# Cultural Differences in American and Southeast Asian Children's Psychosocial Development

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Observance of Southeast Asian parents and their preschool children during English as a Second Language (ESL) classes suggests that rethinking commonly held developmental phenomena in psychosocial development may produce insight into Southeast Asian culture and childrearing, middle class American culture and childrearing, and child development in general. Because it meets the needs of parents, the Des Moines Area Community College offers child care with ESL classes for refugees in the Ames, Iowa, area.[1] This article is based on observations from nearly five years of experience in the refugee nursery school with parents and young children. Children's ages range from two weeks to seven years of age. Most were newly arrived in the United States, with little or no English ability.

Erik Erikson's classic work on psychosocial development, *Childhood and Society*[2], provides a rough framework for cross cultural comparisons. He suggests three processes govern psychosocial development: 1) the somatic (or physiological and mental makeup inherent in the individual), studied in the discipline of biology; 2) the ego (or organization of expression in the individual), studied in psychology; and 3) societal (or organization into groupings of geographic and historic coherence), studied in the social sciences. National characteristics or identities arise as childrearing is adapted to the needs of the society. Erikson is careful to illustrate the effect of interaction of all three processes on individual psychosocial development as he describes childhood in two American Indian tribes, Hitler's childhood, Russian childhood, and white American childrearing. Because we live in America and because most child development research is conducted on white middle class American children, research results are applied to all groups as if they were developmental somatic and ego processes with little cultural influence.

While Erikson comes from the psychoanalytic tradition and believes early experience can have effects much later in life, Jerome Kagan suggests early experience need not have these long-lasting results.[3] This exploratory article is not concerned with the early experience controversy, but rather with the immediate effects of childrearing practices. The intent is to raise questions, not provide answers.

Erikson suggests that each person experiences eight distinct "ages" of psychosocial development through life, with each age resulting in either a positive or negative attitude. Behavioral phenomena at the first three ages involving children at preschool and beginning school age are focused here. Both Southeast Asian and American children show the same developmental ages, but behaviors differ.

## AGES

### Infancy

Mothers create a sense of trust in their children by providing sensitive care of the baby's individual needs and a firm sense of personal trustworthiness within the trusted framework of their culture's life style. Erikson compares middle class white systematic regulation of functions and impulses in earliest childhood with Sioux Indian culture, which holds a child should be permitted to set the pattern. Southeast Asians appear close to the Sioux Indian approach.

Childrearing practices for Southeast Asians are different from white middle class Americans in feeding, sleeping, crying, physical contact, use of toys, and group belonging. The practices involved in caring for infants—feeding, sleeping, and crying—clearly illustrate cultural differences. Middle class Americans stress a regulating type care while Southeast Asians practice a flexible and permissive attitude. American baby care experts such as Benjamin Spock[4] and T. Berry Brazelton[5] agree on feeding schedules where the baby receives enough milk—breast or bottle—to last approximately four hours with maternal and family convenience as scheduling factors. In contrast Southeast Asian mothers feed their babies—whether breast or bottle—at the first whimper. Small four ounce bottles are used for many months. For example, mothers often bring two bottles for the baby for the two hour ESL training period or come down to nurse the baby during the break. Spock discusses fat babies under bottle feeding, but breastfed Southeast Asian babies are just as chubby as their bottle-fed counterparts. Food is always available to them to accept or reject.

Sleep patterns illustrate similar differences. Brazelton[6] and Spock

both suggest easing children into sleeping patterns around the family schedule with the security and quiet of bed. Southeast Asian babies, however, remain with the group, collapse when tired, and revive again to be part of the group. One mother of seven became quite upset when she found her sleeping infant in the crib room. When she brought him back to class, she said in very broken English that her child should always be with the group—he would be frightened on waking alone.

