A Balancing Act: Independence and Interdependence in Native American Traditional Child Rearing Methods and Modern Theories of Child Development

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Literature Review

Western culture has long been the most liberal and the most progressive in the world. In the 1600s, John Locke, founder of Western liberal individualism, criticized patriarchal systems and the underlying belief that a father had absolute power over his offspring (Foster, 2001). Western societies have led the way in promoting human rights such as racial and gender equality. At the same time, Western cultural values often bear the brunt of harsh criticism. The flip side of the coin of democratic equality, it seems, is a spirit of competitive individualism that denies the basic human need to find one's identity in community. Traditional cultures, on the other hand, such as "those in East Asian, Latino, Native American, and African cultures" – even though they commonly endorse unequal or authoritarian social roles – "foster a view of the self as fundamentally connected to others and to the surrounding social context" (Fryberg, Covarrubias, & Burack, 2013, p. 441). The case of "the West versus the rest" exemplifies the differences between independent and interdependent cultural representations of self (Fryberg et al., 2013), and a child's cultural representation of self significantly affects how the child experiences the learning process.

For the student of child development, as well as the parent or pedagogue, walking the line between independent and interdependent models of self is a delicate balancing act. Erikson (1950, 1968, as cited in Santrock, 2009), who developed his theory of psychosocial stages through his observations of Sioux and Yurok children, believed that identity formation is crucial to development and has its foundation in infancy, when the infant resolves the crisis of *trust vs. mistrust* with a significant other (the caregiver), and the preschool years, when the child resolves

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the crisis of *autonomy vs. shame and guilt*. "Indeed, Erikson identified the infant's achievement of 'basic trust' as a first and necessary building block in developing an ongoing sense of self" (Woodward, 1994, n.p.). Erikson saw identity as "rather like a delta built up by the confluence of body, mind and milieu [culture, society, and history]" that "depends on the successful integration of all three elements" (Woodward, 1994, n.p.).

Other developmental theorists concur with Erikson. A major milestone in development is *attachment*, or developing an emotional bond with the caregiver, as found by Bowlby (1969) and others (Santrock, 2009). If an infant has a secure attachment (what Erikson called trust) with the caregiver, this serves as a springboard for navigating other relationships in early childhood. Even though attachment is a mechanism that creates social bonds, it has an individually oriented function. By around age two, the securely attached infant enters the process of distinguishing between self and others, which makes him able to anticipate and respond to other people's needs, desires, and goals as well as his own (Santrock, 2009). Clearly, we are both social creatures (members of a community) and individuals (an "I" with an ego). But why do we undergo psychosocial transitions that require such a balancing act? Capps (2012) suggests that the stages of the developmental process help us achieve an integrated understanding of self that we use both to withstand life's challenges and to find life's meaning. As described by Erikson (1964) in his essay, "Human Strength and the Cycle of Generations," the "four human strengths developed in childhood are critically important to the development of the resourceful self" (Capps, 2012, p. 268). Although Erikson believed the self was composed of several integrated parts, Capps (2012) writes that "among these various selves, the resourceful self is critical not only for personal survival but also for the sense that one's life has meaning and purpose" (p. 269).

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If development is a social process with an individual purpose, the mechanisms by which children learn during the stages of development ought to be social in nature. Brazelton & Greenspan (2000, n.p.) explain that supportive, nurturing interactions allow young children to grow emotionally, physically, and cognitively. Parental nurture develops everything from the nervous system to a sense of right and wrong in interacting with others:

> …Exchanging gestures helps babies learn to perceive and respond to emotional cues and form a sense of self.
>
> …….
>
> When there are secure, empathetic, nurturing relationships, children learn to be intimate and empathetic, and eventually to communicate their feelings, reflect on their own wishes, and develop their own relationships.
>
> ……..
>
> Not only thinking grows out of early emotional interactions--so does a moral sense of right and wrong. The ability to understand another person's feelings and to care about how he or she feels can arise only from the experience of nurturing interaction.

The research of these Western pediatricians is confirmed by comparison to the values held by many of the tribal peoples of North America, according to James & Renville (2012, p. 27), who write that indigenous peoples tend to hold children in a high regard, as worthy of deliberate nurture and moral education. "For example, tribal languages refer to children as respected 'sacred beings' while languages in hierarchical Eurocentric cultures connote inferior status, chattel, 'just a child' (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002)." Welsh-Breetzke (2002) confirms the affinity of theories like Erikson's with indigenous (in this case African) childrearing values. She writes that Erikson (1963) was one of the first Western theorists of development to

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recognize the impact of social interaction and to argue that "[e]go strengths [the integrated self, discussed by Capps, 2012] develop from trusting relationships" (n.p.). She explains the "Circle of Courage," a model for youth character development based on Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern's (1990, 2002) study of how "tribal cultures foster positive growth through belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity" (n.p.). Each of these four aspects is defined somewhat differently from how Western culture understands it (e.g. "belonging" refers to village or clan identity rather family unit; "independence" refers to non-interference rather than self-assertion). The end goal, however, is the same: to nurture the moral and cognitive strengths latent within the child by nurturing the child through the process of attachment, self-definition, and other-relation until he can relate to others confidently on his own.

Social development is as much a form of education as is academic work. A clear relationship exists between cultural norms (especially norms that find concrete form in the family) and the learning process in children and adolescents. Piaget (1950, as cited in Santrock, 2009) coined the term *cognitive schemata* to refer to the mental and behavioral frameworks built through cognitive development, including moral beliefs. The critical importance of positive social interaction from caregivers and the surrounding community becomes evident here. Whatever the size or makeup of a family, it is a culture with its own rules and communication patterns. Fitzpatrick (2004) argued that a family communication pattern is, in itself, a cognitive schema. The schema for social behaviors learned in childhood shapes the adult's social abilities and potential for close relationships, as demonstrated, for instance, by Fowler, Pearson, & Beck (2010, as cited in Barrett, 2013). Likewise, cognitive anthropologists (D'Andrade, 1981, 1995; Holland & Quinn, 1987; Shore, 1996; Sperber, 1985, as cited in Fryberg, Covarrubias, & Burack, 2013) refer to *cultural models*, or culturally embedded frameworks of assumptions.

