education settings children may, for example, have to learn that in whole class activities they need to signal their desire to speak and then wait to be asked or that they need permission to visit the toilet.

'Ethnocentrism' and 'cultural relativism' are concepts which also require definition if we are to understand how culture and cultural practices are both defended and criticised.

What is ethnocentrism?

Ethnocentrism is the belief that one's own culture and way of behaving is the correct way; all others are judged by this standard. Ethnocentrism generally legitimates a Western 'gaze' or interpretation of a problem or issue – concealing and, in doing so, preventing the articulation of indigenous responses. An example might be where there are concerns about HIV orphans in sub-Saharan Africa; whereas the local community may assert that the care of orphans lies with the extended family and kinship network, Western responses may include the development of institutionalised care. In cultures where extended family members (aunties, uncles, grandparents) traditionally provide care for children this ethnocentric response is deeply flawed as it disrupts customs and practices which have long ensured cultural and community continuity.

Issues related to working children also challenge our cultural perspectives about childhood and what is deemed acceptable and appropriate. Children who work transgress the boundaries and notions of childhood; indeed, the issue of child work/labour has been a longstanding point of conflict and tension in the West with international agencies and institutions at the forefront of the activity to remove children from the workplace. However, while there are good reasons to prevent exploitative child labour there are some benefits for children and their families and communities particularly in the case of poverty where children feel pride at being able to make a contribution to their family or when their work pays for their education.

What is cultural relativism?

James and James (2012: 35) define cultural relativism as:

The recognition that societies differ in their cultural attitudes towards social phenomena and therefore no universal criteria can be applied to compare one cultural view with another. Culture can therefore only be judged through reference to their own standards.

They provide an example of the age of marriage which varies across Europe, with a fairly standard age of 16. In the Indian sub-continent it is not unusual for girls to be

married at 12. In the Western context this may be seen as abusive and exploitative and campaigners suggest that early marriage leads to earlier child birth which impacts on the health of females. However, the cultural practices of early and arranged marriage have been practiced as a means to bring families and kinship groups closer together and ensure the continuance of the tribe, clan or group.

It is important to ensure that when we accept and defend cultural practices, we are not legitimating harmful behaviours. An example of this is found in the Laming enquiry (2003) where the concerns about Victoria Climbié were not expressed or communicated, as the deferential behaviour she presented when with her aunt was accepted by the professionals she had contact with as the norm in her culture (see Chapter 14). The child was clearly frightened by the presence of her aunt, but the extent and reasons for these fears were only articulated after Victoria's death.

The complexity of cultural relativism can be seen in relation to the practice of female circumcision which is common in some parts of Africa. The practice in some cultures is related to transition from childhood to adulthood and beliefs about healthy childbirth. Campaigning organisations in the 1970s and 1980s renamed the practice 'female genital mutilation' and drew political attention to the physical harms caused by the practice (Keck and Sikkink 1998). The practice is now condemned by activists from within the culture and so its legitimacy as a rite of passage for girls is challenged (James and James, 2012).

Childhood and child rearing in cross-cultural contexts

As indicated above, our own views of childhood will have been formed within a particular cultural context and will therefore often be seen as how things 'are' and 'should be'. However, there are many reasons why as practitioners we should broaden our understanding of child development and child rearing practices and also extend what we know about childhood in other cultures.

First, if we accept that developmental theories are contextually and culturally specific (see Chapters 6 to 10), then we can see that there are limits to how these theories are applied. The concept of the self as connected to others which is common in many African cultures develops as part of a rich socialisation process which begins after birth. The mother of the infant communicates the heritage and kinship lineage, emphasising the uniqueness and nobility of his or her birth. Members of the kinship network live in close proximity to facilitate continued social support including childcare between members, as well as retaining links to ancestral heritage (Gbadegin, 1998 cited in Owusu-Bempah, 2007). This is in contrast to the early experiences of infants in Western cultures who live in a nuclear family with (usually) two parents and develop attachments exclusively with them.

