Cultural Concepts of Learning and Development

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Abstract

People in different cultures vary in their descriptions of their self-concept. These descriptions tend to be either individualistic or collectivist. Individualistic cultures preface independence and self-fulfillment, while collectivist cultures tend to be more group-oriented and carry more social responsibilities. Immigration and colonization have had an impact on many collective cultures that had lived among independent ones. Conflict often occurred when interdependent cultures tried to maintain their identity in their new independent environment. Teachers and students at schools frequently experience similar challenges. Theories of cognitive development show that parents differ in their perception of intelligence among these two cultural types (independent and interdependent).

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

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INTRODUCTION

Cultures have long been described as either individualistic or collectivistic, suggesting that people in these cultures differ in the way they live, learn, and socialize as people generally become a product of their cultural values, beliefs and norms. Hofstede (1980) used the terms individualism and collectivism to describe relations between individuals and the groups they identify themselves with (Greenfield, Trumbull, Keller, Rothstein-Fisch, Suzuki, Quiroz, 2006). Individualistic cultural conceptions stress individual "identity, independence, self- fulfillment and "standing out", while the collectivist cultures focuses on group identity, interdependence, social responsibility and fitting in" (Greenfield et al., 2006, p. 676).

Triandis, Brislin and Hui (1988), reported that when collectivist cultures were asked to complete "I am" sentences they described themselves in terms of organization, family and religion. Hosfstede (1980) alternately observed that people from individualistic cultures identified themselves by listing characteristics of personality like hardworking, intelligent and/or athletic. Triandis (1989) has argued that these latter developmental pathways are not universal and seventy percent of the world's cultures can be defined as collectivists. In collectivist cultures, people

tend to describe themselves in relation to a variety of social groups and they develop collective identity because of their shared experiences with these groups.

Recent increases in migration and immigration across the globe has had an impact on the expansion of educational psychology. Not surprisingly, when people move from their countries of origin to live or work in other countries, they often experience culture shock and face the many challenges of trying to maintain their cultural beliefs in a new and foreign place. The purpose of this paper is an argument within the cultural conception of learning and development. The paper seeks to highlight whether cultural descriptions exist among cultures. Collectivistic and individualistic cultures are also the focus of discussion in this paper. The descriptions above could have an impact on students' learning and cognitive development. Hence, teachers and parents should be aware of these cultural differences so that they can assist learners to adjust in class and community environments particularly if they live among cultures that is not of their own.

IMMIGRATION AND EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

Increases in immigration and its effects on educational psychology have led some researchers to develop educational innovations to help immigrant parents and students, as well as teachers in schools. Historically, immigration in America has had a significant impact on education and education systems. Between 1840 and 1920 about 37 million people from Germany, Ireland, Italy, England, Scotland, and Wales immigrated to the United States. They were seeking new opportunities to and a living and were looking to escape the hardships they faced at home (Greenfield, et al., 2006). As school enrollments increased, more teachers were trained and hired in schools across the country. It was in the best interests of the country to have literate citizens and so new post-secondary education institutions were built (Hall, 2003). Programs in existing institutions were upgraded and expanded to reflect the new skills required by teachers. More courses in educational psychology, for example, were added.

Educational psychology and immigration in America were also linked through the notion and process of intelligence testing. As the number of immigrants entering the country increased, so did fears and concerns among some segments of the existing population. This led Immigration and Naturalization Services to be more selective of the immigrants passing through Ellis Island. Educational psychologists were given the opportunity to use intelligence testing to assess the abilities of immigrants. The results of such tests were then used as the basis for admission into the Unites States.

America today continues to receive immigrants and refugees from across the globe, particularly from Mexico and Central America. Upon settling in their new home, the children in these families, who often hail from collectivist cultures, are enrolled in the much more individual-oriented American public school system (Greenfield et al., 2006). The parents of these children often experience a number of challenges related to the expectations and protocols of their new individualistic culture, while at the same time fighting to maintain their transplanted collectivist culture and values and pass these on to their children. Conflicts for these children emerge when they are expected to uphold one value set at home (the cultural norms of their home country) and expected to adopt and abide by a different value system at school (individualistic values).

