Taking Culture Seriously in the Study of Fathering

Michael E. Lamb (Ed.)
The Father's Role Cross-Cultural Perspectives
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One of Michael Lamb's goals for this volume is "to increase our sensitivity to the importance of cultural assumptions and realities" (p. xiv) in understanding fathers. This volume is a valuable start in that direction, but it is not there yet, because it does not reflect the true range of cultural variations around the world. Culture is a more powerful and complex variable in the study of fathers than this volume suggests.

The volume is more cross-national in scope than cross-cultural. Eleven of the 13 chapters focus on nation-states; of these 11 are European/North American (Great Britain, France, Germany and German-speaking countries, Sweden, Denmark, Ireland, and the United States), and two others are culturally Eurocentric (Australia and Aden). Three others are US-based (Asia and Israel). These chapters provide a good overview of historical data showing the cultural changes that have occurred, and the lingering effects of past paternalism, less egalitarian beliefs and practices of the Afrikaans dialect, and to some extent the Chinese and Japanese, show a different ecological pattern.

What is added if we consider a wider range of the world's societies, classes, races, and cultures than is presented in this volume? We find fathers concerned over the sheer survival of their young children. They want to protect their offspring from the dangers of famine and pestilence; to have food, clothing, and shelter; and to ensure that they can be educated. They are plagued by the stresses of the environment, and the survival of their young children in these societies is a symbol of the father's authority. The analytical strategies of the authors do not expose this aspect of cultural influence.

The book has several excellent chapters in the book; they usually present both a review of the circumstances in their nation/culture and some new data. The Aka Pygmy study is particularly well done; Aka fathers seem to do well and develop an hour a day (a lot in world perspective), and Hewlett analyzes the ecological factors (type of work done by men and women and the father's stage in his own life cycle) that influence this high father involvement. He relates his results to both cultural and sociological theory. Nugent provides a fine overview in his chapter to the challenge of viewing the remote Irish father. The chapter by Hwang reviews data on the presumably egalitarian Swedes, finding that paternal authority and support public and social consensus in the United States has thus far had only small effects on father participation. A fine paper by Schwaib, Inzumiaux, and Nakazawa focuses on Japanese concerns over a weakened father image: "Mothering is universally accepted as a virtuous and valuable enterprise, but the role of the Japanese Japanese father is ignored, devalued, and even a state of flux" (p. 5). A brief review of the Swain research on kibbutzim provides only weak evidence of radical change in parenting roles. Paternal versus maternal attachment to their infants, Israeli fathers are active infant caretakers that are essential in the data presented by Sag, Karen, and Weinberg. The paper on " New fathers" by Russell shows analogous struggles by fathers and mothers to change the roles of parents.

Most chapters focus on Western contemporary social concerns regarding fathers, such as how, why, and where there may be more fathers involved in child care and domestic activities, effects of maternal labor force on fathers; and developmental issues regarding early childhood care and education, the role of fathers under different paternal involvement circumstances. Although such concerns are important and deserve attention, the overview Western European developmental work on fatherhood, and developmental issues regarding fathering for most families and cultures in the non-Western world. Furthermore, the chapters, not surprisingly for a collected volume, do not use the data. Thus, it is an interesting study, more seriously, they do not debate the theory or to what extent cultural differences or similarities when they appear, and so such culture or nation stands more as a connected case study, with no way to explain or understand why one is different or similar from the others. The book focuses on fathers, Lamb argues that the cultural gap between men are more important in influencing children than the sea of the parent: "The important dimensions of parental socialization are distinct with parental characteristics rather than gender-related characteristics" (p. 17). To the extent this is true, it is just as essential to understand the reasons for the remarkable cultural similarities and differences, in these shared parent characteristics across time and cultural place.

References

Cognitive Development: The Life Span Perspective: Cones of Age

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George W. Rebok is a research fellow with the Alzheimer's Disease Research Project in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at the Johns Hopkins University and associate professor of psychology at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. He is coauthor of "Flans, Actions, and Transactions in "Solving Everyday Problems" in the forthcoming Scoring Problems: Theory and Applications. J. D. Sinnott (Ed.) William J. Hoyer, professor of psychology at Syracuse University (New York) is coauthor, with J. M. Rybash and P. A. Roodin, of Adult Cognition and Ageing.

Georges Rebok's text, Life-Span Cognitive Development, is an advance in the field of study that life span developmental psychology has attained maturity. Although most introductory developmental textbooks now cover the course from infancy to old age, this book should be considered the first advanced text in developmental psychology to take a life span approach. This text covers the body of knowledge that constitutes the first 50 years of cognitive development. Although the life span perspective can be traced back to many sources in the 18th and 19th century (e.g., Alcock, Kramer, & Baltes, 1964), the approach has its modern beginnings with Prey and Kohlen's (1957) Psychological Development: Through the Life Span and the volume of the 1978 conference on the Yale University conferences on life-span development psychology (e.g., Studebaker & Baltes, 1970; NelsondeReese & Reese, 1978). In the early 1970s, the life span approach was seen by traditionalists as stultifying, disparate, and overly inclusive—too broad to be useful for the purposes of advancing substantive research and theory. But during the past decade, the impact of the approach has been dramatic and pervasive. Not only are life span textbooks, but more important, the life span view has stimulated a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches.

The life span approach is now seen as one that embraces the interpretation of development both within and across age levels as well as the conceptualization of developmental phenomena. Developmental studies do not need to include only one's children, adolescents, young adults, and elderly adults, yet the approach does not stress the appreciation of the range of age-related change and the antecedents for such change. The life span approach, with its emphasis on individual differences, history-specific variables, and especially social and cultural differences, has replaced (through inclusion) the narrow views of the nature of development based on ontogenetic