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THE TRANSITION FROM INFANCY TO EARLY CHILDHOOD: A DIFFICULT TRANSITION AND A DIFFICULT THEORY

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most important uses of fieldwork in anthropology is to raise new questions and generate hypotheses about human behavior and culture. I am sure that Vogt considered these to be important purposes in his vision of the long-term field project and a secret educational payoff in introducing undergraduate students to fieldwork.

As an undergraduate in Chiapas in 1968-1969, I studied Zinacanteco funeral and burial customs. Now, reflecting on the experience, I realize that the questions that were aroused in my mind to linger on after I left focused not on the life crisis ritual, but rather on topics closer to what I have gone on to study, child development and socialization in comparative cultural perspective. However, at the time I did fieldwork, I had not yet studied developmental psychology, and so my eye was still naive and untrained in observing child and parent behavior. When Vogt placed me in several Zinacanteco households and instructed me to take field notes, I was not at all sure what I was seeking or finding out, because nothing happened related to my topic of funeral customs.

The two households that I observed most intensively included children. In the first were at least six children, ranging in age from adolescence down to a girl of two and a small infant. In the second were four children: two boys aged about six and eight, a girl of three, and an infant boy. The first household also included a grandmother, while the second was nuclear in structure. In Zinacanteco style, the men and older adolescent boys engaged in farming and other activities that took them away from the compound all day, while the women and adolescent girls were busy in and nearer to home with food preparation, weaving, collecting firewood, and, in one household, carrying water and pasturing sheep. The school-age children played in the yard or accompanied adults on errands and were seldom seen inside the hut. The infants spent most of the day sleeping under cover on their mothers' backs while their mothers worked. During intervals of nursing they got their best opportunity to look around, smile at people, and receive friendly attention from whomever was nearby.

What disturbed me was the two- and three-year-olds, "toddlers" in common American parlance, "knee babies" in Margaret Mead's terminology. In contrast

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to the rest of the family, they seemed unoccupied and dispirited. Each orbited quietly around her mother, or leaned against her body when she sat down, but received few of the touches or absorbed looks that the mother directed at the "lap baby." The mothers did not scold or send the children away, but neither did they attempt to cheer them up or find something to occupy them.

In the first household, evening was the time that the two-year-old showed the most animation. I noted one incident in particular, when two adolescent boys, just back from the fields, sat relaxing next to each other on little chairs, with the child standing cradled between one boy's knees being "taught to talk." The boys stated words and short phrases to her in loud, clear tones, and she repeated them back. The boys were exuberant in their praise, and she beamed and laughed.

In the second household, the three-year-old spent some part of the day outside playing with her older brothers, but seemed especially withdrawn and uninvolved in the evenings, when the rest of the family sat around the cooking fire while the mother prepared tortillas, and all talked, ate, and rested. On one occasion, the little girl fell asleep on the family bed behind the circle of people, just before the others began to eat. When she awoke dinner was over, and she began to cry for food. Although she cried for at least an hour, she was not comforted or given anything to eat, and she eventually subsided and fell asleep with the other children.

I noted that, in both cases, the households were considered highly successful by Zinacanteco standards. The parents appeared to be warm, competent, and sensitive to the needs of others, and the older children in each family were affectively positive and energetic. The infants also were healthy and had well-organized behavior. They ate vigorously and were anything but listless in their responsive smiling, gazing, and cooing in social interaction. Only the toddlers appeared to be in difficulty.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Of course, what I was observing was not idiosyncratic behavior but rather a cultural pattern. Vogt (1969b, 1970b) describes infancy in Zinacantán as a time of almost total nurturance. The child is nursed on demand and held most of the time, either in its mother's *rebozo* or lying next to her at night. Until walking competently, the child is subject to no expectations. As a young toddler, the child is expected to keep clear of fire and other hazards, to notify someone when needing to be helped to urinate or defecate, and to stand back from the mother when she is very busy. Still, the child receives little pressure to master the basic skills of walking, talking, and toileting and is offered much attention and affection. All of this changes at about age two or three, when the next baby is born. Then "life becomes rough" (Vogt 1970b:65). The toddler is completely weaned and becomes vulnerable to dysentery and other diseases. At first, adults cater to the jealous child's tantrums and help him to master his aggression, but by age three, the child receives little attention or affection, many commands, and a general attitude from adults of "don't bother me."