The Bridging Cultures Project, an educational intervention helped to resolve such dilemmas, was developed by Greenfield et al in 2006. The project shed new light on our understanding of cross cultural differences and the conflicts faced by children bridging two distinct cultures. The intention was to have individualistic schools develop an awareness of the cultural differences of children accustomed to collectivistic environments and to welcome them regardless of their beliefs. The role of the school was thus seen to be one of assisting students to learn while being aware of their values and beliefs. A child raised in a collective culture, for example, may enjoy working in groups rather than independent work and this should be recognized and encouraged. Children from collectivist cultures may also use other students' belongings (pens, pencils and other materials) without asking for permission to borrow them the sharing of things is valued in collective cultures. Such behaviors can cause confusion even among teachers and so the understanding of these cultural differences is vital to successful student and classroom learning.

Greenfield, et al., (2006) found that immigrant parents were often rooted in their culture of origin when it came to the ways they interacted socially and the cultural norms they taught their children at home. The Latino parents in their study, with children in the third and fourth grades, were often uncooperative with their children's teachers. The disagreements and breakdowns in communication that followed further highlighted the differences between the two cultures. In this context, the following were identified as disputes:

- Individual versus family accomplishments;
- Praise versus criticism;
- Cognitive versus social skills; and
- Oral expressions versus respect for authority (Greenfield, et al., 2006).

Greenfield et al. (2006) worked with seven elementary school teachers and helped them to better understand and create educational bridges between the home culture and the school (p.68). Together the teachers and researchers investigated various ways in which different cultures, values and beliefs could produce different expectations of children and of the school. Greenfield et al. concluded that if schools are to be successful in educating children, parents must participate in the education of their children. At the same time, educators must have knowledge of how cultural values impact the beliefs, expectations and behaviors of the family, teachers and the school community.

It is possible to find features of both individualism and collectivism in every society. Furthermore, cultures are ever changing and new cross-cultural interactions continue to increase the diversity of values held in all societies. It is thus more important than ever that both teachers and parents understand the basic differences between individualistic and collective self-conceptions so that neither puts too much pressure on young learners to abide by foreign or detrimental cultural expectations.

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT THEORIES

Theories of cognitive development can be helpful in further understanding collectivist and individualistic cultures and how they differ. Piaget's theory is useful in relation to children's intelligence and is relevant to educational psychology.

Piaget's theory is of developmental psychology has grown in popularity from 1928 until the present time. His Western scientific theory of intelligence was influenced by Inhelder and furthered the advancement of intelligence as a developmental goal. According to Greenfield, Keller, Fulign, and Maynard, (2003) the understanding of intelligence as a developmental goal is common to countries characterized by independent social relations because it stresses the individual in relation to the world of objects. Piaget's theory has been widely applied to cognitive development in Europe and other parts of the world and is used mostly in educational settings with regards to children's stages of cognitive development.

Individualistic and collectivist cultures differ in their descriptions of intelligence and how parents perceive intelligence. Africans and Asians generally preface and nurture the social intelligence of their children. Social intelligence is thus dominant in Africa and Asia. In Africa, the theory of development proposed by Nsamenang (as cited in Greenfield, et al., 2006) describes the stages of development in social roles. This notion of development is thought to characterize collective ideas about intelligence (Greenfield et al., 2006). This notion of development is also thought to be more fitting with caregiving practices for infants that stress body contact between the caregiver and the baby, rather than placing the baby to play with developmental toys alone (as is stressed in individualist cultures).

Knowledge is seen as related to intelligence in both individualistic and collective cultures, but each culture has its own unique description of knowledge. The Maya community in Chiapas, Mexico, for example, uses the word 'na 'which means 'to know' and refers more to the whole person (Zambrano as cited in Greenfield et al. 2006). The meaning 'na' includes knowing with the body and soul, while 'know' in English generally only includes knowing with the mind and refers to factual knowledge and theoretical understanding (Greenfield, et al., 2003, p. 472). Li (2002) found that the Chinese community has a similar understanding of knowledge as 'na' in that they refer to knowing with the 'heart and soul'. This 'na' type of knowledge involves knowledge that is based in practice and that involves the habit and the character of a person. It is more relevant to a culture which emphasizes and values the social being (Greenfield, et al., 2003).

