Analysis of Preschool in Three Cultures: Examining Enculturation

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Introduction

As a human population how do we go from being infants to productive adults? How do we learn what is acceptable or culturally desirable? How do we learn to interact and live with others? These are questions that have been asked by sociologists, psychologists, and developmental researchers for years. The question of how one internalizes culture and becomes a member of society has been at the heart of several research studies and has been an especially informative topic to examine across cultures.

Across cultures, the fundamental answer to the question how we develop into functioning human beings that learn and create culture, is enculturation. Enculturation is the process of learning and adopting cultural norms, manners, and values (Matsumoto & Juang, 2008). Enculturation is otherwise known as the psychological aspects of culture that become internalized through development and socialization (Melton, class lecture, Jan. 25, 2010). The process of enculturation begins at a very young age and is aided by enculturation agents. Enculturation agents may be any person, group, or institution that an individual comes in contact with.

For young children enculturation agents typically include parents, teachers, peers, and the institution of preschool. Preschools are especially interesting to examine cross culturally, as enculturation agents, because they bind parents, teachers, and peers together as one entity. Preschools are noted as being “complex social institutions serving children, parents, and, indirectly, the wider society that in addition, both reflect and affect social change and continuity (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989, p.2)

Cross culturally, preschools are both similar and different, in how they address enculturation and in what they see the goals of enculturation to be. The Preschool in Three Cultures Study (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989) provides an excellent framework for examining the similarities and differences of enculturation in three different cultures: China, Japan, and the United States. The review of Cross-Cultural Research on Motor Development (Adolph, Karasik, & Tamis-Lemonda) and the book, Culture and Psychology (Matsumoto & Juang, 2008) act as a resource to better understand the information and findings presented in The Preschool in Three Cultures Study (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989). Using the above documents I will analyze the role that preschool plays in Japan, China, and the United States. I will
also examine the goals of enculturation, the process of motor development, and the components of enculturation across cultures.

Objects of the Study

The primary research question addressed in the Preschools in Three Cultures Study (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989) is how preschools meet the need for enculturation and how preschools may be similar or different in the ways they meet that need. The secondary research question in this study pertains to how preschools create, maintain, and are impacted by social change, making the study more than just the “study of three cultures’ preschools but also of three cultures as seen through their preschools” (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989, p.2).

Assuring Validity

To assure the validity of their findings the researchers of The Preschool in Three Cultures Study (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989) anticipated several issues that they expected to encounter while carrying out their research. One of the important decisions that the researchers made early on was to limit the study to one preschool in Japan, China, and the United States. This made the study more manageable, allowing the findings to be published sooner. The countries chosen by the researchers to carry out the study are also typically thought of as being rather different from one another in a cultural sense, so this provided for more profound insight when similarities or differences were found across cultures. In choosing one preschool from Japan, China, and the United States the researchers searched for a preschool from each culture that would be a good example of a middle-class preschool. This provided for a more meaningful comparison among the preschools, cultures, and enculturation process.

In addition, the researchers choose an appropriate method of studying each preschool. The researchers choose to do a visual ethnography that was derived from videotaped scenes. The researchers choose to standardize what they would capture on video from each preschool, prior to conducting research. The researchers determined that they wanted to film “a typical day, with scenes of arrival and departure, of play indoors and outdoors, of structured activities, of children saying goodbye to parents, of
children interacting with teachers and peers, of children fighting and cooperating, and of teachers disciplining, instructing, and comforting children (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989, p.5). To accompany the visual ethnography the researchers included a multivocal ethnography to provide the commentary and feedback of parents, teachers, and administrators. The researchers accepted the reality that “one preschool cannot represent the preschools of a nation” (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989, p.8) and in doing so provided the opportunity for parents, teachers, and administrators to describe whether the preschools chosen were truly representative examples of the cultures studied. The researchers also provided parents, teachers, and administrators the opportunity to evaluate the preschools chosen with a quantitative rating sheet. Also, the researchers tried to account for the loss of context that occurs when isolating a culture by filming it. The researchers strove to include a context of socioeconomic class, place, and time by providing relevant information about each of the cultures.

Lastly, as in any research study or experiment, there are generally issues that researchers cannot anticipate or effectively resolve. Two issues that the researchers in this study struggled with that they did not specifically prepare for are gaining access to film in preschools and how that would impact the preschools they were able to film in. The research notes the difficulty the researchers had in gaining access to film a typical preschool day, specifically, a typical day in one of China’s preschools. Similarly, it is intriguing that the researchers choose a preschool in Honolulu, Hawaii to represent the typical United States Preschool, as an island community usually differs in several ways from mainland culture. In addition, there are drawbacks to using just three preschools from three cultures to conduct this study. There much variability across cultures so to choose one preschool from each culture, although it has its benefits, is very narrowing as well.