Indeed, the combination of high initial indulgence and relatively severe weaning and independence training to make way for the next baby is a common pattern worldwide (Whiting and Child 1953; Whiting and Edwards 1988). For instance, Romney and Romney (1966) studied a group culturally related to the Zinacantecos, the Mixtecans of Juxtlahuaca, in Oaxaca, Mexico. Based on systematic observations as part of the "Six Culture Study of Child Rearing," they present a very full description of the transition from infancy to early childhood that is generally consistent with the Zinacanteco pattern. Romney and Romney discuss a post-infancy transition that is marked by three important changes in the child's treatment. The first is weaning from the breast, which takes place when the child is one or two years old. Weaning is always abrupt, and mothers report that the period following weaning is a difficult one in terms of the child "crying for no reason" and being vulnerable to disease and death. The second change is in the child's sleeping arrangements. During the nursing period, the child sleeps in the parents' bed or, more rarely, in an adjacent cradle, but after weaning, the child sleeps with siblings. The third change is that the primary care of the child is transferred from the mother to older siblings or courtyard cousins. Though the mother retains ultimate responsibility for the child's care, nevertheless she cannot do her work with young children underfoot. Therefore, she ceases carrying the child in her *rebozo* and insists that older children, especially sisters, provide the nurturance, including comforting the child after a fall or hurt and helping meet other requests. This third transition is not an abrupt one like weaning, but takes place gradually over the course of a year or so.

In recent anthropological theorizing, the pattern of abrupt withdrawal of maternal nurturance after infancy has been described as common in nonindustrialized peoples and is exacerbated by ecological stress. The pattern sometimes potentiates malnutrition and associated secondary infections in toddlers (Cassidy 1980), but, some sociobiologists argue, may serve adaptive functions to promote reproductive success of parents (by allowing high rates of fertility under conditions of high child mortality; see Burgess et al. 1988). In another sociobiological interpretation, Draper and Harpending (1988) assert that cultures generally use one of two grand reproductive strategies, with associated patterns of child rearing. The first, "parent rearing" (where even after infancy, parents or a few consistent adults provide material and emotional resources), is described for most contemporary hunter-gatherer groups, some horticultural groups, and relatively affluent socioeconomic classes in modern societies. The second, "peer and surrogate rearing" (where, after infancy, the child is discouraged from putting too many demands on parents and is turned over to the multi-age peer group) is seen in most middle-level agricultural and pastoral groups and in the poorer socioeconomic classes in modern societies.

Thus, anthropologists have long been familiar with this account of the toddler period as a stressful transition involving "weaning from breast and back" and loss of close physical contact with mother. However, few have commented on how discrepant this picture is from the classical psychological accounts of the

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developmental crisis of early childhood. It is interesting that so little has been made of this discrepancy, because both psychologist and anthropologists have made a major point of how the Western description of adolescence as a stormy period of identity-questioning and conflict with the older generation does not typically fit non-Western cultures.

PSYCHOANALYTIC ACCOUNTS OF THE TODDLER PERIOD

The classic psychoanalytic account focuses on issues surrounding control of bodily function. The child is portrayed as an assertive, willful being whose strivings for independence bring him or her into inevitable conflict with socializing, restraining adults.

At first, Freud (1905; see Mueller and Cohen 1986) described only two surges of infantile sexuality: an oral stage in early infancy gratified by sucking and a phallic stage at the end of the preschool period. In his later writings, Freud (1949) inserted a third impulse-ridden stage between the original two, the anal-sadistic stage. During this time, the rectum and anus are the locus of sexual excitement, and children resist toilet training because they wish to control the timing of such a pleasurable function.

Erikson's (1963) revision of Freudian theory has more commandingly influenced current conceptions of the toddler period. Erikson tempered Freud's biological determinism and constructed eight "psychosocial" stages, each a particular kind of encounter between the individual and the social environment. Influenced by the anthropologists in the Harvard Department of Social Relations, he explicitly considered the cultural and historical contexts when analyzing an individual's experience. Erikson's second stage (age one to three) begins with the child's push for autonomy, including control of bodily function. Toddlers wish to be in charge of their own processes of elimination and to do other things for themselves, but they must begin to submit to parental pressure for clean and appropriate behavior. When toddlers' attempts at self-control do coincide with what is asked of them, they are boosted by an enduring strength of will. When, in contrast, parents are too rigid, demanding, or degrading, they may be weakened by lasting anxieties.

These descriptions seem off the mark for the Zinacanteco child, as well as the toddlers in many other societies. Of course, the ethnographic evidence is not of a clinical nature, yet it hardly suggests that the locus of conflict is the child's push for autonomy. Toilet training and other elements of self-reliance are acquired with a minimum of parent-child conflict in most communities where children's clothing is simple and floors can be easily swept up. Parents allow children to gradually learn to toilet, feed, and dress themselves at their own pace, through observation and imitation. Cross-cultural data suggest that, in many communities, the far more difficult tasks for the knee child are accepting the mother's insistence on physical separation and learning how to get one's needs met and find a place in the pecking order of the multi-age peer group (Whiting

and Edwards 1988).

