

**Early Precursors of Work-Family Tension:  
A Psychodynamic Study of Socialization**

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A fundament of social science research on dual-income middle-class American families is that couples find themselves pulled between divergent aims: meeting the demands of employers, on the one hand, and satisfying the needs of family, on the other. In this paper, I am going to look at the impact that this schism in the lives of adults has on the way parents in middle-class American society conceive of and shape the lives of their children. Human development and other child-observation researchers have remarked for decades that parents in this cultural context place an inordinate amount of stress on the separation and individuation of children. My ethnographic study of parent-child interactions certainly confirms this view. However, my findings go further, suggesting that cultural patterns experienced in childhood create not a unidirectional emphasis on individuation, but a dynamic tension between this emotional orientation and a countervailing desire to relinquish independence and embrace dependence. This core emotional conflict, instilled in the first three to five years of life, provides the psychodynamic basis for the social tension that the developing individual experiences, much later in life, between the public world of work and the private world of family.

I will begin this paper with a brief discussion of the developmental trajectory that organizes childhood in middle-class American society. Here, I am synthesizing the work that anthropologists, human development researchers and other social scientists have done on family and life cycle issues. I will then describe the new insights that my own ethnographic research provides into this complex process of socialization and enculturation.

## **A Culturally-Specific Developmental Trajectory**

Consistent with modern America's emphasis on individualism and personal choice, the typical developmental pathway in middle-class society stresses the necessity of leaving childhood attachments behind and making one's own way in the worlds of work and love. As the child develops his or her sense of selfhood in this cultural context, he or she comes to realize that he or she will eventually have to create new interpersonal ties from scratch and develop a strong professional self-image, rather than defining the self through familial or community ties (Bellah et al. 1996). The underlying belief of caregivers is that only by navigating this individualized path can the developing individual attain lasting happiness and fulfillment in life.

As children mature in middle-class American society, their caregivers continue to express to them in subtle but systematic ways that they are defined by their innermost feelings, thoughts, and motives, and that their primary goal should be the establishment of an independent and unique self (Rothbaum et al. 2000). As a result, the developing individual comes to see him- or herself as a "lonely navigator" who must eventually leave childhood attachments behind, and set out on a personal quest to cultivate innate potentials (Ikeda 1998:156). Caregivers assume that only by helping children cultivate an individuated sense of self will they be able to find their proper place in society and thereby achieve lasting happiness and success. The family and other social institutions stress these normative assumptions of psychological development by directing maturational processes and emotional energies of the child toward the "all-important event of leaving home" (Bellah et al. 1996:57).

A complex of developments works to propel the child toward more autonomous functioning in during the earliest and most formative years of life. Central to this developmental trajectory is the shift in the child's attention away from the attachment figure and toward the

external world. Beginning in the second year, emotional energies are redirected away from establishing a basic sense of trust and unity and toward the cultivation of self-assertion and self-direction. The motive to explore is its own strong impetus for development, as endogenous tendencies and physiological growth propel the child away from the primary caregiver. Middle-class American caregivers then intensify this orientation toward individuation by enhancing or assisting the child's own initiative. One way they do so is to downplay the dependency needs of toddlers, while strongly encouraging their distancing behaviors (Roland 1996; Rothbaum 2000). This orientation is also intensified through various socialization techniques, such as participating in tasks but treating that task as an accomplishment of the child, and rewarding the child with verbal praise for each new sign of mastery (Valsiner 1989).

The stress that middle-class American caregivers place on independent functioning reflects the underlying anxiety that many of these adults have about the ability of children to flourish in the larger world. This concern is evident in caregivers' habit of "comparing notes" with other parents and their attempts to remedy development if their children appear to be lagging. The preoccupation with facilitating maturation in the hopes that one's child will "make it" ahead of others reflects broader cultural assumptions about the importance of "inter-individual differences and the inevitable competitiveness of society" (Valsiner 1989:191).

Spurred on by caregivers, the young child rapidly expands his or her capacity for separate functioning (Mahler et al. 1975). The role of the caregiver evolves during this time from an empathic or symbiotic partner to a more distant, emotionally supportive presence, or "home base," to which the toddler periodically returns for "emotional refueling" (Mahler et al. 1975:68). Despite the continuing important presence of the primary caregiver, however, the child's progression toward autonomy – or separation from others – is seen as the hallmark of emotional maturity.

