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052157546X - Child Care and Culture: Lessons from Africa

Robert A. LeVine, Suzanne Dixon, Sarah LeVine, Amy Richman, P. Herbert Leiderman,
Constance H. Keefer and T. Berry Brazelton

Excerpt

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Introduction

This book examines parenthood, infancy, and early childhood in an African community, revealing patterns and practices unanticipated by theories of child development and proposing a cultural approach to the understanding of early environments. In comparing the Gusii people of Kenya with the American white middle class, we show their differing patterns of reproductive behavior and child care to be goal-driven, not by goals fixed in the course of human evolution but by historically conditioned cultural models that set a parental agenda for optimizing certain potentials of human development over others. Gusii parents give priority to their own fertility, the survival of their infants, and the compliance of their children – goals they have been largely successful in attaining during the 20th century. (The Gusii have one of the highest fertility rates in the world.) In describing Gusii family life and infant care practices, we demonstrate how their organization as parental strategies was coherent and efficacious in the indigenous context while becoming increasingly problematic under new conditions.

This study of 28 Gusii children and their environments over 17 months provides a profile of care from birth to 30 months of age, includes comparisons of Gusii and American mother–infant interaction, and indicates many specific differences in caregiving environments. Gusii mothers breast-feed for 16 months, sleep with their infants, leave them during the daytime with child caregivers as young as 5 years old, and avoid praising or questioning toddlers or engaging them in extended conversations. Gusii infants grow up in bodily contact with their caregivers and are present at virtually all family activities, but are rarely the centers of verbal or visual attention. They have relatively little opportunity for motoric exploration during the first 18 months, and they have *less*

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access to maternal attention as they reach the transition from infancy to early childhood. These practices diverge sharply from those considered normal or optimal in North America and Europe, namely, infant care that is visually stimulating and socially engaging from the start (while affording long periods of sleep), with a verbally responsive and emotionally supportive mother who facilitates exploratory behavior and conversational interaction during the transition from infancy to early childhood. What are we to make of Gusii practices from this point of view? Do they constitute a form of neglect or deprivation? Or do our assumptions about the “average expectable environment” of the human infant have to be changed?

In this book we take up the challenge of answering these questions through an analysis of Gusii practices of reproduction and infant care in their own cultural context and in comparison with American practices. Gusii mothers are devoted to the welfare and development of their infants, and their sense of what is best for them is framed in terms of indigenous cultural models that assume high infant mortality, high fertility (but with protective birth-spacing), and a domestic age-hierarchy in which young children acquire useful skills and moral virtues through participation in household food production. The accuracy of these assumptions has been eroded by changing conditions, but the models based on them – putting more emphasis on survival, soothing, and compliance, less emphasis on talking and interactive excitement than American models – remained the dominant guides to parental behavior at the time of our field study.

The Gusii care raises questions for child development research: How do we conceptualize the needs of infants and young children in face of the diversity revealed in this study? To what extent do human populations with divergent conceptions of the life course facilitate different maturational processes in the early years, and what price do they pay for developing one potential of human development rather than another? Have theories of early development exaggerated the universality of infant social environments in the absence of convincing evidence about their diversity? Have theorists misinterpreted infant care practices that enhance school-related skills, and other behavioral tendencies valued in the West, as prerequisites for human development in general? Finding the answers must begin with a hard and detailed look at evidence

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from non-Western cultures. This book takes such a look at the Gusii, from the combined perspectives of social anthropology, pediatrics, and developmental psychology – examining the child and the environment over time, describing practices in context, analyzing their benefits and costs, and appraising some of their developmental and health consequences.

Chapter 1 offers a comparative framework for studying child care at the population level across diverse cultures. In Chapter 2 we review the evidence on infant care in the agricultural societies of sub-Saharan Africa from several disciplines. In Part II of the book (Chapters 3–5), we focus on the Gusii people of Kenya – their changing culture and family life as an environment for child rearing, and their practices during pregnancy and childbirth.

Part III presents the results of our longitudinal study, with an examination of the care and interpersonal environment of Gusii infants (Chapter 6), their health and nutrition (Chapter 7), their social interaction and communication (Chapter 8), and variations in their early caregiving relationships (Chapter 9). In Part IV (Chapter 10), we interpret the data in cultural and psychological terms, comparing Gusii infant care with that of the American white middle class and considering the lessons to be learned from this research.

