

Taking Culture Seriously in the Study of Fathering

Michael E. Lamb (Ed.)
The Father's Role: Cross-Cultural Perspectives

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Review by
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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; 7 of these 11 are European/North American (Great Britain, France, Germany and German-speaking countries, Sweden, Italy, Ireland, and the United States), and two others are culturally Eurocentric (Australia and Ashkenazim in Israel). Two others are listed as "Asian" (China and Japan [Israel is also listed as Asian]), with one region (West Africa) and a hunting and gathering society (the Aka Pygmies of the Central African Republic) added.

These are predominantly literate, industrial, and postindustrial societies in which men are relatively closer to and more involved in their families and more likely to be available for (however much they actually participate in) the domestic domain (West & Konner, 1981). The 11 nation-states are currently monogamous and have the nuclear family as the cultural norm. Culturally, legally, and economically, most emphasize the intimate couple relationship and tend to separate the couple from outside kin and nonkin social supports. Most practice predominantly ecological residence, have relatively small

completed family sizes, have partible inheritance rules for both sons and daughters, and permit wide choice in mate selection with relatively little familial involvement intruding on the couple's companionship and parental responsibilities. They tend to have cultural ideologies regarding gender and sex roles that are relatively egalitarian compared to much of the non-Western world. Of course, the histories of fatherhood and patriarchy in many of these countries show changing patterns, and one of the strengths of many chapters is the use of historical data showing the substantial changes that have occurred, and the lingering effects of prior patrifamilial, less egalitarian beliefs and practices. The African data, and to some extent the Chinese and Japanese, of course show a different ecocultural pattern.

What is added if we consider a wider range of the world's societies, classes, castes, and races 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 clear and present dangers; provide them with the basics of subsistence competence in farming, pastoralism, or trades; and ensure that they will be able to socially replace their parents in the next generation. They remain concerned with perpetuating their name, clan, and ethnic group in competition with others for cultural prestige and scarce resources, often in the face of oppression and exploitation from the state or from other ethnic groups. These fathers worry about arranging advantageous marriages for their

children, initiating them properly, and taking a second wife for themselves to become an even stronger and influential man and father. They fear ritual pollution, witchcraft threats, and the uncertain moral/religious future of their communities and their children.

In many cultural systems, the father role is closely related to male responsibilities for assisting their brothers and nephews, or with ensuring their sisters' advantageous marriages and safety. Compared to the European cultures, the father's role in many societies is much less autonomous, less centered so exclusively on the nuclear family and on the father's personal needs for nurturance and intimacy with his own children.

Beliefs and symbols regarding fathers and maleness are given too little attention as compared to norms, cultural ecology, and institutions. Consider the Sambia of Highland, New Guinea (Herd, 1976), in which fathers are so convinced that contact with women will pollute and weaken the health of any male, that men and boys over six or seven live in separate men's houses. Sambia fathers also have the startling and disturbing (to us) physiological belief that young boys must ingest semen if they are to develop properly physically and socially, and so (among many reasons), the father's role involves participation in ceremonies that include training for required and universal homosexual relationships among youths. From even this glimpse, one can see that a full use of culture as a variable in the study of fathering would need to analyze the symbolic and other connections among beliefs in domains other than fathering and the family per se. The Sambia interweave beliefs about fathering with biological beliefs, bodily metaphors, color imagery, the meaning of assistance and dominance in human relationships, and so on. Most cultures in this volume do not vary widely enough on beliefs like these to expose the powerful role such cultural ideas can have on fathering, and the analytical strategies of the authors do not expose this aspect of cultural influence.

There are many 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 hold their infants on average an hour a day (a lot in world perspective), and Hewlett analyzes the ecocultural 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 presents interesting new data in his chapter to challenge the view of the remote Irish father. The chapter by Hwang reviews data on the presumably egalitarian Swedes, finding that paternity leave and public support for active involvement has thus far had only small effects on father participation. A fine paper by Schwalb, Imaizumi, 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 father is ill-defined, devalued, and in a state of flux" (p. 247). A well-done review of the Israeli research on kibbutzim provides only weak evidence of radical change in parenting roles. Paternal versus maternal attachment where Israeli fathers are active infant caretakers seems equivalent in the data presented by Sagi, Karen, and Weinberg. The Australian work 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 fathering, such as whether, how, and why there may be more father involvement in child care and domestic activities; effects of maternal wage work on fathers; and developmental issues regarding early child attachment and sex role training under different paternal involvement circumstances. Although such concerns are important and deserve attention in the contemporary Western European developed world, these are certainly not the dominant 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 from other chapters. More seriously, they do not debate theory as to what to make of cultural differences or similarities when they appear, and so each culture or nation stands more as a disconnected case study, with no way to explain or understand why any one is similar or different from the others.

Although the book is focused on fathers, Lamb argues that similarities between mates are more important in influencing children than the sex of the parent: "The important dimensions of parental influence are those that have to do 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 variations, as well as commonalities, in these shared parental characteristics across time and cultural place.

This book is available in a paper edition, and it is highly recommended for use by students and scholars in a wide variety of disciplines who want to study a wider range of variation in father roles and to take culture seriously as a variable in understanding fathers and mothers everywhere. But the restricted sample limits generalization to mainly industrialized nation-states with a Eurocentric orientation, and the use of culture as a powerful

variable for studying fathering remains only partly developed.

References
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Cognitive Development: The Life Span Perspective Comes of Age

George W. Rebok
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George Rebok's text, *Life-Span Cognitive Development*, is an affirmation that life span developmental psychology has attained maturity. Although most introductory developmental textbooks now cover the life 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 life span cognitive development. Although the life span perspective can be traced back to various sources in the 18th and 19th centuries (see Dixon, Kramer, & Baltes, 1984), the approach had its modern beginnings with Pressey and Kuhlen's (1957) *Psychological Development Through the Life-Span* and with the volumes resulting from the first West Virginia University conferences on life span developmental psychology (e.g., Goulet & Baltes, 1970; Nesselrode & Reese, 1973). In the early 1970s, the life span approach was seen by traditionalists as faddish, disparate, and overly inclusive—

too broad to be useful for the purpose of advancing substantive research and theory. But during the past decade, the impact of the approach has been dramatic and pervasive. Not only are there life span textbooks, but more important, the life span view has stimulated a variety of theoretical and methodological advances.

The life span approach is now seen as one that enriches the interpretation of findings both within and across age level as well as informs the conceptualization of developmental phenomena. Developmental studies do not need to include a once infants, children, adolescents, young adults, and elderly adults, yet the approach involves an appreciation of the full range of age-related change and of the antecedents for such change. The life span approach, with its emphasis on intraindividual plasticity, history-graded and cohort-graded phenomena, and a wide range of contextual (e.g., biocultural) antecedents, has replaced (through inclusion) the narrow views of the nature of development based on ontogenetic