Attachment theory, based on the work of John Bowlby ([1953] 1965) (see Chapter 7), has been challenged as being overly reliant on Western notions of the family, disregarding the varying ways in which global communities, tribal groups and societies rear children. Notions of reciprocity, and the significant role kinship networks undertake, are marginalised in the dominant child rearing theories with which Western education and science are aligned. Owusu-Bempah (2007) argues that socio-genealogical connectedness is crucial for children's adjustment to separation from their family or kinship networks. This theory can assist us in our interventions with children who have experienced their parents' divorce and separation as well as more permanent 'endings' they experience through international migration, long-term fostering and adoption. Understanding that children need to have information and culturally rich experiences which respect their heritage and history is a relevant issue for children who may be brought up by carers who do not share their culture, and as such care givers and practitioners would need to ensure that children's environments and activities draw on multiple cultural experiences.

Second, ecological models of child development have supplemented more traditional theories of attachment and incorporate the notion of the child interacting with, and adapting to, the environment. Erikson's (1995) life stage development theory, for example, suggests that all children go through similar stages or sequences, and each culture has developed its own way of both monitoring and protecting children as they transit each stage. The ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) also suggests that culture and the environment are important factors to consider and development tasks are adapted to suit the environment in which children are reared. More recently, Owusu-Bempah (2007) suggests that child development relies as much on the environment and the nurturing that children receive as it does on the knowledge and understanding they have about their heritage, cultural origins and the sense of being connected to their genealogical roots (see Chapter 10).

Timimi (2009) illustrates the way in which Islamic cultural practices and traditions assist children through various stages of development. These stages have been linked to children developing an understanding of the importance of truthfulness and co-operation and the sophisticated cognitive abilities to discern, show respect and demonstrate social skills. Once these understandings are attained, the child is deemed ready to move to the next phase of development. Within this culture, Timimi points out, indulgent parenting in a social environment that is characterised by high acceptance, low pressure and low competitiveness encourages children to want to show respect to adults and to demonstrate obedience. This is in contrast to Western traditions of child rearing which often over emphasise the importance of individuality, independence and self-esteem in children.

Timimi (2009) maintains that non-Western societies welcome children's acceptance of a range of childhood behaviours and more consensual and hierarchical interpersonal relationships. Children in these social systems are accepted just for being

who they are, rather than what they may become, or in achieving certain developmental milestones. Although it is also important to consider that in many faiths, cultures and practices of child rearing the normality of heterosexuality predominates and so the gendered socialisation of children emphasises the reproduction of normative gendered behaviours (Kehily, 2009).

The third reason for examining child rearing and childhood in other cultures is that if we value one cultural perspective or approach to child rearing over another this inevitably leads to ‘ethnocentrism’ – the belief that one’s own way of life is the only or superior way – and this precludes respect for and integration and/or adoption of traditional practices which have worked well in a range of circumstances and environments. In 1930 the anthropologist Margaret Mead published the findings of her study of the Manus people of New Guinea and suggested that modern societies could learn from the child rearing practices of this tribe:

the successful fashion in which each baby is efficiently adapted to its dangerous way of life is relevant to the problems which parents here must face as our mode of life becomes increasingly charged with possibilities of accident. (Mead, 1954: 13)

This leads to the fourth reason for challenging what we think of as ‘taken for granted’ knowledge. In many Western societies the family is generally defined through blood relations and it is this family which is morally and economically obliged to care for children. In many non-Western societies the notion of family is broader than blood relations, and includes reciprocity between kinship and extended family networks that have roles and responsibilities towards children and their siblings (see Chapter 4). Some social work interventions for children without parental care have been criticised for transposing Western models of childcare which marginalise and undermine traditional approaches to caring for children (Everychild, 2012). Abebe and Aase (2007) discuss this in relation to the role of the extended family in caring for children whose parents have died from HIV/AIDS in Ethiopia. Child rearing practices in Ethiopia have long included the traditions of sending children to live with relatives distinguished as ‘front line’ who are blood relations and ‘fictive kinships’ defined as:

people who have no blood relationship with each other but have deliberately created social ties that would enable them to co-operate with each other during normal times as well as during periods of stress. (Abebe and Aase, 2007: 2060)

In the UK in recent years family placement work with children who cannot be looked after by their families has started to recognise the important role that wider familial networks play in supporting children and their parents in caring for children, drawing on these and other indigenous approaches found in Africa and New Zealand.