Social intelligence differs from the sensory motor stage of development as described by Piaget. The Baoule people use the term 'n'glouele' to refer to intelligence and are reluctant to assess their children's current intelligence because they believe that children are always changing, in part because of "educational interventions". They observe their child's behavior in place of observing their intelligence. They are aware that their children will have intelligence in the future as the word "o yo n'glouele foue" means he or she 'who will own intelligence' (Dasen, 1984). For parents

in this culture, the important thing is that their child starts to perform tasks without supervision, is respectful of elders, is polite, speaks well in public, and displays the knowledge needed to use proverbs in speech.

All of these concepts of knowledge and intelligence have implications in learning and thus teachers must endeavor to understand the different types of learners and their socialized knowledge. Research shows that these differences in knowledge and intelligence can result in values conflicts in multicultural communities. In the United States, for example, while schools and teachers concentrate on individual academic success, Latino parents focus more on the social aspects of behavior (Greenfield, et al., 2006). Indicative of this is the Spanish word for education, 'educacion' which means 'the inculcation of proper and respectful behavior'.

Studies of giftedness found similar differences among Native Americans and European Americans (Greenfield et al. 2006). Greenfield (2003) reported that while schooling in the US concentrates more on rewarding the child who stands out from the group (the best of the best), Pueblo Indians (Keres) tend to value the 'community and inclusion' because they believe that the unique qualities of each child will contribute to the welfare of the whole community. Greenfield highlighted two ethno theories of giftedness which are in turn related to two different apprenticeship practices.

Greenfield et al., (2006), define apprenticeship as "informal teaching and learning, a type of knowledge transmission that has evolved from primitive roots in nonhuman primates" (p.678). The apprenticeship process is cherished by the Keres. For them it involves cooperation, mentorship, and inter-generational modeling and "keen observation, attentiveness and focused listening are important methods of learning" (Greenfield et al., 2006 p. 679). Questioning, skepticism, and curiosity though appreciated as methods of learning in individualistic cultures, "are not promoted". Research has found two unique apprenticeship models, the independent model and the interdependent model. Traditional weaving, for example, is an interdependent model of apprenticeship found in Mayan communities in Mexico. Other Mayan communities were found to guide their children in puzzle tasks that also prefaced interdependence (Greenfield et al., 2006). These models tend to be found in 'subsistence economies' where learning occurs in family settings.

The findings of the above researchers have also reported a shifting of these models such that the weaving apprenticeship is becoming more of an "independent mode of learning, as subsistence is replaced by commerce" (p.679). Likewise, in formal education, puzzle learning has shown a shift from a shared cooperative task, in which groups concentrate on a part of the puzzle and share roles in solving that part, to a task in which individuals each work on different parts of the puzzle at the same time (Greenfield et. al., 2006). Both commerce and formal schooling are likened to individualistic types of apprenticeship.

CONCLUSION

Human beings are products of their environment and they learn the values, beliefs and norms of their culture. Teachers in learning environments need to be aware of and accommodate cultural differences so that learners can maximize their learning and academic potential. Ultimately, Greenfield et al., (2006) concluded that societies are neither wholly individualistic nor collectivistic, but that specific 'cultural patterns and preferences exist'. One of Botswana's four national principles, self- reliance, means for example that the people of Botswana need to have a spirit of working for themselves and of being self -motivated to do so through hard work and personal initiative. In an otherwise or perhaps outwardly collectivist culture, this principle encourages individuals to be independent rather interdependent (Long Term Vision for Botswana, 2016).

While it will remain the prerogative of academics to investigate and report of cultural differences and nuances, it is equally if not more important to ensure that classroom teachers are aware of and prepared to accommodate these differences and the diverse learning styles they engender. It is likewise important that teachers be aware of their own cultural values and endeavor not to impose these uncritically on learners as they interact with them. For parents of students learning in new or foreign cultural environments, it is important that children be given the space to adapt and grow into their new culture should they choose to do so. When children are expected to conform to one culture at school and another at home, these cultural conflicts can create a great deal of stress for young learners. Parents can aspire to maintain and share important cultural traditions and beliefs with their children, but must also allow for certain adaptations to the environment their children presently live in. Educational interventions like the Bridging Cultures Project offers hope that by working together, parents and teachers can help to foster the academic and social success of children living in new or different cultures.

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