Infant crying is another behavior which appears to have cultural determinants. Erikson quotes older Sioux Indian women as saying babies learn to cry "like a white baby" and, "they teach their children to cry" when middle-class American customs are followed. Indeed, infant crying receives a good deal of attention from both Spock and Brazelton who agree it is a normal need of infancy, but may be handled and minimized by scheduling and maturity. Today much concern is directed to teaching American mothers to recognize their infants' states of responsiveness. When their needs are met, Southeast Asian babies do not cry while at the refugee nursery school. Babies, parents, and older children all have an expectation of quiet, content babies, an expectation which must be met to build trust. The staff is learning that if American childrearing beliefs are put aside, fulfilling the expectation is not difficult: moving at the first whimper and anticipating needs does prevent crying.

Physical contact, group belonging, and use of toys are early social practices which differ among cultures. Whereas American babies are taught to amuse themselves and to learn that they can control their environment, one or another family member holds the Southeast Asian baby most of the time. A fussing American baby is given another toy, a change of environment, or music. A fussing Southeast Asian baby is jiggled, played with, or soothed. People may use toys to entertain Southeast Asian babies, but they have little importance or appeal alone. Although the American baby has a regulated place in the family, the Southeast Asian baby is in the hub of activity.

Both cultures establish a sense of basic trust in their children but in different ways. Southeast Asian adults anticipate and immediately act to fill babies' wants. Most American babies are on the path of independence by fitting into routines and amusing themselves. Current American research[7] and popular child care books[8] about infant attachment reflect a cultural concern for establishing the basis for infant trust.

Although Southeast Asian babies are trusting and secure with any member of their family (which is usually extended and has numerous

members), they express great fear of white Americans, beginning earlier than the six to eight months found in the attachment literature. While individual differences are great, infants seem to recognize differences earlier and take time to accept white Americans—it can take children weeks to feel secure enough to remain without crying. Even then, the appearance of new Americans produces the fear reaction again. In a room with several American caretakers one frightened little boy first allowed the two blond Americans to care for him—it appeared the polarity of the difference made them recognizable. After they are secure, infants grasp at American noses and hair as if exploring the differences. The fear expressed by these very young children is so great it raises questions as to a biological origin in the distrust of another race, perhaps as a protective, survival mechanism.

### Toddler

Erikson believes this is the age at which children become aware they have a choice and enjoy exercising it. He states firmness must protect the child from an untrained sense of discrimination at the same time the child exercises new abilities. American childrearing pushes the child to greater maturity at this age: independence from the mother, verbal restraints, attempts to reason with the child (who is now talking), and toilet training. Southeast Asian children are still babies at this age; much time is spent holding and playing with them (continuing early infancy practices), demands on the children are few, and there is little or no attempt at toilet training. Young children enjoy the older children and adults as they imitate and participate with them. Older children are caring and helpful to the younger. In American society much concern is expressed in research and popular media for developmental problems. Attachment, fathering, concern about effects of maternal employment on children, discipline, toilet training, sibling rivalry, and the "terrible two's" are American phenomena which do not appear to surface in Southeast Asian childrearing. For Southeast Asians the toddler age is a time to enjoy the new abilities of babies and laugh good naturedly at demonstrations of immaturity.

During the toddler age, American children are developing a sense of possession. Toys and material objects are important to the children and to their caretakers as means of development. Cognitive development is seen as dependent upon experience and activities.[9] People remain the focus of Southeast Asian children who appear affectionate and eager to please.

Both cultures foster autonomy in their children but in different ways. Americans stress independence, ownership, and the beginnings of control. Southeast Asians allow children freedom to explore the immediate social and physical world with few restrictions.

### Preschool

At this age children add to autonomy the quality of initiative, or undertaking tasks with energy and active direction. The child is eager and able to work cooperatively, profit from teachers, and imitate ideal prototypes. American children now move quite readily outside the family to playmates, nursery school, and kindergarten. The challenges of new experiences and greater socialization provide the base for American nursery schools and kindergartens; children have a strong sense of their possessions, independence, and competition, and part of the child's task is to learn to share, play cooperatively, and take the view of the other person. Child development research interests show social development concerns for pre-school children. Research is in areas such as play behaviors, role taking, development of altruistic behavior, discipline, locus of control, and moral development. Southeast Asian children appear to have few problems in social development; being group members is central to existence in their culture.

