Configurations

Biological and Cultural Factors in Sexuality and Family Life

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5 Eskimo Family Life,

Jean L. Briggs

Other authors in this volume have illustrated several of the many ways in which culture influences the family—its structure, its functions, and the rules governing acceptable familial behavior. But the influence of culture on the quality of interpersonal relations within the family is not limited to defining the behavior that family members may and may not engage in. Culture also molds the motives underlying that behavior and hence the meaning that the behavior has for the members of the family. This is an extremely important kind of cultural influence, which is at the same time very subtle and therefore easy to overlook.

The fact that culture influences the behavior of individuals including, of course, behavior toward members of their families is common knowledge. We all know the stereotypes about Jewish mommas, German fathers, and so on. We know that mothers in some cultures worry more than mothers in other cultures about whether or not their children are eating. But we are rather too ready to assume that when a Jewish momma worries that her child is not eating, she is worrying for the same reasons that make an Eskimo mother worry when *her* child doesn't eat. We know that fathers in some cultures worry more than fathers in other cultures about whether or not they are obeyed. But when a German father insists that his children obey him without question, we are likely to assume that he does so for the same reasons that make an Eskimo father ask for unquestioning obedience from *his* child.

In other words, the fact that families in two cultures may look or behave quite similarly and yet be very differently motivated is not at all obvious, and for that reason we are frequently misled in our interpretation of familiar-looking structures and behaviors when we find them in other cultures. We tend to extrapolate from assumptions based on our own cultural experience about the reasons for certain kinds of family structure and the motivations that underlie particular kinds of behavior.

In our culture, for example, we assume that when parents fail to feed, clothe, or house their children, it indicates that the parents are indifferent or hostile toward the children, and we further assume that the children will suffer severely and that there will be unpleasant psychological and social consequences. But what if we find a society like that of the Kinga of Tanzania,[a] where parents regularly turn their children out of the parental dwelling at the age of two or three and leave them to the somewhat erratic care of slightly older children, who take their younger brothers, sisters, and cousins into the tiny shelters that they

[a] I owe these Kinga data to conversations with Dr. George K. Park.

have built for themselves and who obtain food for themselves and their juniors by begging and foraging? Are we justified in assuming that Kinga children will suffer in the same way as abandoned children in New York or Montreal and will turn into delinquents or waste away from lack of love? In fact, they don't. They turn into good and responsible citizens at the tender age of six or seven.

Why does this happen? There are at least three important differences between the Kinga situation and the North American situation on which we are basing our preconceptions. First, Kinga parents, unlike North Americans, justify their nonnurturant behavior by the belief that nurturance is a form of oppression; it interferes with the autonomous growth of the individual. Thus, abandonment of a child to the care of his peers is motivated by affection and concern for the child, not by indifference or dislike. Secondly, of course, the child is not really abandoned, in the sense that he would be in North America if his parents refused to take care of him. Affectionate and, on the whole, responsible substitute caretakers are provided, and if it happens, as it occasionally does, that the initial jolt gives the child nightmares, then all of his caretakers and his parents, as well, come running to comfort him. Thirdly, it happens to all children, not just to an unfortunate few, and therefore a three-year-old who has been separated from his mother cannot compare himself with other three-year-olds who still have mothers. Certainly, being taken away from one's mother at the age of two or three will have an effect on one's personality; but I don't think we can assume that the effect will be the same, regardless of whether the abandonment was motivated by love or hate and regardless of whether it happens to everybody or only to a few who must contrast their own deprived situation with that of the more fortunate many.

A comparison of Eskimo childrearing practices with our own provides a second example of the way in which we make unwarranted extrapolations from our own culturally biased assumptions about motives underlying behavior, and I will devote the rest of my chapter to a discussion of this material.