## **Pilot Research on Childrearing Beliefs and Practices**

My ethnographic research on middle-class American families lends further support to the consensus, described above, that early development in this cultural context is organized around the assumption that the child must form a separate sense of self. At the same time, my findings complicate this picture of childhood, by showing that a continuing emphasis on attachment and togetherness exists in dialectic opposition to the stress that caregivers place on separation and individuation.

Over the past year, I have spent several weekends a month as a participant-observer with four families in my neighborhood, located in a suburb of a major Southeastern city. Three of the families are comprised of husband, wife and one child. The fourth household is comprised of a single mother and two children. At the time that I began the study, the children in the first three homes were six months, ten months and three years old. The two children in the fourth home were one year and two-and-one-half years old. One of the wives worked part-time; all of the other adults worked full time. Although the fathers were around the house most of the time (because it was the weekend), it was the wives who, in every case, assumed primary duty for childcare.

Needless to say, this small group is far from representative of middle-class American society as a whole. Nevertheless, I believe that my ethnographic study of these families over a

period of one year sheds new light on the developmental trajectory that researchers have documented and described. My main finding is that middle-class caregivers stress closeness every bit as much as separateness – only it is *psychological* closeness rather than physical closeness that they strive to engender with their children.

The parents that I observed and interviewed felt certain that children must learn to be emotionally self-sufficient in order to discover their own unique identities and achieve lasting happiness and success. Yet these adults also believe that cultivating an intense emotional bond with their children is crucial to psychological growth, since enriching experiences in infancy and early childhood are assumed to provide the foundation for successful socio-emotional functioning later in life. The interpersonal strategies that they use to relate to and care for their children are a reflection of these competing aims, as well as the ongoing effort to reconcile them.

Although the mode of interaction that transpires between caregivers and children changes dramatically as the latter mature, caregivers focus throughout early development on creating and maintaining a compromise between closeness and differentiation. The ongoing task of balancing these relational states gives rise to a form of relating that can best be described as distant relatedness: an approach to the interpersonal bond that stresses, simultaneously, psychological closeness and physical separateness. Combining togetherness and differentiation in this way produces childcare behaviors that are distinctive, by cross-cultural standards, both with respect to their high intensity in terms of physical stimulation and emotional expressiveness (stressing closeness), as well as in their relative moderation in terms physical contact (emphasizing distance).

### *Infancy*

Three of the children in the study are infants, or at least they were at the time that I began the study. Having read extensively on childcare practices cross-culturally, what stood out to me the most about the patterns of interaction that I have observed is how little physical contact middle-class caregivers have with their children (see also LeVine 1990). Caregivers hold infants infrequently, and make frequent use of playpens and other equipment. Having so little physical contact with infants is convenient for caregivers, since it enables them to do other things. But when I ask why they do not hold their infants more, caregivers always stress how important it is for the infants to have their own physical space. As long as infants receive frequent bouts of visual and verbal stimuli, caregivers reason, they are fine to spend long periods on their own sleeping or resting.

At the same time that they provide little physical contact, these caregivers engage their infants in repeated, intense forms of psychological connection. Anyone who has seen middle-class caregivers interact with their infants knows what I am talking about. These caregivers chatter in highly stylized ways with their infants, assured that they are communicating with them – emotionally if not linguistically. When I ask parents about this practice, they stress how they are trying to “share” with their infants, as well as imbue their infants with a sense of wellbeing.

The sharp division that middle-class American caregivers create between isolated sleep and socially excited wakefulness is assumed by them to be a necessary and natural ordering of the infant’s interpersonal world. As the cross-cultural ethnographic record clearly shows, however, this pattern of relating to infants is but one of many of approaches to childcare that are

available to caregivers. Many other cultures have childcare practices that are radically different from this approach, and yet manage to produce well-functioning adults.