Erikson suggests that on entering school, dangers await minority group Americans who enjoyed a more permissive early childhood. Southeast Asian children are no exception. Four-year-olds are very attached to their families and it is difficult to separate mother and child. Children cry relentlessly, and mothers, who are accustomed to keeping their children happy and content, are visibly upset and unable to control the situation. Whether there is an innate self preservation instinct called into action when faced with people of another race, whether the familial attachment and security are that strong, or whether a combination of the two is at work are questions to be answered by research.

The routine, regularity, and lack of freedom in schools after being accustomed to more or less having control can also present problems for Southeast Asian children. Children repeat kindergarten not for lack of English ability but for immaturity. Girls especially appear to have problems and react with "babyish" behaviors. In Southeast Asian culture four to six year olds often assume a responsible role in child care and helping their mothers. Evidently children move naturally into initiative and industry by their desire to imitate older siblings and adults and by their desire to please. Middle class

American culture teaches children initiative by regimentation and regulation of activity (which is part of adult American life) rather than by assigning family responsibility.

Because they are good group members, the Southeast Asian children in the Ames center do not possess the American competitive spirit. These children share and help each other, but winning, possessing, and being singled out do not have importance. They have an obvious awareness of the feelings of other children which one does not observe in American children.

Again, both groups develop initiative, but behavioral results differ. However, at this age problems can result because Southeast Asian children do not behave as middle class Americans.

## DISCUSSION

Childrearing customs exist because they work for specific cultures; they produce competent, effective adults. Through different childrearing practices both middle class Americans and Southeast Asians reach a normal result for their culture. Following are some specific considerations in contrasting the cultures.

The realization that all babies do not cry in the same manner as American babies suggests reexamination of certain basic assumptions. Are the babies temperamentally different? Are cries of American babies not being read correctly? Are feeding methods causing problems? Does the personality of American adults cause them to rebel at the constant demands of infants? Does nuclear family organization require infant adaptation? Some of the questions could be researched; for others there may be no answer readily available. Crying, in this instance, is culture specific, the recognition of which raises questions about middle class American infant care.

What is the function of American infant toys—substitute care giver, cognitive development, a combination of the two, an introduction into the culture? Personal reaction to the realization that toys or "things" could be substituting for people was disgust at the materialism and guilt at introducing this aspect to children. On closer consideration is this perhaps a good way to introduce Southeast Asian children to another culture, especially one into which they will have to find a place, as long as the children are content, happy, and secure? Could this short exposure to different childrearing add another dimension to the lives of the children?

What is the role of fear in a child's life? Fear is a primary emotion

but ethical considerations make it almost impossible to research. Attachment behaviors have been researched in relation to fear[10] but the primary consideration has been the mother-child relation and the child's security. Observing Southeast Asian children's reaction in strange situations makes one quite aware that fear is an extremely powerful emotion which needs to be overcome before children can move on to other tasks. The children in the Ames center not only manifest an extreme fear reaction before six to eight months but older children, two-years to four-years of age, also show extreme reactions.

That fear is a primary motivation necessary for survival is recognized in physical dangers; an infant fears being dropped or falling. Experience with young infants of another race and culture raises the question of whether the same survival instinct is present in stranger anxiety, especially in the intensity with which it sometimes presents itself in Southeast Asian children. Individual differences in reaction to white Americans raise the question of causes of fear. An answer without careful research is unlikely. If the roots of fear are self-preservation, prejudices could be understood in another way.

What exactly is "spoiling" a baby? Are Americans in reality extremely authoritarian in dealing with their children? American concerns with discipline and "spoiling" young children are in direct contrast to the easy going approach of Southeast Asians. Discipline for Southeast Asians appears to rise out of the child's desire to please and to be one of the group. Rather than exert authority and demand conformity, the expectation is that the child will obey. Mothers state they ask of their children what they expect at the particular age and watch closely to be sure children are able to fulfill the expectations. The success of the method suggests American childrearing practices demand too much maturity from very young and preschool children and too little family responsibility from school-age children.