In order to embrace difference and diversity and benefit from the rich sources of knowledge and tradition it brings, we must at all costs resist drawing on our own experience of childhood and our child rearing as the solitary measure of comparison. Mead's work and the work of other anthropologists who study children and their social and cultural life in their own environments bring a wealth of insights to the differences and variations in childhood, family and community life in a global context. We know from the work of Mead that the Manus people looked after their children very well preparing them for later life when they would be responsible for continuing traditions and practices.

However, what are we to make of children being trained for a harsh rural life and their exposure to the natural environment which Western traditions of child rearing would baulk at as dangerous and irresponsible? Mead (1954) reported that Manus children could eat when they liked, play when they liked and sleep when they saw fit. In a Western context this may be seen as neglectful behaviour on the part of the parents and children exposed to this regime would likely be subject to a battery of psychological tests to assess the immediate and long-term damage to them. It thus falls to practitioners to consider how these different approaches may be used to inform and shape our approach to working with and on behalf of children.

The loss of childhood: work and migration

In Western societies, the 'loss of childhood' is often used to describe the way in which children are denied a childhood as they have to assume adult responsibilities. The notion of the 'loss of childhood' is a term often applied to children who work and, as noted above, a Western ethnocentric perspective on child work has led to international calls for the abolition of child labour. However, the reasons for children working are often associated with structural factors and individual aspiration as well as culture and tradition and so global and national attempts to ban children from the workplace may do more harm than good.

Ethnographic research provides a broad cultural context for understanding childhood and children's agency (Nieuwenhuys, 1996; Manzo, 2005) and has informed research on child labour in developing countries and on child work and migration (Liebel, 2004; Hashim, 2006). These studies highlight the role of extended family networks in supporting children's migrations and desire to work. The longer term benefits of migration to children, their families and communities have also been evidenced. Children in Burkina Faso who left their village to work away from home for a year returned with new skills and were more respected by their elders. The migration was often seen by parents and the returning children as *rites de passage* (De Lange, 2005). Busza et al. (2004) found that children's own aspirations and hopes for

a better future for themselves and their families were the primary reasons for them to migrate abroad for work. Children's migrations for work were facilitated by intermediaries and extended family members, who often advocated around payment issues and offered support during their migrations in general.

The intervention of states and their agents and attempts to prevent children from working have had negative impacts, for example: children's economic contribution to their family being reduced or removed; children being unable to pay for their education. Western ideals about childhood which inform these interventions neglect to consider the cultural differences which encourage children to make a contribution to their household and education. Western approaches which simply seek to remove children from the workplace and 'give them back their childhood' undermine the social action which children can and do engage in to address structural economic conditions including their bargaining with employers around several issues including working conditions and wages (Liebel, 2004).

UNCRC and children's rights

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN General Assembly 1989) provides the framework for a minimum set of universal standards and entitlements for children and signatory countries agree to base their national legislation on these standards. The UNCRC recognises children as holders of rights, rather than being objects of international law (see Chapter 12). In relation to the focus adopted in this chapter, however, the UNCRC may be criticised on several counts.

First, many countries have used the UNCRC to measure progress in improving the life chances and opportunities for children (Twum-Danso, 2009). However, the UNCRC might actually undermine the expectations, aspirations and ambitions of children who can never hope to realise the idealised rights enshrined in the Convention. The monitoring committee (Committee on the Rights of the Child – CRC) is unable to report on the progress countries are making; developing countries simply do not have the resources to monitor progress and there is a lack of clarity in terms of which national government department is responsible for addressing any issues or challenges which are presented in countries' monitoring reports. The capacity of developing countries to invest in infrastructure services such as health and education is also compromised by the availability of national resources.