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Part I

**African infancy: Frameworks
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The comparative study of child care

Ever since Margaret Mead published *Growing Up in New Guinea* in 1930, it has been evident that knowledge of cultural variations in child rearing is essential to an understanding of human development. Mead introduced the idea that the diverse peoples of the world constitute a great laboratory of child development, with each culture representing a different set of experimental conditions for the rearing of children. The anthropological observer interested in questions of early education had only to “read the answers” from the experiment conducted for over a thousand years by a particular culture. Mead envisioned, for example, that her ethnographic report on the Manus people, whose children spent their days free of parental control, would help resolve the debate over “permissive” child rearing in America at that time.

The notion of cultural diversity as a laboratory offering “natural experiments” to the child development investigator has continued to excite interest in the cross-cultural study of child rearing, but reading the answers proved more complicated than Mead anticipated in 1930.¹ This is partly because the metaphor of a laboratory experiment makes the interpretation of results seem simpler than it is. In an experiment, the investigator controls the background conditions thought likely to affect the outcome in order to focus on one or two factors of interest, which are permitted to vary. But the conditions of childhood in Manus differ from those of American children in a great many ways other than the amount of parental supervision, and predicting the effects of “permissiveness” in the United States from observations made in New Guinea is highly conjectural. Anthropological students of child rearing resemble laboratory researchers in the experimental tradition less than they do naturalists in the Darwinian tradition of field observation.

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In field research, the central question is what to observe, and the answers to that question concerning child development have changed over the years since Mead's pioneering study, with the emergence of new theories and evidence of what children learn at various ages and how they experience their environments. Field studies conducted at different times and from distinct theoretical perspectives have been focused on dissimilar aspects of childhood, resulting in something less than a cumulative record of empirical findings from which general conclusions can be drawn. Indeed, progress in this field has been marked primarily by studies calling attention to "new" aspects of childhood, those hitherto unexamined by anthropologists but which research in psychology, linguistics, or other disciplines has shown to be significant in the development of the child.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, for example, experimental studies showed human infants to be far more capable of perception, learning, communication, and the formation of social relationships during the first year of life than had previously been known. This stimulated more detailed field research on infant care in diverse human societies – including the study reported in this volume – that examined early environments in the light of the new developmental knowledge. Thus there have been many changes in, and continuing divergence concerning, what constitutes an adequate case study of child rearing in cultural context.

Ideology has also played a role in preventing a simple "reading of the answers" to questions of child development from world cultural diversity in child rearing. Much child development research in the 20th century has been driven by the fields of education and psychiatry in seeking to find the determinants of academic achievement and mental disorder within Western societies. This practical agenda has narrowed the range of problems selected for investigation and given a normative bias to interpretations of the evidence. Just as Mead framed her Manus material in terms of the permissiveness debate in the United States during the 1920s, subsequent analyses of cultural diversity in child rearing have often addressed questions arising from American middle-class concerns about school performance and mental health – usually recast as cognition, competence, or emotional development – and have reflected Western assumptions about child development, without taking ac-

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count of the local contexts and conceptions of the people under discussion.

Furthermore, ideologies of child rearing in the Anglo-American West have changed over the last 60 years: The concern with hygiene, schedule, and discipline among child care “experts” of the 1930s was replaced after World War II by an emphasis on infants’ need for love and emotional support. From the older perspective, for example, African customs of breast-feeding on demand for 18 to 36 months could be interpreted as “overindulgence” and classified in Freudian terms as excessive gratification at the oral stage of psychosexual development;² from the later perspective, the same practices, insofar as they were not accompanied by visual and verbal expressions of the mother’s love that were familiar to Western observers, were occasionally interpreted as neglectful of the infant’s emotional needs.³ Do African mothers “indulge” their infants too much – or too little? Both the question and its answers reflect the biases of observers rather than the indigenous contexts that shape infant experience.

Thus Margaret Mead’s dream of a world laboratory of variations in child care providing clear answers to the educational questions of middle-class America has not been realized, partly because the world is not a laboratory (even though it is varied), partly because our questions change as we know more, and also because many of our questions are rooted in local concerns and assumptions that have constrained the search for answers. Yet Mead’s basic message to the child development field remains as valid today as in 1930: To understand how children grow up under varied environmental conditions, one must be willing to go to where those conditions already exist, to examine them with respect and in detail, and to change one’s assumptions in the face of new observations.

Mead also recognized some fundamental issues to which anthropological evidence on childhood environments should be addressed: the issues of universality and variability, heredity and environment, normality and pathology. These issues are as important now – and as controversial – as they were in 1930, though they are debated in the context of more specialized bodies of knowledge.

