

# Childhood Socialization: Comparative Studies of Parenting, Learning and Educational Change

Robert A. LeVine

## The Most Important Influences on Human Development

### Foreword

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Socialization should be at the center of our attention in the study of human development. If you have always thought so, you are going to appreciate this volume. Robert LeVine defines socialization as "the intentional design of psychologically salient environments for children's development" (p.1). If you do not necessarily think in terms of children and parents in such environments throughout the world, travelling varied pathways towards good parenting and child development, you are about to be introduced to concepts and empirical exemplars that surely will persuade you.

Robert LeVine's vision of human development is situated in history, ecology, human evolution, and family processes. The essays in this rich collection from across LeVine's career illustrate why the study of human development should be a holistic social science. LeVine sustains this vision throughout the articles in this collection. He ties each set of articles to enduring theoretical topics not only in the anthropology of human development, but also to education and the social sciences writ large.

Each section of the book is organized around a central problem in the social sciences, as applied to the topic of culture and human development. These problems are as relevant today as they were in the years that LeVine first worked on them. What is internalization and how do internalization processes operate in non-state societies? What accounts for variations in parenting goals and practices around the world? What have been the impacts of the remarkable diffusion of formal education for literacy and numeracy on parents and children? Is there a universal form of the self? If early experience matters, how does it do so? If women's education is associated with so many changes in women's behavior around the world (fertility, health, parenting), just how and why could schooling have such an effect?

These essays also illuminate five processes in human development LeVine has studied throughout his career: parental investment; enculturation; educational mobilization; school experience; and classroom interaction. For each one, he emphasizes the need for comparative evidence, the importance of differing cultural goals for children and families, and the usefulness of a socialization perspective for understanding these processes.



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Along with his wife Sarah, and in collaboration with scores of students and colleagues, LeVine has worked in communities around the world throughout his career. In this collection alone, you will find studies from Yoruba and Hausa communities in Nigeria; the Gusii in Western Kenya; Japan; Boston; several communities in Mexico; Zambia; and Nepal. Add to these all the comparative data from secondary sources, and these papers take us on a valuable tour of diverse communities with differently-designed environments for children.

LeVine's strategy is to build up from carefully and systematically compared, deeply-understood cases, drawn from societies throughout the world. He always uses multiple methods, and works across levels of analysis (psychological, cultural, social-historical, biological). There are general theories driving his work – but these theories include the ability to account for the often-wide variations in parenting and development to be found around the world. LeVine's work spans childhood, adolescence and young adulthood – because socialization requires understanding of the programmatic efforts communities make to engage children in one or another pathway in development.

Notice another feature of LeVine's papers and his framing introductions to them: he changes his mind when the evidence comes in. For instance, LeVine suggested early on that "...the cultural scripts for childcare are hazard-avoidance formulas reflecting actual environmental threats to the attainment of universal parental goals..." (p.70). Hence, where mortality threats are high, parents protect children from such threats and postpone other kinds of childcare scripts (such as early verbal interaction) until later in development. But "negative evidence accumulated" in regards to this model, as he puts it, and the adaptationist paradigm behind this hypothesis had logical problems. So his current formulation is that utilitarian survival is still important for comparing parenting practices, but it is balanced by locally meaningful features of parenting that also drive parenting scripts.

There are sharp challenges to business as usual in developmental research explicit in LeVine's point of view. One is the difference between progress and historical change. Historical change has brought schools, a premium on socialization for literacy, dramatic changes in mortality, global flows of capital, people, information, and media – all bringing new ways of engaging children in social relationships and the meaning of personhood. But these changes are not signs of progress towards a universal set of parental socialization goals around the world. These changes, and therefore the ways to understand developmental processes and assess outcomes, still require close attention to local variations in commitment to these changes. For example he argues that "non-pathological development of self and ego in humans comes in the wide variety of cultural forms on which we increasingly have evidence." LeVine's framework recognizes certain core, universal requirements for children's development, having to do with nutrition, basic security and predictability of environments, or frank pathology in behavior – circumstances that would be recognized as important everywhere. There is true pathology, but its opposite is *plurialism*, not a universally normal self, or a universally optimum way to parent (Weisner, 2000).

Gems can be found at every turn, both in the papers themselves and in LeVine's comments on them. Think of "precocious" children for example. American developmentalists, as well as most American parents in their everyday ethno-psychology, think of precocity as an individual-difference characteristic, to be measured across children in a community. A child very high on verbal skills, or motor coordination, is considered precocious in that ability compared to others in their culture. LeVine points out that precocity also is a *cultural* product driven by the developmental priorities of parents – by the shared patterns of socialization that shape children in local populations.

Just as Gusii children are precociously compliant as toddlers, at least by American standards, and American middle-class children are precociously talkative, at least by Gusii standards, so German children show precocious self-reliance as infants and toddlers... and Japanese preschool children precociously tact and diplomacy with their peers.... (p.7).

Many of the abilities children are *potentially* capable of at young ages, if those abilities are not marked as particularly important in that community, are not socialized for, and so that community of children is not precocious compared to others around the world. Cultural precocity influences what parents worry about, what special services are asked for, and what becomes a deficit. American parents worry if their children are not talking early, conflate verbal skills with intelligence, and may seek help for this "delay". Early self-reliance in their child might be a cause of worry over "attachment deficit" rather than a sign of successful development. Barring true developmental delay or other evidence of pathology, such worries reflect concerns over culturally-constituted social careers.