In our culture, certain kinds of inconsistency or discontinuity in the exercise of parental authority are often attributed to defects in parental character—weakness, bad judgment, ambivalence, irresponsibility, indifference. We call it by different names depending on our training, but it's always a "bad" name. And because inconsistency is attributed to parental personality problems, it often has unfortunate consequences for the child and sometimes for society. But if we carry over these expectations about inconsistency when we look at Eskimo behavior, we're in trouble. In the Eskimo context "inconsistent" behavior that looks very similar to our inconsistent behavior doesn't have at all the same effects that it would have in our society. In fact, when the behavior is interpreted in the light of Eskimo views of human nature and child development, it is not inconsistent at all.

There are three such apparent "inconsistencies" in the way in which Eskimo parents exercise authority over their children. The first of these is the contrast

between the way in which children are treated before and after the age of three.[b]

In Central Arctic Eskimo families, babies and small children are treated with great demonstrative affection. A baby is the center of attention in its household: it is cuddled, carried, played with, and talked to during all its waking hours. Babies and small children are encouraged to display their bodies and their new skills to admiring audiences. And the child's every wish is gratified, if possible, as soon as it is expressed.

However, after the birth of the next sibling, demonstrativeness gradually stops. The older child is no longer carried; he is sent out to play with his older siblings and peers, who may neglect him or abandon him if he hinders their games. Bodily display and demands for demonstrative affection are discouraged by teasing or by threatening that imaginary boogymen will come and try to kiss or cuddle, or even adopt the naked or noisy child. Demands for nurturant attention—"give me something to eat; put me to bed; fix my boot"—are ignored, sometimes only for a while, but sometimes permanently.

Members of our culture, observing Eskimo two- to three-year-olds, think they are "spoiled brats." They say: "Eskimo children aren't disciplined. Their parents must be weak, or they love their children too much."

Westerners say this also when they notice a second "inconsistency" in parental exercise of authority, namely, the fact that even after parents have begun to tell their children how to behave, they still allow the child to have the last word. They do not impose their will on him. (I am still speaking of Central Arctic parents.)

In both cases, when Western observers make remarks about how "spoiled" Eskimo children are, they are thinking in terms of their own culturally determined, and often unconscious, learning theory that tells them that a habit—for example, of self-indulgence or of stubbornness—or an expectation—for example, of being gratified—once formed, is hard or impossible to break. And, as I have said, they are also making the ethnocentric assumption that this parental behavior is due to some parental defect. Common suppositions are: "They love their children too much and unwisely." "They are weak, or perhaps indifferent; it's too much trouble for them to make sure their instructions are carried out." "They are ambivalent; they don't know what they want." "They're irrational; they don't consider the consequences of what they're doing." These are all judgments that might be passed on inconsistent discipline in our own culture, and Western observers see Eskimo discipline in the same light.

According to our ways of thinking—frequently expressed by whites in the North—Eskimo methods of childrearing are likely to have unhappy consequences for the child and for society. We see that Eskimos give a child everything it

[b] I am speaking now of the Central Arctic only; the situation is somewhat different elsewhere. Furthermore, "three" is only an approximate age, and the transition does not occur as abruptly as this somewhat oversimplified version would make it seem.

wants for the first several years of its life, then weakly say "No, no!" but nevertheless continue to let the child have its own way, whenever it insists, for the duration of childhood. We are shocked, and we imagine that this will produce confused, undisciplined, unruly children and adults. Thus, some observers explain Eskimo "spendthrift" behavior on entering the money economy as an "inability to defer gratification," which results from this early experience of having every demand immediately met. Paradoxically, however, Eskimos consider *us* to be uncontrolled as compared with themselves; they say *we* are the ones who are childish and can't defer gratification. And in the situations that they use as examples, they are right. We get angry at the slightest frustration; we are very bad-tempered if we can't eat every day and sleep our accustomed number of hours; and we couldn't possibly stand motionless over a seal hole for an entire day.

