

## Eurocentric Image of Childhood in the Context of the World's Cultures

Essay Review of *Images of Childhood*<sup>1</sup>

edited by Philip C. Hwang, Michael Lamb and Irving E. Sigel

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A review of an edited book with contributions from gatekeepers of the discipline is a challenging task, and doing so 'from the other side' [Kagitcibasi, 1996] renders the task more difficult. However, this task was made easier by the journal editor's specification that 'The aim of essay review of books in *Human Development* is to provide readers with the reviewer's ideas that spring from reading a valuable book.' The editor expects a 'broad view of how this book and the larger endeavor it represents fit into the field as a whole and move it along'. Thus, this essay is my selective attempt at interpreting the contents of this remarkable publication as I think it expands conceptual visions thereby instigating advancement of the field.

Hwang, Lamb, and Sigel present contributions highlighting cultural and historical variations in images of childhood from leading scholars representing a wide variety of disciplinary perspectives. This 9-chapter volume constitutes a valuable contribution in its articulate presentation of source materials on childhood and child life. A more appreciable value is its introduction of images of child psychological development in some nonWestern societies into the discipline's knowledge base, albeit from the perspective of a Eurocentric epistemology. For example, the title of Chen's chapter on Japan (chapter 5) – 'Positive Childishness' – has been phrased from a Eurocentric mindset, because native Japanese or other nonWestern people are unlikely to stigmatize or refer pejoratively to their children as 'childish'. The garden metaphors [Cole, 1992] Chen has cited for Japanese culture are similar to those in agrarian societies, but Japanese metaphors have been modified in adjustment to Eurocentric modernity. These metaphors connote tending and nurturing into maturity and the bearing of fruits, that is, children. Accounts of socialization of Japanese and Navajo children (Chisholm, chapter 8) are similar to the characterization of social ontogenesis in West African cultures [Nsamenang, 1992a]. Serpell (chapter 6), on his part, has explained the extent to which modern realities have displaced the Chewa of Zambia from the authenticity of their traditional life but they

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have not fully acceded to the coherence of that modernity. As a result, the Chewas, like most sub-Saharan Africans, are neither traditional nor modern; they present a hybrid set of childrearing values and practices characterized by both traditionalism and modernity. Palacios (chapter 3) has painted a similar picture for traditional and modern parents in Southern Spain where contradictions and paradoxes in parental ideas are the norm.

The book, however, does not specifically articulate how the images, especially the new ones, might inspire a paradigm shift or influence progress in the field. If we could listen to, discuss with, or observe and learn from how the enormous diversity in the human condition breeds variability in worldviews and images of childhood across cultures, this might lead to a new way of seeing children and the various ways different cultures organize children's development. For example, we may be inspired by images of childhood in societies in which children enter the adult world and take an active role in managing their own learning through observation and social participation, as with the Navajo (Chrisolm, chapter 8). Such insight is relevant to theoretic enrichment and innovation and to creativity in methodological approaches.

### **The Lopsided State of Developmental Science**

Although each chapter of the book offers a somewhat different framework within which to explore and understand childhood, in a certain sense, each represents a powerful critique of a scientific discipline that purports universality, but has failed to attend to '95% of the world's children' [Zukow, 1989, p. 3]. The neglect or exclusion of the bulk of developmental psychology's subject matter casts doubts on the scientific status of the discipline. What is evolving and becoming established as a science of developmental psychology is the story of efforts to understand the Western child. In other words, what most psychologists now know about human development is based primarily on one cultural point of view, the individualistic, child-centered idea and practices of the Western culture [Markus and Kitayama, 1991]. This state of the discipline obtains because the tools of contemporary developmental psychology were constructed to suit, reveal, and constitute members of the Western world [Ingelby, 1995], or, more accurately, the modern (postmodern) child.

Given its European invention and American domination, we may attribute the lopsided state of developmental psychology largely to the obsession in Western scholars to restrict their vision to and present Western ideas as the only rational and universally valid ones [Tangwa, 1996]. When Western psychologists, for instance, elect to listen to, say, African social thought or to observe African children, the tendency is to decide a priori what they want to hear or see and how it should be said or seen. Even authors in the nonWestern World are constrained to address the international marketplace, implying Western Europeans and North Americans, rather than speak to their own people in their own terms. The science of developmental psychology is not the prerogative of any cultural community; its task is to provide a better, fuller, and clearer comprehension of the natural world of childhood throughout the world. But the discipline has been dominated by European-driven cultures [Mundy-Castle, 1974] that value individualism and cognitive competence. Cultures like the African that place primacy on interdependence and value cognition as a means to social development are underrepresented in the literature. In this light, the extant developmental literature is, however incor-