Here is another challenge to developmental research – assessing normative development. We err on the side of measuring things American or European communities want to make their children collectively precocious in. Outcome measures should reflect the goals of parents and intentional environments they have created in their communities to socialize their children in different ways. The outcomes in children commonly measured today are based on the acceptance of norms for those behaviors that come from the United States and Western Europe. Many child abilities are not being measured appropriately, or at early enough ages, if they are measured at all, because Western psychology does not view them as expectable or even possible for large numbers of children.

Developmental assessments (early literacy; cognitive; motor) may capture individual abilities, but not how these are used in the service of well-being. A social career for a child that promotes well-being would be rich in a child's engagement in activities deemed desirable by the cultural community the child is growing up in, and includes the psychological experiences produced by such participation. Outcome measures need to be much more sensitive to children's social careers and the activities and pathways they actually need to be competent in to produce the holistic well-being of a person.

Societies not only socialize children to be precocious in some specific skills (verbal responsiveness, intellectual quickness, good posture) but also shape the child to be a certain kind of cultural *person* with an appropriate self and identity. The parents and children in LeVine's work have social careers to engage in, not just specific, discrete abilities measured only individually. Socialization therefore, sets up cultural complexes – interrelated sets of many beliefs and practices intended to engage children in cultural careers meaningful and important for survival in that community. LeVine describes the “pedagogical” cultural complex of middle class Boston children, for example. I have described “sibling caretaking” systems of socialization in societies around the world (Weisner, 1987). Robert Levy (1973) describes the cultural management of emotion in Tahiti in this way. Tahitians use “redundant social controls” to achieve a culturally precocious (from the Western view), quiet emotional demeanor. Tahitians, as well as many Pacific Island, Asian and other cultures, expect children to be calm, gentle, and watchful/deferential in demeanor (except for an extended period of adolescence and youth called *taure'are'a* in Tahiti, in which adventures, autonomy, rebellion, and aggressiveness are culturally expected and common). Redundant community management of this “gentleness” includes many beliefs and practices organized into a cultural complex: children are somewhat distanced from their mothers and fathers after infancy, and live with peers; socialization networks are diffuse, meaning that affect towards others is diffused; severe anger is “strongly discouraged”, while mild transient episodes are tolerated; threats are common while actual aggression towards children is not; accidents are reinterpreted as punishment by spirits for aggression and this is widely believed to be true; there can be magical retaliation for serious anger; and it is generally shameful to show lack of control. This is an example of a culture complex of beliefs and practices extending across many domains (discipline, supernatural belief systems, treatment of peers and siblings, beliefs regarding shame and the self). Culture complexes of this kind are a strong sign that some emotional pattern or competence in children is of adaptive and moral importance to society, and therefore likely to become a “precocious” behavioral pattern when viewed cross-culturally (Weisner, 2001).

LeVine never loses sight of what, in my view, is the most important single influence on human development – the particular cultural community where the child is growing up. I have used a thought experiment to drive home the value of keeping the diverse cultural pathways for development in the foreground. Bring up in your mind's eye an infant, neurologically sound and healthy. Visualize the infant. What is the single most important thing that one could do to influence the development of that infant? Most American college and research audiences quickly respond with mentions of what come to mind as most important: physical protection and security for the infant, good nutrition, providing love, ensuring good attachment, providing a trust fund/financial security, and stimulating the infant. Of course these “Top Six” influences are all important in development, all with extensive research literatures, all important things parents do around the world. LeVine's papers focus on all of these.

But, I then propose, none of them is the most important thing you could do. The most important would be to decide where on earth – in what human community – that

infant is going to grow up. Highland New Guinea? Rural Western Kenya? Tamil Nadu, India? Tahiti? Taiwan? A small town in rural Western China? West Los Angeles? How will each of those clearly essential (and universal) important investments be carried out in that community? What physical protections are believed needed in each of these communities, and what do people think infants need protection *from*? What do parents believe about nutrition, and what resources do they have to provide it? How is love expressed by different individuals at different ages, and what kinds of persons are loved in what ways within what kinds of social relationships? What does “attachment security” mean to parents, how does it connect to social trust, and whom do children come to trust? What kinds of financial security are possible or in reach? What kinds of “stimulation” are important in each community, and when in development should that stimulation happen? Furthermore, towards what ends are parents and others doing these good things for children? What are the goals – the adaptive projects – which organize and give meaning to them? In other words, with what set of cultural pathways is that infant about to engage (Weisner, 1996)?

Some still seem to cling to the view that culturally different pathways imply that they are fixed, invariant, and only specific to geographically local communities. LeVine reminds us that all these assumptions have long been supplanted. LeVine conceptualizes enculturation as the acquisition of “local idioms” for development based on central tendencies within particular local populations – not as fixed personality traits or habits or practices that don't vary and change. These local idioms (meanings, beliefs, scripts for action, shared practices and ways of organizing everyday routines of life) vary across populations. The degree to which they are shared within a local population is an empirical question. The extent to which beliefs and scripts are shared should neither be assumed nor ignored in studying child development. Enculturation also does not happen through some form of automatic replication from parent/community to child (LeVine calls this the fax model). The child is not only not a blank slate, but is prepared to actively acquire cultural templates and transform them through internalization and use them strategically. There is increasing scholarly interest in this approach to culture and human development. (*Human Development*, 2002; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001)

The result of this recasting of our initial, implicit assumptions about the thought experiment of imagining the infant is that, if asked the question again, we would now imagine the infant in a specific community with a set of developmental pathways and activities and social relationships that surround the infant. We would no longer think of the infant floating all alone, context-less, in our mind's eye. Bob LeVine's intellectual journey represented in this volume is an exemplary model for taking this vision of childhood, and the study of socialization and human development, on to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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