The work of anthropologist Robert LeVine (1990; LeVine et al. 1994) shows that this way of organizing caretaking activities is culturally specific. Based on years of studying development in diverse social settings, LeVine argues that the dominant childrearing strategy in many of these cultures is for caregivers to keep their infants on or near their bodies at all times, day and night. Another point of contrast is that there is relatively little attention paid to the infant as an emotionally responsive being, in terms of eye contact, smile elicitation, and “vocal tones coded by Americans as forms of warmth and affection” (LeVine et al. 1994:255). Instead, caregivers strive in every way possible to soothe distress and calm excitement. This is especially true in the East African community of the Gusii that LeVine has studied first hand:

The infant is never isolated, asleep or awake, and is often in physical contact with the caregiver’s body in both states. At the same time, the infant is hardly ever the center of social attention and rarely engaged in positively exciting emotional interaction. Even when awake, the infant is soothed, and even when asleep, she is with others. The peaks and valleys of excitement, arousal, and stimulation observable in the American Case are largely missing from the experience of the Gusii infant (LeVine 1990:463).

LeVine insists that even though these childcare practices are “abnormal” by the standards of middle-class American society, they are perfectly appropriate for the Gusii, given the material constraints and values of their society. More active stimulation would be maladaptive in the Gusii context, he suggests, since it would arouse expectations in infants for future maternal attention that simply could not be met, given the demands of women’s agricultural work and their high fertility. Greater emphasis on soothing and modulating excitement affords a temperament in infants that is calmer and more docile, making them more easily managed, and, thus, better adapted to the Gusii environment (LeVine 1990:466).

Even in some highly industrialized societies, infant-care practices stress the physical alignment between parents and infants much more than do middle-class American practices. In Japan, for example, caregivers use a number of childcare strategies that promote proximity and constancy of contact with infants. Japanese caregivers spend larger amounts of time, as compared to their American counterparts, soothing and lulling their infants, and less time stimulating them with active social exchange. One reason for this is that Japanese caregivers make greater use of proximity-promoting equipment, such as snugglies, and do not employ distance-promoting equipment, such as walkers and swings, as much (Rothbaum et al. 2000:1127). Co-sleeping is also a more common practice in Japan, because caregivers see it as an important strategy for fostering infants’ feelings of closeness and sense of security (Morelli et al. 1992).

Although I have only provided a glimpse of the cross-cultural record, one can see that the middle-class American emphasis on active engagement and emotional self-regulation is not a universal strategy for shaping infantile experience. Caregivers in many other cultures do not consider active engagement an essential form of stimulation and emotional support. In fact, many societies see this form of interaction as having deleterious effects on development. The goal of attachment and emotional regulation is still achieved in these other cultural contexts, but

through other means, such as continuous physical contact and quick responsiveness to crying and other signs of distress.

### *Early Childhood*

As their infants grow into toddlers and young children, caregivers continue with their struggle to balance the competing goals of instilling separateness and cultivating closeness. The importance of separation and individuation is conveyed to children in subtle but systematic ways, as they learn that their primary goal in life should be the establishment of an independent and unique self – a self that is defined by one’s own, innermost feelings, thoughts, and motives. The dominant cultural message that the caregivers whom I have observed communicate to their children is that steady progress toward an individuated sense of self is essential for becoming a good and worthy person. Increased capacities for self-regulation and self-direction enable the child to meet this goal, increasingly demonstrate the characteristic that is considered the hallmark of emotional maturity in this society: namely, the ability to maintain emotional stability and self-esteem in the absence of external support and recognition.

At the same time that they underscore the importance of developing an individuated sense of self, caregivers also insist that this healthy independence cannot be cultivated without a strong, ongoing interpersonal bond with important others, especially parents. The parents with whom I have spoken describe several personality traits that they believe are essential for success and proper socioemotional functioning later in life. And in each case, this special quality of the self is vitally linked to interactions with parents. Perhaps the most important is self-confidence, or the child’s sense of assurance about his or her unique feelings as valid in their own right. Cultivating a sense of certainty about oneself is considered to be essential for “taking on the world” or “really going after what one wants.” Rather than something that children can develop on their own, it is seen, instead, as a quality that must be brought out in children, through continual praise and encouragement (see also Kusserow 1999).

Caregivers place equal importance on the closely related attributes of self-assertion and self-expression. As children become old enough to talk, caregivers encourage children to put their preferences and opinions into words, so that they can exercise their will, rather than having to accommodate to the wishes of others. This is apparent in the following quote, given by one parent after I asked why she is so encouraging of her son’s self-expression: “I want him to know how important he is – he’s just so special...and I know how the world is, and he might not always have someone like me around. So, I’m giving him what I can, so that he will be able to overcome whatever he needs to overcome to do what he wants to do.”