A view of children both as having rights but, because of their immaturity and innocence, of being incapable of exercising their rights, ensures that the UNCRC affords children protection as well as equal status with adults (Twum-Danso, 2009). For many children, the realisation of their rights and the Western idealised notions of childhood as a space of freedom, innocence and dependence remain outside their

grasp. The situations of children in certain countries have worsened considerably in the last few decades and globally many children lack real economic and political power. Financial and structural interventions and programmes are generated through adult-centred concerns and force children into exploitative labour, while international conflicts, such as in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, expose them to poverty and dislocation.

The UNCRC and children's rights perspectives have also been criticised for ignoring the realities of children's lives where they are socio-economic actors. The dominance of developmental discourses which reproduce images of children and childhood as (being in) a state of dependence and immaturity simultaneously mutes the expressions of social action and participation which children demonstrate in the vast range of social institutions which cater to and for them. The UNCRC is individualised and based around entitlement and social justice and is not aligned with the sense of community reciprocity and responsibility which characterises child rearing and concepts of childhood in non-Western contexts (Kjørholt, 2007).

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined key reasons why we should understand the differences children experience growing up in their culture. Studying childhood in different cultures is pertinent given the various impacts of globalisation and the international migratory movements of people who bring with them cultures and traditional patterns of child rearing which are often in contrast to notions of what is accepted as normal in our own cultures. As this chapter has discussed, our understanding of childhood necessarily includes recognition that this is not a fixed, one dimensional phase of life which starts and ends with achieving a particular stage of development; these stages, while arguably universal, are also culturally and socially defined. Instead, we may talk of childhoods and childhood experiences, while also acknowledging that these are socially constructed.

Childhood can be a period of innocence and dependency but this is not the experience of all children and importantly nor should it be. Cultural and traditional beliefs systems which engender responsibility, reciprocity and self-discipline shape different childhoods and ensure the reproduction of culture and community cohesion strategies. Child rearing can take many forms and is defined and fostered through traditional practices and by drawing on a range of development theories, some of which are peculiar to a given culture or social group. The challenge for practitioners is to recognise and embrace these differences and the diversity they bring to childhood experiences.

Questions and exercises

1. What are the most important reasons for studying the cross-cultural context of child development and child rearing?
2. How can we find out about cultural differences in child rearing?
3. What do we mean when we talk about culture?
4. What is 'ethnocentrism' and what is wrong with it?
5. What is 'cultural relativism' and what are the problems with it?
6. What impact does the UNCRC have on child rearing?
7. In what way can the UNCRC help us overcome the problems identified with 'ethnocentrism' and 'cultural relativism'?

Further reading

Bronfenbrenner (1979) provides an introduction to his hugely influential 'ecological systems' theory while Green (2010) critically examines a range of sociological and psychological theories which have informed and influenced child development theory and practice. Owusu-Bempah (2007) raises important issues about the cultural limitations of traditional Western psychological child development theories and introduces sociogenealogical connectedness, a cultural theory of child development which is applied to children separated from their parents and communities. Hendry (2008) provides a wealth of research and case studies which are drawn from her anthropological studies of many cultures and their beliefs. Timimi (2009) engages with globalisation theory and its potential as well as challenging the homogenisation of interventions and practice with children which negate cultural understanding and traditions. Buckingham (2007) examines the globalisation question with regard to children and their media literacy and the Western domination of media which majority world children encounter. Twum-Danso (2009) presents a valuable case study about the UNCRC and its application in non-Western states, specifically discussing the challenges in the realisation of children's rights in Ghana. Finally, globalisation brings the distant to a local audience and the growth of social media in the last decade brings the stories of the lives, experiences and cultures of children across the world into our homes. International organisations such as UNICEF and Save the Children use the media of film to capture the experiences of children, and social media platforms such as YouTube and Twitter provide a window for us to engage with children's worlds. These approaches not only depict the impact on children of war, conflict and invasion but also the lifestyles, cultures and traditions and are useful resources if used critically.