Conclusions of the Study

The major conclusions of The Preschools in Three Cultures Study (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989) are that there are several differences and similarities between Japan, China, and the United States in regards to the role that preschools have in enculturation. Some of the most notable similarities the study found were that all three cultures determined that preschools purpose was to provide students with a
group experience (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989, p.203) but also to teach them to be independent and self-reliant (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989, p.195). This finding was particularly interesting since Eastern cultures are viewed by Western cultures as being solely collectivistic with no room for any sort of individualism. As discussed in Dr. Melton’s Cross Cultural Psychology course, just because a culture is seen as being generally collectivistic doesn’t mean that the members of that culture don’t choose as an individual to behave in a collectivistic manner. Members of collectivistic societies can still be independent; the difference is they independently choose to emphasize group harmony and to act in a manner that is most beneficial to the group. Similarly, some may find it surprising that American’s may have an interest in preschool children learning how to be members of groups, however, American’s still have an interest in getting along with others and having group memberships, just as collectivistic cultures do. As noted in Dr. Melton’s Cross Cultural Psychology course, American’s actually have a larger number of group membership than collectivistic cultures. American’s are more likely to be involved in several sports teams and organizations, meaning that learning how to be a member of a group and getting the group experience is also as important for American preschool children as it is for preschool children of Eastern cultures. Also, Japan, China, and the United States are all experiencing a movement toward smaller families or toward nuclear families. Smaller families and a fear of abduction are leading children to have less and less contact with their peers or other unrelated adults outside of a school context (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989). This makes it all the more essential that children from all three cultures are provided with a group experience at preschool.

In addition to the similarities noted above, there were also several differences found in the study. One of the most notable differences was the differing ideas parents had across cultures in regards to what skills preschools should provide their children with. Parents from the United States were noted as being concerned with preschools providing their students with consistency, while Chinese parents were concerned with preschools undoing or avoiding the results of spoiling, while Japanese parents were concerned with preschools providing children with experiences they don’t get in the home environment (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989, p.184). Differences were also noted in how the preschools in each
culture viewed academics and play. Japanese parents and preschools were less concerned with academics than the Chinese (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989, p.192). This difference was displayed in the typical day at the preschool in Japan, in which students primary activities included singing, dancing, and playing, while the typical day at a Chinese preschool included a strict regime of course work. Several other differences were also noted in the study in regards to the expectations of teachers and parents (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989, p. 212), the definition of what it means to be a child (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989, p.154), and the particular values that the culture and therefore the preschool see to be important to enculturation (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989).

Overall, the study was effective in determining the differences and similarities of the role that preschool has to enculturate children across cultures. The researchers attempted, and in many cases did in fact, correct for the issues that arise in a cross cultural study. As always the studies validity and reliability could have been increased if there would have been more cultures or more preschools from the three cultures included in the study. In addition, the accessibility of preschools to use for this study limits the validity and reliability as well.

Early Childhood Enculturation

*Distinguishing Factors*

The greatest distinguishing factor between Japan, China, and the United States in regards to the preschools’ role in enculturation is the dimension of individualism vs. collectivism. The individualistic view in the United States and the collectivistic view in Japan and China serve as a framework for what preschools are to teach children and how they are to effectively enculturate them.

*Goals of Enculturation*

The overall framework or outlook a culture holds in regards to what is important in that society determines what the goals of preschool are. In the United States the primary goals of preschool are to teach children to focus on self actualization and the rights of the individual, (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989, p.144) while also providing consistency from the home to the school environment (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989, p.184). In Japan the primary goals of preschools are to teach children a group oriented
sense of self (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989, p.59) and to work harmoniously in groups (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989, p.25). In China the primary goals of preschools are to undo the effects of parents spoiling (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989, p.184), teach academics (Tobin, Wu, Davidson, 1989, p.94), and teach children to value collectivity (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989, p.86). A very interesting difference to note in regards to Japan and China is that they are indeed both collectivistic cultures but they display collectivism differently especially in regard to academic performance. As noted in Preschool in Three Cultures, Chinese preschool teachers have a tendency to focus on the differences between children when it comes to academics in hopes that students will try harder, while Japanese preschool teachers strive to minimize the differences between students academically in hopes that the students will remain equal.

The Socialized Child

The differences in what preschools and cultures emphasize as important culturally, for children to learn, impact what children are like as socialized and enculturated individuals. An appropriately socialized American child would have a strong sense of self and would behave the same way at home as at school. An appropriately socialized Japanese child would understand their place amongst their group and would also do their best to avoid situations that would disturb the harmony of the group and would do everything possible to promote harmony in the group. An appropriately socialized Chinese child would be disciplined, would value the group, and would focus much time and energy on academics.