rigible it may seem to us, a peculiar variant of child psychological development 'within the context of the world's cultures' [Geertz, 1973]. Psychologists continue to present a partial picture of children and child life, without considering what the worldwide variation in conceptions of childhood portend for the universalistic image of human childhood. Indeed, many questions on human development in nonWestern societies are unanswered or, worse yet, they are unasked because psychology has literally ignored or dismissed as unimportant aspects of social thought and behavior [Walsh et al., 1993], particularly the socio-emotional components, that may be inaccessible to current research tools.

### **Fragmentation of the Discipline**

The image of the discipline that emerges from *Images of Childhood* is that of a fragmented scientific discipline in search of itself. Central to this fragmentation is a lurking doubt about the behavior implicated in the definition of human psychology as 'the science of human behavior'. This doubt comes to the fore in concerns whether psychology actually applies itself equally to all humans. A decade ago, Werner [1988] wondered why the majority of developmental studies have been carried out in settings that are unfamiliar to most children around the world. The apparent limitation of the scope of contemporary human psychology to 'aspects of behavior conveniently available to investigators in highly industrialized nations with a history of scientific endeavor' [Triandis and Brislin, 1984, p. 1006] exacerbates the doubt. The concern whether the so-called minorities around the world (e.g., Eskimos, Gypsies, Pygmies, indigenous peoples, voluntary and involuntary immigrants) and their majority peers receive comparable attention as knowledgeable participants in psychological research is also indicative of the discipline's fragmented nature.

Another element of fragmentation perceivable in most chapters of the book of Hwang et al. is that contemporary developmental psychology is not monolithic; it is contested terrain. 'Although its overarching concern is a general interest in the study of behavior in living organisms, there is considerable diversity in how this interest is manifest in theory, method, and practice' (Sigel and Kim, chapter 2, p. 47). So far, the most acknowledged and intractable contest is on conceptual issues or theoretical perspectives, but, to my mind, the most fundamental battle should focus instead on competing indigenous and modern psychologies, even in Western societies. This battle is, however, intensifying as nonWestern scholars and psychologists in minority enclaves in Western countries increasingly become aware of the inadequacy for and unfairness to their peoples of the dominantly Western-oriented approaches to their discipline.

The fiercest theoretical battle is over a modernist view of the human person as a self-contained system about which it is possible to uncover a set of universal psychological mechanisms. The basic assumption is that mentalities, for example, are shaped by universal context-independent mechanisms [Nsamenang and Dawes, 1998]. With this kind of mindset, psychologists have posited a set of universal developmental norms with data wrung from studies of the developmental patterns of a narrow stratum of the human population, represented mainly by middle-class White samples. The overvaluation of experimental procedures by this paradigm, with its corresponding theory-driven methodologies and emphasis on the individual level of analysis limit access to the diversity that characterizes human thought and experience. Its positivist posture stands in

sharp contrast with concepts of the person held in interdependent cultures, the vast majority of human societies [Kagitcibasi, 1996], where the self is seen as coextensive with community, spirituality, and natural phenomena or features of the local environment [Geertz, 1973; Nsamenang, 1992a].

A frame of reference that focuses on the individual does not strictly apply in such societies, in which the individual gains significance from and through his or her relatedness to other humans [Ellis, 1978]. Accordingly, a central idea for developmental psychology is the fact of human embeddedness in a community of other humans. The 'human 'animal' becomes humane by virtue of its incorporation – humanization via care and socialization – into the human community' [Nsamenang, 1992a, p. 75]. Itard's account of the Wild Boy of Aveyron underscores the role of social networks in wholesome psychological development. Thus, as a situated entity, individual behavior and cognition are better understood within 'larger systems that include behaving cognitive agents interacting with each other and other subsystems' [Greeno and the Middle School Mathematics Through Applications Project Group, 1998, p. 5]. It is thus an egregious error to develop a science of human development without reference to the role of the community in the lives of the researched.