A recent theoretical contribution by Mueller and Cohen (1986) appears more promising in terms of the cross-cultural data. They propose that the toddler period, age one to three, is a "little latency," a period of relative emotional calm in which children's energies are directed outward toward mastery achievements in language and communication and establishing meaningful bonds with others, especially child peers. This theory rings true in its de-emphasis of bodily control issues, as well as its description of the child's orientation to the world of children. However, the parent-child relationship is said *not* to be an issue for the child in little latency. Indeed, attachment (and reattachment) issues are salient only during early infancy, the late preschool (Oedipal) period, and adolescence. It is not clear how this theory can cope with the case of the Zinacanteco child who enters the second year with a secure attachment to mother, but then must accept a redefinition of their relationship as imposed by her, much more severe than is expected of the typical American toddler, at the same time as he establishes initial peer bonds.

Another recent psychoanalytic interpretation seems to square with the anthropological data insofar as it focuses on separation from mother as the key issue for the older toddler. However, even this description seems different from the kind of upheaval experienced by Zinacanteco toddlers, because we still see an assertive child driving away from an encircling mother. Mahler, Pine, and Bergman (1975) theorize that the first three years of life are devoted to the gradual achievement of psychological separateness and individuation. At age one, they describe the newly mobile child as engaged in a burst of joyful exploration of the physical environment. Between age two and three, however, children's moods darken when they make the intellectual discovery that they are not, after all, omnipotent: their mothers operate under independent volition. The children are precipitated into a period of negativism, resistance to adult authority, ambivalence, and demandingness. Only by remaining available and accepting do the mothers help their children gradually to come to terms with their necessary separateness.

All of these theories are important and serious, but they are evidently limited in describing the special quality of what must be a physically and emotionally challenging transition for children in cultures such as Zinacantán.

STEPS TOWARD RECONCEPTUALIZING THE TODDLER PERIOD

In reconceptualizing this period, there are three main theoretical questions with which to deal. The first question is whether the toddler period represents a distinct developmental phase with its own issues or just a continuation of infancy. We (Whiting and Edwards 1988) have used Margaret Mead's terms (*lap*, *knee*, *yard*, and *community* ages of childhood) to mark the great, culturally universal changes seen not only in the physical and social settings that children frequent, but also in the social behavior that they demonstrate to and elicit from

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their social partners. In our view, infant and toddler periods are distinct in these dimensions. Lap babies live in a bounded space centered on the emotional and physical presence of the mother and other people who share intimate space with her or take over the care-giving role when she delegates it. These infants elicit high frequencies of nurturant behaviors (offering of food, comfort, warmth, objects, etc.) from all other age grades of people. In contrast, knee children (ambulatory toddlers) can now move out to explore a larger environment, though still one constantly monitored by caretakers. Because their memory, attention, and symbolic capacities are now qualitatively more mature, they can engage in much more complex communication. Mueller and Cohen (1986) are correct when they focus on the fact that toddlers have a surplus of intellectual energy suddenly free for making major strides in language, rule learning, object play, and sustained, reciprocal social interaction with child partners who are more like themselves.

As a result of these increased powers and new motivations, knee children receive less nurturance than before but more dominance. They elicit commands whose intent is to see that they do not harm themselves or others in their explorations. They receive commands and reprimands intended to instruct them in the rudiments of appropriate behavior. They become subject to restrictions from people who wish to curtail interaction or contact with them, or simply to control their movements.

Interestingly, we have identified societal differences in the proportion of different kinds of dominance that knee children receive. In societies such as Zinacantán, where parents expect older siblings to look after their younger brothers and sisters, the older children adopt a prosocial and training style of dominance; they monitor the younger children's play, participation in tasks, and social behavior with an eye to normative social rules or family objectives. In societies where older children are not given legitimate authority and responsibility for the younger children, their dominance is relatively more overtly egoistic in style, intended to meet their own needs rather than those of the toddler or family as a whole.

The second question is how to characterize the developmental issues of the toddler period. Is there one central, emotionally charged issue faced in all cultures—whether a psychosexual one (as Freud claimed) or a psychosocial conflict (such as Erikson's autonomy versus shame and doubt, or Mahler's separation and individuation)? Or is the toddler period normatively one of relative emotional calm, in which the child engages in a cluster of ego-building tasks related to communication, play, and social skills (as in Mueller's little latency)?