For example, some investigators of infant development, follow-

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ing Hartmann's concept of an "average expectable environment" to which all human infants are genetically "preadapted,"⁴ have proposed that there is a species-wide pattern of infant caregiving that promotes normal social and emotional development; that human parents as well as infants are preadapted to engage in this type of interaction; and that violating the infant's expectations for this pattern of interaction can lead to emotional disorder.⁵ Other, more socially oriented students of child development, however, argue that the patterns of interaction proposed as universally necessary for normal development are actually derived from contemporary middle-class Anglo-American norms and that evidence from a broader range of populations would show a variety of infant caregiving patterns to be consistent with normal social and emotional development – thus casting doubt on both the genetic determination of early interactions and their contributions to emotional disorders. According to this perspective, early environments provide culture-specific patterns of interaction from which infants begin to acquire the codes of communication and interpersonal conduct prevailing in the community into which they were born.⁶

This difference of views about the interactive aspects of infant environments indicates a general problem of child development research: Investigators tend to make theoretical claims or assumptions about the human species as a whole but they tend to support them with locally collected data from their own, usually Euro-american, populations. More evidence from diverse cultural settings is needed to help resolve, or reframe, long-standing issues in the field. We also need a broader and more inclusive conceptual framework than has been available to integrate evidence of human cultural diversity into child development research and to guide our search for further knowledge.

A POPULATION PERSPECTIVE ON
CHILD DEVELOPMENT

The child development field has been primarily concerned with *species-specific* and *person-specific* characteristics of humans. The general theories (e.g., of Freud, Piaget, Erikson, and Bowlby) have been offered as formulations applicable to all humans, positing stages and processes connected directly and indirectly with the

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Table 1.1. *Framework for the comparative analysis of child care*

Adaptive needs	Population-level patterns	Cultural goals of child care
<i>Subsistence:</i> Provision of food	Economic systems: foraging, agrarian, industrial	Economic competence
<i>Reproduction:</i> Somatic continuity	Marriage and kinship systems, demographic regimes, norms of infant care	Childbearing and survival, acquisition of gender roles
<i>Communication:</i> Sharing of information	Languages and other symbol systems	Communicative competence
<i>Social regulation:</i> Maintenance of order	Social hierarchies, conventions of face- to-face relations	Self-control, situa- tionally appropriate behavior

maturation of the central nervous system during childhood. Empirical research on child development, however, has focused largely on individual differences within relatively homogeneous populations, seeking to identify person-specific environmental or temperamental variables that predict person-specific behavioral outcomes. *Population-specific* characteristics have usually been regarded merely as an extension of individual differences, if they are taken into account at all. From a biological point of view, however, population-specific characteristics are of central significance in the analysis of human adaptation.

Population-level variation in social organization and social behavior is a characteristic of the human species.⁷ Fundamental adaptive processes such as subsistence, reproduction, communication, and social regulation, far from being simply replicated across human populations, are highly variable in their pattern and organization, as indicated in Table 1.1. Patterns of social organization and behavior such as mating patterns (e.g., monogamy vs. polygamy) and emotional display rules, which vary across *species* in much of the animal kingdom, vary across *populations* in homo sapiens.

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Populations can be defined as interactional networks within which mating and other communicative processes tend to be concentrated. Human populations vary greatly in size, complexity, and stability of boundaries, and form local associations, endogamous groupings, and speech communities, at national and subnational levels in the contemporary world. A population tends to share an environment, symbol systems for encoding it, and organizations and codes of conduct for adapting to it.⁸ It is through the enactment of these population-specific codes of conduct in locally organized practices that human adaptation occurs.

Human adaptation, in other words, is largely attributable to the operation of specific social organizations (e.g., families, communities, empires) following culturally prescribed scripts (normative models) in subsistence, reproduction, and other domains of animal behavior.⁹ The description and analysis of these organizations and scripts are the primary tasks of social anthropology. No account of ontogeny in human adaptation could be adequate without inclusion of the population-specific patterns that establish pathways for the behavioral development of children. All too often, however, child development theorists have leaped from species-wide determinants to person-specific behaviors without sufficient attention to the intervening contexts created by social and cultural systems, and investigators have studied individual differences without examining their ecological relationships. Seeking to identify the neuropsychological “hardware” or capacities for behavioral development, they have frequently overlooked the cultural “software” that gives it direction.

Table 1.1 outlines a framework for the comparative analysis of human child care, showing dimensions of population-level variation and the goals of child care corresponding to each of four adaptive needs or functions: subsistence, reproduction, communication, and social regulation. These functions are vital to survival and are socially organized, in *homo sapiens* as well as in other animal species.¹⁰ In humans, the socially organized patterns vary at the population level, as indicated in the second column, and particular patterns influence the survival and behavioral development of offspring through the provision of goal-directed child care environments, as specified in the third column.

In biology, survival is the ultimate criterion of adaptation, achieved not only through spawning and protection of the new-