The focus of the second contest is on the eco-cultural perspective [e.g., Berry, 1976; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Super and Harkness, 1986], a version of which Berry [1993] has described as a general guide to classes of developmental and behavioral variables. Its seminal concept is contextual 'niceness' – the fact that the human person as well as every developmental phenomenon or human action is embedded or situated in a specific eco-cultural niche. This frame of reference struggles to go beyond a modernist faith by viewing development as a natural, biological agenda onto which environments and cultures write their particular scripts [Nsamenang, 1992a], thereby introducing differences in the rate and purpose of development [Wober, 1974]. An essential requirement is thus sensitivity to local conditions [Saraswathi, 1993]. This perspective calls for environmental assessment – a systematic approach to assessing how attributes of places influence cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes [Craik and Feimer, 1987]. An important aspect to assess is the image of childhood and pattern of child life prevalent in a particular cultural community or developmental niche. At the moment, the ecological essentialism implicated by this perspective is more in rhetoric than in reality in that the ethnotheories, epistemologies, and logic of developmental discourse are essentially Eurocentric and post-modernist. Accordingly, non-Euro-American images of childhood have typically been presented as if they were 'more or less wrong about the facts' of human development [Riesman, 1986].

The cultural psychology perspective sparked the third theoretical controversy. Shweder's [1991] version of cultural psychology is a constructivist and hermeneutic project that crosses disciplinary boundaries but rejects the possibility of discovering a universal set of mechanisms that structure human development [Nsamenang and Dawes, 1998]. Beyond biological potentials, this approach holds that children's emerging mentalities are constructed during ontogeny through their extraction of cultural ideologies, practices, conceptions of childhood, and other situated meanings from their developmental niches. By contrast, the genre of psychological and anthropological research initiated and perpetuated by colonial scholars was a social Darwinist and eugenicist imperative to provide racist accounts of Africans [Dubow, 1995; Nsamenang and Dawes, 1998], rather than to understand African thought and experience on their own terms. The academic psychology that arrived in Africa or elsewhere in the colon-

ized world during colonization has remained essentially imperialistic and racist in theory, methodology, and application [Bulhan, 1990; Moffit and Owusu-Bempah, 1994]. As such, it largely produces pejorative and/or etic interpretations of nonWestern behavior and experiences. An extension of this imperialistic project was the utilization of the colonized world as a laboratory to extend Western theories and norms in order to establish the purported psychological universals.

### **Developmental Psychology: A Value-laden Science**

It is crucial to note that ‘science, like any other human activity, is influenced by the culture in which it is embedded’ [Connolly, 1997, p. iii]. Developmental literature, like any other form of scientific knowledge, is constructed within the intentional world of the scientist(s) [Ingelby, 1995]. This view is plausible to the extent that scientists are not insentient, unconcerned, neutral fact-finders [Nsamenang, 1992b]. ‘Although scientific knowledge, once attained, may be considered *ambipotent* for good or evil, the work of pursuing new science and developing technologies is by no means value-neutral...’ [Lorraine, 1985, p. 3]. Given that science is a peculiar way of looking at the world, a process of discovery, psychologists look at and attempt to describe or explain the world from the imperatives of their varied worldviews and motives. It is worth noting that both the insights and blind spots in these perspectives exert or produce significant scientific outcomes and consequences. This alerts psychological scientists to ‘be aware of the difficulties and dangers of extrapolating the terms and concepts of their ‘own’ cultures into the representations of other cultures’ [Beattie, N.D., pp. 8–9]. With such prudence, a plausible approach would be to figure out how best to chart a systematic process of capturing the ‘reality’ constructed through the subjectivity inherent in psychological research rather than to lay claims to a nonexistent value-free discipline.

In the light of the foregoing, *Images of Childhood* represents a few of the world’s childhoods in a multicultural universe in need of exploration. The values that underlie the global diversity in approaches to raising and educating children and the motives for various lines of research ought to inform developmentalists that their science is value-laden. In order to sustain itself as a true scientific discipline applicable in all contexts, developmental psychologists need to adopt a learning posture [Agar, 1986]. This posture can inspire an opening up to creative, more inclusive approaches to all sources and forms of developmental knowledge. This approach can also enhance the application of the criteria – objectivity, positivism, being value-free (if possible), universality – that characterize a science.

### **The Value and Impact of Context**

Because ‘societal contexts matter, often greatly, in determining what is normal and what facilitates and obstructs human flourishing’ [Kessel, 1995], we see developmental psychology as the science of human development in context. The differential impact of the context, as mediated by the family, is especially evident in two basic spheres of human development – that of the self and that of cognitive competence [Kagitcibasi, 1996]. Depending on the conditions or opportunities offered to children by their developmental contexts, the environments of childhood influence development in terms of

how stimulating, unstimulating, rich, impoverished or adverse they are. In this sense, it becomes stigmatizing to classify children into minority and majority groups rather than to identify and objectify the particular conditions in which they are developing.