While this question is surely still open, I would argue that a describable set of developmental tasks is typical of the toddler years, but that children need not invariably confront all of them in every cultural group, and there is no invariant order in which these tasks must be surmounted. These tasks are best conceived of as psychosocial issues, in Erikson's sense of specific, historically and culturally constrained encounters between the maturing individual and the environ-

ment. They include the following: (1) learning to do without close physical contact and concentrated attention of care givers (including giving up the breast and sleeping position beside mother); (2) establishing bladder and bowel control; (3) beginning to control one's behavior in accordance with social standards; and (4) establishing bonds with people other than primary care givers. The evidence indicates that the timing of these tasks is set by the culture. Some, such as weaning and sleeping away from mother, can be moved backward into the infancy period, or pushed forward until after the toddler years. However, it is clearly true that *when* and *how* the child is asked to face each task strongly affects how stressful and challenging it is likely to be. For example, weaning and sleeping apart are much more difficult for the child when initiated in the toddler period than when done either earlier or later. Normative data have established that bladder and bowel control are much more difficult when expected of younger toddlers (especially males) than of three-year-olds. Moreover, when children are given more initiative in the timing and pace of mastering the task, the emotional difficulty is less, as, for example, when Zinacanteco toddlers gradually acquire sphincter control.

The third question is how to characterize the mother's role during the toddler period. This is perhaps the most difficult question of the three to answer. Does she (or should she) have one central goal, such as supporting the achievement of autonomy (in Erikson's terms) or remaining emotionally and physically available (in Mahler's)? Or are the meaning and impact of the mother's behavior primarily determined by cultural factors?

When the observed behavior of mothers to children aged two to ten in twelve societies was coded according to a transcultural system focusing on the overt intent of each act (Whiting and Edwards 1988), we found that four summary categories comprise almost all maternal acts: (1) *nurturance*—routine care giving and offering help, attention, and support; (2) *training*—teaching appropriate skills, social behavior, and hygiene and restraining dangerous and inappropriate behavior; (3) *control*—commanding, reprimanding, and dominating to meet the mother's own personal wishes; and (4) *sociability*—exchanging information, laughing, touching, and otherwise expressing positive feelings. Comparing mothers across the cultural communities, it is evident that their behavior shows a transcultural similarity to each age grade of children, especially the three youngest grades (lap, knee, and yard children). In general, mothers direct the largest proportions of nurturance to lap and knee children, control to yard children, and training to community (school-age) children.

However, cultural differences are also prominent, and they are related to ecological constraints set on mothers by their workloads. Their workloads are of course determined by subsistence level, household and settlement patterns, the help provided by husbands and adult female kin, the number of children the mother has, and opportunities for adult female sociability.

In essence, the surrounding complex of social supports and daily routines influences which of three general patterns, or profiles, characterizes maternal behavior to children of knee grade and above. The mothers of the sub-Saharan

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African samples have *training* as their most frequent category, and they bear the heaviest workloads in the study. They begin recruiting their children as young as three years of age to serve as their main assistants in economic and household work, as well as child care. The mothers of Juxtlahuaca, Mexico, and the North Indian and Philippines samples have a profile with *controlling* as their most frequent category. They have relatively lighter workloads and more opportunity for adult female sociability. They use their children, especially daughters, in child care roles, but assign them fewer tasks of other kinds and/or wait until they are older. These mothers tend to use reprimanding and commanding after the fact to reduce their children's annoying behaviors or intrusions. The mothers of Orchard Town (United States) are the only group with *sociability* as their most frequent category. They have the lightest workloads but the least opportunity for adult social contact during the day. These mothers encourage types of play and social interaction with their young children that are most intense and time consuming for the mothers and most egalitarian. Certainly, they expect toddlers to demand a great deal of attention and care, even when there is another new baby.

These data do not answer directly the question of whether there is, at an abstract level, a universal theme in the mother's role with toddlers. Yet they do suggest to me that we should begin to think in terms of neither one nor a multitude, but rather a *few* psychological accounts of normal toddler development, each with its own scenario of central issue(s), normative signs of stress and conflict, and themes of adequate or supportive maternal behavior. These accounts would surely draw on classic psychoanalytic concepts of sexual interests and ego mastery, but would be specified using observational studies of cross- and intra-cultural variation in child and parent behavior during the toddler period. A good place to begin looking for divergent scenarios may be in terms of the three profiles of maternal behavior. The evidence reviewed in this essay suggests how the scenario in cultures with the "sociable mother" differs from the other two, but it does not suggest how the scenarios for "training" versus "controlling" maternal profiles differ.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As we come to learn more about general patterns of human cultural adaptation, we can begin to ask increasingly sophisticated questions about the influence of culture on child development. No longer does there appear to be an infinite variety of scripts for normal development (as many anthropologists once thought), or just one optimal script (as many psychologists claimed), but rather a determinable set of distinct patterns. This is probably true not only of the toddler period, but also of the other developmental stages. Human cultural variability no longer seems as extreme as it once did (Draper and Harpending 1988), and human learning appears to be constrained by biasing mechanisms tied to physical and cognitive maturation. Thus, a fruitful opportunity for interdisciplinary research and theorizing lies ahead. We seem further along the

road of constructing a comparative understanding of early child development than when I got my first glimpse in Zinacantán of how different growing up in another society can be.