The stress that middle-class Americans put on an individuated sense of self makes sense in a sociocultural environment in which the individual is assumed to be independent and ultimately responsible for his or her own success or failure. In many other societies, where the ability of the person to accommodate others and obey them is of central concern, however, developing a positive sense of self as a unique and special person may not be an adaptive outcome. In Gusii society, for example, esteem enhancing practices are explicitly rejected, because they are seen as encouraging behaviors that are antithetical to the primary goal of socialization, which is to foster a sense of calm and obedience that is essential in a society where obligation to the group and cooperative activities are more important than personal autonomy

and individual initiative (LeVine et al. 1994:254). LeVine notes, though, that these traditional Gusii childrearing beliefs and values may be of less adaptive value as this society rapidly modernizes, and personal resources, such as self-esteem and self-direction, become essential for maintaining a sense of safety and wellbeing in social life (1990:341).

## **Psychological Conflict and Cultural Contradiction**

Over the course of the first three to five years of life, the typical middle-class American child develops a generative tension between attachment and separation, or between togetherness and individuation. These competing emotional orientations are channeled into dichotomous social spheres, which correspond to two distinct and contrasting visions of the self: as self-directed and autonomous in the public world of work, and as passive and interdependent in the private world of family.

In treating childhood experience as precursors to social and cultural contradictions in adults' lives, I am drawing on Charles Nuckolls's psychodynamic theory of cultural dialectics (1996). Nuckolls begins with the premise that cultural contradiction is inevitable and pervasive in social and cultural life, because collective expressions and understandings mirror the interplay of deep-seated desires and fears within the individual. He goes on to argue that culturally shared beliefs and values minimize conscious awareness of widespread psychological conflicts by redirecting the individual's attention away from problematic emotions and toward moments of resolution in pursuit of culturally defined goals. Rather than resolving the underlying dynamic elements in any ultimate sense, however, cultural ideals and aspirations externalize or objectify the pervasive tensions, so that internal oppositions are reconstituted as cultural contradictions.

Building on this theoretical premise, I argue that representing the desire to reconnect as wholly separate from – and, thus, not in conflict with – that part of the self that wishes to consolidate and expand the individuated sense of self regulates or resolves the dynamic tension between opposing emotional orientations, rooted in early developmental experience. Partitioning self-experience in this way exploits the psychodynamic defense of “splitting,” which refers to the ability of the self to divide itself and separately act out or acknowledge desires that cannot be simultaneously realized (Nuckolls 1996:14). By dividing psychological representations of the self according to their opposing qualities, this defense keeps inconsistent thoughts and feelings apart, enabling the individual to avoid the conflict that would be experienced if they were allowed to intermingle.

The strength and stability of splitting comes from its ability to divide conscious thoughts and feelings about the self along preexisting and unconscious lines of difference (Moore and Fine 1990:184). In the divide between family and profession, the defensive organization of personal experience extends the disjuncture between opposing interpersonal experiences that were internalized at different points in early development. Through consolidating and elaborating the representational boundaries between these internalized representations of early life, social and cultural divisions are able to give expression to the core emotional conflict of attachment and separation, or independence and dependence, without exacerbating or intensifying the tension between these psychological tendencies.

The defensive maintenance of contradictory ideas and attitudes in the autobiographical self-understanding is accomplished, through splitting, by focusing attention on the distinct and

opposing features of the self that make the unification of the self impossible. The integrity of each component of self-understanding – the individual’s professional life and his or her family life – is supported by devaluing or excluding any qualities associated with the alternative vision of the self. More specifically, representations of professional identity are perceived as coherent to the extent that they eliminate external influences, whereas depictions of family togetherness are rendered coherent by excluding the directive force of inner aims and desires. Reinforcing the internal opposition between self-definition and relatedness in this way prevents these competing emotional orientations from entering conscious awareness simultaneously, and thereby undermining the stability and integrity of the self.

Although the split between professional and family lives prevents the competing emotional orientations from generating conscious tension, this defensive maneuver does not resolve the core emotional conflict in any final or complete way. The antagonistic aims and desires, rooted in discontinuities and inconsistencies in the primary relationship, remain very much interlocked in dialectic tension with each other at the level of the dynamic unconscious. The perpetual nature of this struggle motivates individuals to seek more complete or permanent solutions to internal opposition.

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