Motor Development

Conclusions about Motor Development

The review of cross cultural motor development (Adolph, Karasik, & Tamis-Lemonda) describes the differences and similarities in motor development across several cultures. The article “provides evidence that childrearing practices and contextual factors have a powerful influence on motor development” (Adolph, Karasik, & Tamis-Lemonda, p.1). The article also clarifies that there is no typical child and that not even a lab can control for everything. The article advocates against stages of motor development that imply there is a universal sequence of skills and advocates for a view that takes cultural context into account.
Important Evidence

Relating to the countries of interest of The Preschool in Three Cultures Study (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989) the article offers accounts of how motor development not only differs between the cultures of Japan, China, and the United States, but also how motor development differs within those cultures due to changes in the cultural context. According to the article “Japanese infants show delays for rolling and crawling if they are dressed in heavy, restrictive clothing, or if their bed coverings include heavy winter blankets” (Adolph, Karasik, & Tamis-Lemonda, p.10). Similarly, the article noted delays with infants who are restricted by clothing or garments in China and the United States, also. In the United States, “infants growing up in Denver, CO, are negatively affected by the restrictive clothing that accompany cold weather, causing crawling to be delayed by 3 weeks for infants who came of crawling age in the winter (Adolph, Karasik, & Tamis-Lemonda, p.10). In China, the use of sandbags as diapers for babies 12-24 months of age led children to show a significant delay in sitting and walking (Adolph, Karasik, & Tamis-Leomonda, p.10). The article also cited evidence of within culture differences in regards to motor development for different eras. For example, “one hundred years ago 40 percent of American infants skipped crawling, most likely because their feet would be caught in the long gowns they wore (Adolph, Karasik, & Tamis-Lemonda, p.6). Other significant cross cultural differences in motor development include the use of eating utensils (Adolph, Karasik, & Tamis-Lemonda, p.18), the effects of swaddling (Adolph, Karasik, & Tamis-Lemonda, p.7), and the display of body language during conversation (Adolph, Karasik, & Tamis-Lemonda, p.15).

Motor Development and Preschool in Three Cultures

Overall the findings in this article relate to those of Preschool in Three Cultures. Both documents support the importance of cultural practices on the development of behaviors; however, the article has a tendency to present a biased view that only gives examples of instances that are impacted culturally or contextually. Preschool in Three Cultures presents a less biased view presenting the concept that behaviors can be both culturally universal while being culturally or contextually specific. Another large difference between the two documents is that the Preschool in Three Cultures research included
very little information in regards to how preschools contribute to motor development. The common ground for the two documents is they both examine how culture and enculturation impact the development of behaviors in children.

Relating Concepts

Culture and Emotion

A concept discussed in *Culture and Psychology* that is also noted in *Preschool in Three Cultures* is that of culture specific emotions. Preschool in Three Cultures discusses the concept of amae in relation to Hiroki, a boy in the Japanese preschool who is known for frequently causing what we would call in America, disturbances or outbursts of misbehavior. The administrator in charge of Hiroki’s preschool explains the boy’s behavior is a response for his need of amae, or the need for attention and caring. Amae, according to *Culture and Psychology* “refers to the passive, childlike dependence of one person on another, that is believed to be rooted in mother-child relationships. The concept of amae is believed to be the building block of all relationships and personality” (Matsumoto & Juang, 2008, p.278). With the concept of amae in mind and with the background information that Hiroki’s mother passed away and his father is abusive, it is easier to understand why Hiroki’s preschool teacher may not respond to Hiroki’s misbehavior with timeouts or discipline, and instead acts kindly toward him (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989). When viewing the videotaped scenes of Hiroki’s misbehavior the Chinese and American parents, teachers, and administrators suggested that he be put in timeout, but that is most likely because those cultures do not identify with the concept of amae. Amae is a unique and culturally specific concept to Japan.

Culture and Self Concept

Another concept discussed in *Culture and Psychology* that is also noted in *Preschool in Three Cultures* is that of self concept in regards to individuality and collectivism. *Culture and Psychology* discusses an individualism-collectivism test that Japanese university students took. The findings of the test reported that over 70 percent of the Japanese respondents were classified by the test as individualists, and that American’s were not found to be significantly more individualistic than Japanese (Matsumoto &
Preschool in Three Cultures (Juang, 2008, p.336). This apparent acceptance or appreciation for both collectivism and individualism is mirrored in *Preschool in Three Cultures* as parents from Japan, China, and the United States were likely to rank that the purpose of preschool is both to provide children with group feeling (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989, p.203) while also helping them to become independent and self-reliant (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989, p.195). Similarly to how things can be culturally universal while having cultural specific components, the dimensions of collectivism and individualism do not have to be mutually exclusive, but can coexist within the same cultural framework.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, Preschool in *Three Cultures, Culture and Psychology,* and *Cross-Cultural Research on Motor Development,* present several differences and similarities across cultures and within cultures in regards to enculturation. Some components of culture are universal across cultures while other components are specific to particular cultures. The concept of universality and cultural specificity is clearly demonstrated through preschools in Japan, China, and the United States. Preschool as an institution acts as a primary enculturation agent, along with parents, teachers, and peers. Uniquely, preschool is the one institution that brings all these components together to actively and passively enculturate students beginning at a young age. Enculturation is fundamental to teaching children cultural norms, values, and beliefs that will help them become productive members of their culture and society.
References

