

Critique

Zbaracki's article is a pleasure to read because its style reflects the major theme of comparing the childrearing practices of two cultures. It is informative enough in detail to relate directly to the supportive literature. The author clearly shows her concern for the issues she raises and her empathy and dedication to her colleagues and the Southeast Asians with whom she works. She states her objective for the article and smoothly pleads her case for the need to understand the problems refugee Southeast Asians face in rearing their children in a strange land filled with strange faces and strange customs.

Although Zbaracki would like to exclude the early childhood experience controversies that abound in the literature of child development from her article, she raises these issues by asking if there exists an innate self-preservation instinct in Southeast Asian infants that would account for her observations of their strong stranger anxiety responses to white Americans. She also suspects that strong familial attachment may also be at work in producing strong separation anxiety in these children. Zbaracki also suggests a connection between the two postulates in producing the twin anxieties. An extensive literature on attachment bonding, separation anxiety, and stranger anxiety that may provide some explanation for the questions she raises does exist.

Attachment of the child to the primary caretaker, usually the mother, and eventually to other persons within its sphere is a gradual development over the first years of the child's life that ideally leads to a sense of security and trust in self, surroundings, and other persons. Attachment enables the child to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to function as a self-reliant, mature adult capable of forming stable relationships. If no bond is formed in early life, the adult is likely to be unstable and anxious.

As the infant becomes clearly attached to the caregiver in the last six months of the first year, infants often protest the impending or actual departure of the caregiver. The child is not easily comforted by another person and demands the return of the caretaker. This complex of behaviors, separation anxiety, is a clear developmental stage in the infant. Separation anxiety is often greatest in those infants most closely attached to their mothers, have been the least exposed to strangers, and whose mothers have always been close at hand.¹

Stranger anxiety appears in many infants about the same time as

does separation anxiety. It appears as early as three months and usually disappears after two years of age. Its expression seems to depend upon the degree of proximity of the infant to the caretaker, the particular identity, behavior, and proximity of the stranger. Cross cultural studies have shown that strongly attached infants react strongly to strangers *and* they have shown the opposite reaction.

Fear is not the common response nor normative behavior . . . the term "fear of stranger" obscures the richness and variety of the infant's and the child's behavior. It allows no room for the interest and pleasure he often accords new people.²

G. W. Bronson notes the reasonableness of such a duality for adaptation and survival. The child extends the boundaries of what is known while avoiding hazards of the environment. Bronson concludes, ". . . any classification of early behavior based solely on their presumed adaptive functions must be regarded as tenuous."³

From what information is presented in this article, I conclude that the Southeast Asian children are especially sensitive to strangers and to separation from their mothers and that the two behaviors are linked. This sensitivity does not, however, place their behavior outside the range of known limits. Rather, because of their unique upbringing, they are firmly attached to and responsive to their mothers and other close caregivers. Their responsiveness indicates that they have learned to be fearful because they have been taught to be fearful, albeit unknowingly.

The literature abounds with examples of primary caretakers eliciting both positive and negative reactions in their children. J.L. Gerwartz writes that

mothers play a direct role in determining the child's response to strangers, a bearded man, or someone of a different race, who approaches. The mother can give many signals, for example, with a sudden movement, draws the infant closer. Such movement may have already become associated by the baby with negative events, so that the child comes to associate avoidance response with strangers. This is particularly true of first child mothers, who are often ill-at-ease when their young infant is held by a stranger and often takes back the baby as soon as possible. ⁴

The learned expectancies infants have about what is appropriate behavior on the part of people are profound. As infants grow older they "may have developed more idiosyncratic expectations about what is appropriate behavior, and it becomes harder to meet these expectations."⁵ Given the stresses of immigration on Southeast Asian refugee adults, it is no wonder that mothers may not be at ease with strangers.

I suggest that a major effort of socialization with Americans be undertaken with the Southeast Asian adults. Changes in the children's behavior can be used to evaluate the effort. The alternatives do not appear hopeful: returning to the homelands; establishing autonomous settlements in this country; making drastic changes in existing educational systems. Ultimately, the Southeast Asians must be responsible for the well-being of their own children in this country, whatever that means in terms of changes in childrearing practices.

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Notes

¹M.D.S. Ainsworth. "Mother-Infant Interaction." *Culture and Infancy*. P.H. Leiderman, S.R. Tulkin, A. Rosenfeld, ed. (New York: Academic Press, 1977) 140-143.

²H.L. Rheingold. "General Issues in the Study of Fear." *The Origin of Fear*. M. Lewis, L.A. Rosenblum, ed. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1974) 255.

³G.W. Bronson. "General Issues in the Study of Fear." *The Origin of Fear*. M. Lewis, L.A. Roseblum, ed. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1974) 255.

⁴J.L. Gewirtz. *Determinants of Infant Behavior IV*. B.M. Foss, ed. (London: Methuen, 1969) 275.

⁵G.A. Morgan, H.N. Ricciuti. "Infants' Responses to Strangers During the First Year." *Determinants of Infant Behavior IV*. B.M. Foss, ed. (London: Methuen, 1969) 272.