Are childrearing methods intended to fill specific cultural needs of children applied without analyzing cultural differences? A concern for children's socialization is reflected in contemporary child development research. Most American preschool and kindergarten curricula stress social development. For example, preschool children's behaviors at play are topics of interest. Contemporary researchers see cooperative play emerging in late preschool years.[11]

In the Ames center, Southeast Asian children demonstrate more and earlier cooperative play. If concurring research verifies this observation it could mean the play development observed is the behavioral result of socialization practices, which do not apply to all children.

The group social experience of Southeast Asian children may accelerate cooperative social development. If so, preschools and kindergartens accepting these children must consider their needs and where efforts are best directed.

Although observation of children from the two cultures reveals many differences, their development lies on a continuum. Socialization offers the widest spread of differences with American children at the individual independence end and Southeast Asian children at the group belonging end. Using kindergarten age children the two groups offer somewhat the following contrast. The independent middle class American child has need to develop skills with other people whereas the group oriented Southeast Asian child must learn to work alone and be self motivating. The challenge lies not only with the individuals trying to find the "middle ground" but with all who will work with children in helping them adjust to different cultures as well as their own. Colleges and universities, as the training ground for those who work with many cultures and societies, have a special responsibility to prepare people with the skills necessary to recognize similarities and differences, essentials and nonessentials, and thus help all to become understanding members of American society.

## Notes

[1]The Iowa Department of Public Instruction is currently funding the refugee English as a Second Language (ESL) program under a Project 310 Grant titled "A Whole Family Approach to Teaching English as a Second Language." Further information of the program is available from Bill Johnson, Director of Adult Education, Des Moines Area Community College, Ankeny, IA 50021.

[2]Erik Erikson. *Childhood and Society.* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1963).

[3]Jerome Kagan. *The Nature of the Child.* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

[4]Benjamin Spock. *Baby and Child Care.* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1976).

[5]T. B. Brazelton. *Infants and Mothers.* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1969).

[6]T. B. Brazelton. *On Becoming a Family.* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1981).

[7]J. Bowlby. *Attachment.* Attachment and Loss Series, Vol. 1 (New York: Basic Books, 1969); M.D.S. Ainsworth. "The Development of Infant-Mother Attachment." *Review of Child Development Research,* Vol. 3. B.M. Caldwell and H.N. Ricciuti, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973) 1-94.

[8]Brazelton, *On Becoming a Family*; M.H. Klaus and J.H. Kennell. *Maternal-Infant Bonding.* (St. Louis: Mosby, 1976).

[9]B.L. White. *The First Three Years of Life.* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975).

[10]M.D.S. Ainsworth. "The Development of Infant-Mother Attachment." *Review of Child Development Research*, Vol. 3. B.M. Caldwell and H.N. Ricciuti, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973) 1-94.

[11]Alicia Loraine Dunn. *Relationships Between Measures of Convergent and Divergent Thinking and the Play Behaviors of Preschool Children.* Unpublished Master's Thesis. (Ames: Iowa State University, 1983).

## Critique

Zbaracki's thought provoking discussion suggests one way in which the Southeast Asian, now American, community can enhance our understanding of a world view entirely different from our own and the ways in which it is taught. Their insistence on keeping the young baby, toddler, and pre-schooler in the company of affectionate adults demonstrates their belief in human beings as integral members of a community (or extended family group) first and foremost. Familial bonds in a foreign setting such as the American Mid-west could be seen as one way to give new born children a sense of an ethnic self esteem, a specific Southeast Asian history, and a degree of protection from the alienation and commercial materialism that afflicts middle class American children at comparable ages.

Learning to share and to care for other people in a closely knit communal environment is an assurance of an individual's and a group's survival. Ethnic American communities such as Afroamerican, Hispanic, and American Indian have known and have practiced this belief in childrearing as a defense against racism and its resultant poverty. When compared to these groups, Southeast Asians would appear no different in this one respect. Middle class American childrearing practices are in a constant state of flux, however. As more and more balanced discussions and comparative studies are completed (such as the one Zbaracki has started for us here), cross cultural borrowing beneficial to everyone will take place.

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