Diversity in developmental contexts and child psychological development is not an aberration in search of a solution; it is in the nature of the human condition. Human beings everywhere acquire culture, the vast majority in multicultural settings. The extent to which traditional and modern imperatives have precipitated conflict, for example, in Chewa (Zambia) (Serpell, chapter 6) and Brazilian (Campos and Gomes, chapter 7) societies, introduces the complexity of a multicultural world for childhood. This alerts psychologists to the problems presented by a hybrid developmental niche as well as to an important lacuna in developmental research – the fact that a vast majority of children and adolescents are hidden between the extreme situations that capture research attention. They also reveal that current research efforts largely fail to address the competing psychologies in both Western and nonWestern settings. The diversity implicit in all this invites keen attention to the ways in which multicultural contexts map onto human psychological development [Keats, 1994]. This necessity derives from the fact that ‘between our universal humanity and our special individuality lies the large part of each of us that is created by the culture handed down to us by our society’ [Maquet, 1972, p. 5].

### **Participatory and Interpretive Research**

Psychologists tend to focus more on measuring research participants, they rarely listen to them in their own terms. Psychological researchers would benefit by not ignoring Taft’s [1987] advice to use historical, demographic, and anthropological data about the people they study. Implicit in Taft’s advice is the need to consider both the context and the situated meanings of the participants [Greeno et al., 1998]. Sensitive observation of and attentive listening to the perspectives of the participants, ‘can reveal other possible dimensions of human psychological being, which are shut out by the ideology of modern psychology’ [Nsamenang and Dawes, 1998, p. 82] that tends to value quantitative over qualitative data. Careful observation, systematic description, and focused dialogue with children and their significant others, for instance, can foster understanding of childhood in cultural context [Nsamenang and Dawes, 1998]. This approach pertains to participatory and interpretive research that values both qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

The passion in this research approach is to understand the participants’ perspective. The heart of participatory research ‘turns on the understanding that data that are *by* the people differ from data that are about the people; a distinction quite separate from the tension between the qualitative and the quantitative’ [Wang, 1995, p. 16]. With this approach, the research process itself becomes a form of dialogue that permits interaction among all participants in the enterprise [Nsamenang and Dawes, 1998]. It requires both the researcher and the researched to see each other in a new way. For instance, the participant and researcher may enter into critical dialogue that focuses on understanding situated meanings [Greeno et al., 1998]. This orientation compels a shift of theorizing in developmental research from linear to nonlinear thinking [Myers, 1981], wherein researchers listen to and share their knowledge with the researched. This can permit examination of alternatives to conventional sources of developmental

knowledge [Wright, 1984] that have hitherto been ignored or excluded by relying solely or primarily on quantitative methodology. The need to explore all images, no matter how peculiar, is urgent given that science, especially contemporary science, has provided only a tiny glimpse of one pattern of child life, leaving us ignorant [Connolly, 1997] of the astonishing diversity in the worlds of childhood.

### **Prospect for NonWestern Contribution to International Psychology**

Participatory and interpretive research approaches invite consideration of who formulates and actually carries out research, who interprets research findings, and the audience for which the interpretation is provided, along with the specific content of research [Myers, 1993]. These genres of research are likely to reduce the problem of Eurocentric category imposition, and advance the humanist project of understanding, for example, the development of thought and emotion in culture. In this way, a developmental psychology that is contributed to by nonWestern communities is possible.

This does not imply support for any cultural essentialism, and does not deny the difficulties of specifying what might be particular about a particular cultural community. Locally developed psychological knowledge becomes not a feature of a specific culture, but an account of the dialectic between mentalities and the social practices that occur within particular cultural milieus [Nsamenang and Dawes, 1998]. An important component of such a conceptualization is the cosmology and image of childhood introduced into the discourse by the psychologist as another human being, researcher or practitioner.

