

<Commentary on Henrich et al. [BBS 33(2), 2010]> pp. 39-40.

<CT>**When nurture becomes nature:** Ethnocentrism in studies of human development

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<C-AB>**Abstract:** This commentary will extend the territory claimed in the target article by identifying several other areas in the social sciences where findings from the WEIRD population have been over-generalized. An argument is made that the root problem is the ethnocentrism of scholars, textbook authors, and social commentators, which leads them to take their own cultural values as the norm.

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I am grateful to the authors of the target article for illuminating this very serious problem in the social and behavioral sciences. I also have written critically on the issue, but without the courage to fully assert the fundamental weirdness of researchers' favorite subjects. I will add to Henrich et al.'s catalog by briefly reviewing several areas where the WEIRD tribe can be shown to be extreme outliers.

<CB>**Culture and cognitive development.** The best known model of cognitive development originated with the Swiss biologist, Jean Piaget. He derived his

theory largely on his observations and interactions with his own very brainy and sophisticated children (Vidal 1994). As Piaget (and colleagues) tested his propositions, subjects were largely drawn from the same milieu of middle-class European society. Piaget led the vanguard but a veritable army of cognitivists followed in his wake. The models that emerged were rooted entirely in research with children from the WEIRD tribe. Had these scholars delved into the anthropological literature, particularly with respect to the cognitive processes implicated in native belief systems, they might have paused to consider the implications. Indeed, Alexander Luria, close colleague of Lev Vygotsky, traveled to Central Asia in the 1930s and easily discovered alternative patterns of thinking in the reasoning of Uzbek peasants (Luria 1976).

Later, researchers working in West Africa (Dasen et al. 1978; Greenfield 1966) and Papua New Guinea (PNG) (Kelly 1971) sought to test these theoretical ideas about children's cognitive development outside the West and found that they didn't hold up very well, especially beyond early childhood. As Luria had earlier shown, scholars were finding that cognitive "development" was driven by exposure to modern institutions – schooling, in particular – rather than reliably erupting, like second molars (Cole et al. 1971). Others succeeded in showing very specific connections between cultural practices and cognitive skill (Price-Williams et al. 1969). Somewhat later in PNG, the typical two-culture (WEIRD vs. "other") comparison was broadened to systematically assess cognition in a variety of societies with varying subsistence patterns and degrees of acculturation (Lancy 1983). These studies revealed that the patterns of cognitive behavior

in the WEIRD population were uncommon compared to preferred local alternatives (Lancy & Strathern 1981).

<CB> **Culture and children's social behavior.** Social psychologist Millard Madsen began with the premise that Western middle-class children were markedly *different*. He devised a series of ingenious, game-like devices that unambiguously revealed whether a child was disposed towards a competitive or cooperative stance. In his initial work, he found that subjects in the United States made only competitive moves in the game (which only rewarded *cooperative* moves), whereas children from a Mexican village made only cooperative moves. Replicated in numerous other societies, the studies revealed U. S. children as outliers, being much more competitive than children from other societies (Madsen 1971). Further cross-cultural variation was neatly predicted by the child's social circumstances, so village kids were found to be more cooperative than urban kids, for example. In the highlands of PNG, Melpa children from warring clans were less cooperative than pairs from the same or allied clans (Lancy & Madsen 1981).

<CB> **Culture and parent-child interaction.** The problem identified by Henrich et al. arises, I believe, from a (likely universal) ethnocentrism. Contemporary orthodoxy regarding child development and child-rearing can turn nurture into nature. The way WEIRD parents raise their children becomes more than just the current fashion, it becomes "natural," rooted in the phylogeny or history of the species. This can be quickly illustrated.

Working among the Gusii of Kenya, LeVine (2004) has raised doubts about widely accepted tenets of the theory of infant attachment. Like many, if not the majority of mothers throughout history, Gusii mothers respond to their infant's need for sustenance but otherwise largely ignore them. Such behavior, if displayed by a Euro-American mother, would be grounds for a clinician to predict later pathological development. Of course, the Gusii children turn out fine. Closely related is the practice of talking to nonverbal infants using a special speech register (baby talk or motherese). Often assumed to be both universal and essential to the development of speech in children, it is in fact neither (Ochs & Schieffelin 1984). "Parenting style" theory (Baumrind 1971) cannot withstand cross-cultural scrutiny. Central African Bofi farmers fit the so-called authoritarian parenting style in valuing respect and obedience and exercising coercive control over their children. Bofi children should, therefore, be withdrawn, non-empathetic, aggressive, and lack initiative. On the contrary, they display precisely the opposite traits, leading Fouts (2005) to conclude that the theory "has very little explanatory power among the Bofi" (p. 361).

Parent-child play is another in this basket of parenting behaviors that illustrates how nurture is made out to be nature. A recent textbook describes variation in patterns of parent-child play, but never questions its universality (see Scarlett et al. 2005). One scholar of infancy claimed that the *absence* of mother-infant play signaled attachment failure or worse (Trevarthen 1983, p. 151). Empirical studies of mother-child play typically report that "Mothers were instructed to play with their [2- to 3-years-old] children *as they would at home*" (Stipek 1995, p. 244; emphasis added). Another

common feature is the use of well-off, highly educated subjects, with no caveat about the limited generalizability of the results (see Sung & Hsu 2009, p. 432). However, in a recent review of the ethnographic record, with hundreds of cases, parent-child play was found to be extremely rare and distinctly incompatible with many native ideas about “best practices” (Lancy 2007). To parents, play’s chief value is in keeping children out of the way (Whittemore 1989, p. 92).

Lastly, I would demur from the notion that parents’ active *teaching* of children is both universal and the essential component of cultural transmission (Csibra & Gergely 2009; Strauss & Ziv 2004). A thorough survey of ethnographic and historical cases shows teaching by parents to be extremely limited (Lancy & Grove 2010); children are expected to learn from observation, imitation, and practice. As Fiske (1997) notes, in the ethnographic record there is “much less child-rearing than there is culture-seeking” (p. 11).

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