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Although European American culture is stereotyped as individualistic in contrast with collectivistic non-Western cultures, this is true only of the mainstream. Many subcultures within American society retain highly traditional cultural models. For instance, conservative religious groups tend to see individualism as a threat to their spiritual values and so emphasize tradition and group hegemony rather than innovation and individual leadership. Similar patterns are evident in families. Fitzpatrick (2004) noted that families with a *conformity orientation* emphasize uniformity, harmony, and obedience – values that align with a collectivist culture. Building on Fitzpatrick's work, I argued (2013) that families in the Christian home school movement tend to follow conformity-oriented family communication patterns for several reasons, primarily including their conservative religious beliefs. The danger in conformity orientation, especially when taken to an extreme, is exemplified by Fox's (1975, as cited in Barrett, 2013) study of arranged marriages in modernizing Turkey, where elders use marriage arrangements to control who gains access to the extended family's wealth and status, or by Greven's (1992) book documenting the punitive punishments used by fundamentalist religious parents in response even to developmentally normal childhood behavior.

Whether tradition is positive, negative, or a mix of the two, children raised in a traditional family culture or social culture bring their interdependent representation of self into the classroom, where it shapes their learning. In an environment like home, they will thrive; in an environment that prizes independence, they may struggle. Fryberg, Covarrubias, & Burack (2013, p. 442) examined the effects of "middle-class European American values" on achievement for students raised in a traditional (Native American) culture:

> In classrooms that reflect and foster independent representations of self, 'learning' is largely about the development of autonomous and independent ways of

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> thinking….Consequently, individual competition and achievement are generally more valued than collaboration and cooperation….
>
> In classrooms that foster interdependent representations of self, however, learning occurs primarily in interactions with others….In these contexts, perceived social support, mentorship, maintaining strong connections to the community, and trusting relationships with teachers positively impact persistence and academic achievement….

Fryberg et al. (2013) found that Native American students enjoyed higher academic achievement when the classroom environment allowed them to develop a positive trust relationship with teachers and collaborative rapport with other students. (For European American students, there was no correlation between trust relationships and academic success.) For students raised with an interdependent cultural model of self, it is likely that family rituals, myths, and narratives provide a basis for a strongly grounded identity. Herman (2008) surveyed college students to discover which family rituals were "the primary vehicles for developing a personal identity from a contextual base of a family identity" (p. 15). In the findings, asking students to reflect on their family customs provided a tool to understand the students' identity formation. Rituals offer a means by which cultural models, cognitive schemata, and family communication patterns are reinforced.

Narratives are another means, perhaps even more far-reaching in their effect than rituals, as suggested by studies of the Native American use of stories and the oral tradition. Vogel (2011, p. 3) writes of the oral tradition:

> Storytelling has been the primary means of education throughout Indian history. Unlike Western stories that are intended to entertain [unfortunately, here Vogel shows a shallow understanding of the Western literary classics!], Indian stories have a moral purpose. The

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> first duty of Indian stories is to promote personal growth and, secondly, the development of expertise....The thread running through Indian stories is of the interrelationships among all things, and from those relationships emerge a responsibility to others....

Vogel (2011) also notes that Native American model of learning us generally nonverbal and experiential. By emphasizing listening (rather than talking) and experience (rather than analysis), this model opens the gateway for a simultaneous development of the student's awareness of others (what others have done) and of self (what the student is capable of doing).

The oral tradition is used to teach many concepts, but its most valuable role is in teaching moral values, primarily the value of respect. Delgado (1997) conducted an ethnographic study of Native American elders to understand their philosophy of education. She discovered that the concept of respect "is so highly revered among the participants that they believe that no kind of learning or teaching could go on without it" and that the family that provides a person with identity is, in most cases, an extended family (p. 5). Delgado confirms Vogel's (2011) note that listening is more important than speaking: "Native children and students are expected by parents and extended family to be aware of and/or able to pay attention to unspoken qualities in life around them" (p. 17). She also theorizes the experiential origins of Native philosophy in reflection and patience rather than empirical analysis of phenomena.

Educators have suggested numerous ways to integrate moral development into the curriculum for young children, primarily through the use of story. Cooper (2007) states that contemporary education practice undervalues children's books "for their historical role in helping children navigate the intellectual, social, and emotional terrains of childhood." She analyzes selected children's literature in light of "Vygotsky's (1978) theory that learning precedes development through scaffolded social interaction" and "Erikson's (1950, 1985) theory

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of psychosocial development in light of the 4–6-yearold's drive towards self-regulation, control, and independence" (n.p.). Jacobs (2003) suggests teaching virtue awareness across the curriculum through activities that "help children understand, care about, and act upon core virtues such as courage, generosity, humility, honesty, fortitude, and patience" (p. 1). He concludes that incorporating Native American methods and philosophies of child rearing can help revive discipline in our school systems.

No child rearing method or plan is perfect or foolproof, just as no education plan will achieve the desired results with every child, since children are individuals. Likewise, neither individualistic Western culture nor collectivistic traditional cultures are exclusively healthy environments for child development. With the insight of modern child development theorists and Native American elders, however, we are on the way to discovering healthy ways to nurture children through the stages of their development, balancing individuality with community and independence with interdependence, one step at a time.

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