NonWestern researchers possess the potential to contribute to the advancement of international psychology. If they engage in critical dialogue within the hermeneutic circle of imported and indigenous psychologies, they can produce findings to inform the psychological community of the extent to which some normative elements of human development constructed within Euro-American worldviews are inappropriate for some nonWestern peoples [Nsamenang and Dawes, 1998]. An articulate contribution in this direction is Kagitcibasi's [1996] image of family and human development 'from the other side'. My own [Nsamenang, 1992a] description of social ontogeny as a cumulative process of integration within the community and clan which Serpell [1994, p. 19] claims 'differs in theoretical focus from the more individualistic accounts proposed by Freud, Erikson, and Piaget' also attempts such a contribution. Furthermore, seminal work for some influential developmental theories – among them, attachment theory, developmental niche, ecocultural perspective, cultural/historical theory – was carried out in nonWestern societies. It makes good scientific sense to determine the extent to which each of these theories is consistent with the ethnotheories in those cultural communities. Thus, the new images of childhood and child life in the book of Hwang et al. or exploration of the forms of mental functioning displayed by children in nonWestern cultures can enrich the discipline, informing it about what are, or are not, universal aspects of psychological functioning. In this direction, Serpell [1984], Nsamenang and Lamb [1994], and Tape [1993] describe a pattern of socializing African children that subordinates cognitive to social development [Dasen, 1984; Wober, 1974]. This type of cognitive socialization contrasts with that in Western societies that value cognition for its own sake [Greenfield, 1997].

## **The Way Forward: Open Up to All Sources of Data Using Both Qualitative and Quantitative Methodologies**

In the face of wide cross-cultural diversity in constructions of childhood and patterns of organizing child life, it seems absurd to restrict ourselves to cultural knowledge accessible mainly to either quantitative or qualitative methods. We should applaud those kinds of cultural collaboration that empower rather than objectify the people with whom we work or wish to understand. The need is to open up to the thought and behavior of all people. In order to begin to address human diversity, we need to articulate perspectives and methodologies that are sensitive and applicable to how diversity is expressed in its global context. Another way to open up to new images of childhood is for gatekeepers of the discipline to ensure the publication of reference works that include 'native' voices from the nonWestern world. Textbook and journal editors as well as scientific panels should have multicultural audiences in mind.

The expectation is that scientific psychology should provide us with a comprehensive and clear picture of child development in the natural world in which we live [Connolly, 1997]. Because physical, cultural, and demographic environments differ from one part of the world to another, psychologists in one environment may be more sensitive to certain developmental phenomena that are being ignored elsewhere [Leung et al. 1997]. Sensitivity to the material and ideological character of developmental settings that give forth the sociocultural practices and ethno-psychological constructs that guide socialization and development [Ogbu, 1981], for example, may facilitate the development of constructs and theories that can enrich and/or complement those developed elsewhere. This effort is an essential step to universalize developmental knowledge.

Because scientific psychology is a creation of the Enlightenment, and is thus inescapably a Eurocentric product, I am suggesting that we accept its limitations, but transcend and gain inspiration from them to articulate inclusive and innovative paradigms and approaches that are sensitive to psychology's diverse subject matter. Participatory research can facilitate the sampling of different social and behavioral settings by taking advantage of the access enjoyed by participatory researchers [Wang, 1995]. This is a reasonable way to improve the accuracy of applying psychological science to all versions of human thought and behavior worldwide. The way forward is to borrow wisely and gain usefully and creatively from an extended family of theoretical and methodological traditions in relevant disciplines rather than from a single disciplinary perspective [Walsh et al., 1993]. It is essential to focus the search for relevant theories and appropriate methodologies on constructing 'a new understanding of theory in close proximity to actual psychological phenomena' [Valsiner, 1997, p. viii].

Efforts to make progress in this direction should begin from questioning the universality of contemporary theories and methodologies, with a view to generating frames of reference and a body of knowledge that is more inclusive and thus more accurate in reflecting human diversity. The scientific status of the discipline will improve and benefits will accrue if paradigms and methods shift from the current Eurocentric orientation to a multicultural perspective. Multicultural approaches must grapple not only with integrating the images of contemporary psychology and indigenous psychologies, but also incorporate what the researcher introduces into the research situation. The individual must be conceptualized as nested in a community of other humans.

Developmental psychology has a subjective and culturally diverse subject matter that traverses several disciplinary boundaries. Child development is a cultural process



in the sense that children are born into developmental niches that have been constructed through centuries of cultural evolution. In addition, children are intrinsically social and are primed to acquire, create, and transmit culture [Greenfield, 1997; Trevarthen, 1980]. Secondly, child development itself is culturally constructed from the perspectives of divergent worldviews. In a more pragmatic sense, childhood often unfolds in multicultural contexts.

As a matter of conjecture, could the images of childhood and child life in the book by Hwang et al. have been different had scientific psychology been 'invented' and cultivated in other than Western European and North American gardens, say, the African or the Chinese?

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