It is clear that Eskimo children are not "spoiled." They do not remain totally self-indulgent. They change in response to the new restrictive demands. And in fact the change occurs remarkably quickly. By the time a child is five or six (or even younger) he rejects offers of demonstrative affection, which are made to tease him or to test how grown up—that is, how controlled—he is. By the age of five or six he has become extraordinarily quiet, shy, self-controlled, independent, and undemanding, at least in public. In fact, he is much better behaved than our own children. And Western observers—even while they continue to cluck their tongues over the "weakness" of Eskimo discipline—nevertheless admire the well-behaved product and ask each other: "How in the world does it happen?"

The answer, in part, is that Eskimos expect it to happen. Their view of child development is to some degree reminiscent of our Freudian theory of "phases of development." Eskimos say that a small child must be gratified because he has no understanding. He is pitiable; he can't cope with hard realities, they say. But when a child begins to understand, then he can be taught—that is to say, *told*—what to do. Of his own accord, as his understanding grows, he will want more and more to learn and thus to behave properly. Eskimos don't believe that there is any native "bad nature" or "perversity" that needs to be overcome by harsh tactics. Providing a good example and good advice is discipline enough. Therefore, it doesn't matter if you (as parent) lose a battle or two or twenty; there is no fear that you will lose the war. You can just rely on the growth of understanding. Eventually the child will see for himself the natural consequences of various behaviors. He will see that the actions that turn out to have good consequences are, in general, those that were recommended by his parents, whereas those that have unpleasant consequences are those his parents warned him against; and he will draw his own conclusions.

To be sure, parents may dramatize the consequences a bit to help the learning process. For example, they may expose a child to rejecting or painful or frightening experiences instead of just warning him verbally that he may be rejected, or hurt, or endangered, so that he will learn more vividly. But these exercises are not punishments; they are intrinsic consequences. The parallel in our society might be "consciousness raising" techniques. In any case, children pick up the expectation that as they grow older they will behave better, and by and large they do so.

Interestingly, one of the expectations is that as a child's understanding grows, he will increasingly obey without question the instructions of his parents and other elders. And so we come to the third apparent inconsistency in Eskimo handling of authority: parental values and behavior are simultaneously "permissive" and "authoritarian." On the one hand, Eskimo society places a strong value on autonomy. This is expressed in letting children take much of the initiative in their development, both in learning new practical skills and in acquiring the less tangible social graces. I have mentioned that children are allowed to win the battles; adults don't forcibly impose their will on children. In adult life the autonomy value takes the form of a strong pressure, at least on men, to be self-reliant, even self-sufficient. On the other hand, a strong value is placed on obedience throughout childhood and young manhood. A child should not even ask why he is required to do something.

Looking at this "contradiction" superficially—that is to say, in the light of our own preconceptions—we ask ourselves: how can you teach a child to obey if you let him have his own way all the time? And on the other hand, how can you teach him to be self-reliant if you're all the time telling him he ought to be obeying you? How can you teach a child to value obedience and autonomy at the same time? Doesn't the child get hopelessly confused?

I say no, he doesn't. The opposition between autonomy and obedience is resolved if we look more closely at (a) the temporal and situational spheres of autonomy and obedience and (b) the rationale for obedience. In other words, when and under what circumstances is one supposed to be obedient? What aspects of one's behavior are subject to control, and why?

Obedience is conceived of as rational recognition of temporarily greater knowledge and wisdom on the part of elders; it is a means of learning their skills, and it assures that one will be protected by that knowledge and wisdom from endangering oneself and others. In general, elders do not attempt to control what a child thinks or feels, only what he does. And the more a child, or young person, is judged capable and responsible, the less his behavior is controlled by others. Then—as it was put to me—"his father just watches"—to make sure his son doesn't make serious mistakes. The prohibition on a child's asking questions is rationalized by a philosophy quite different from that of the Light Brigade: "Ours not to question why, ours but to do or die." It is not a way of inculcating robot-like docility or blind loyalty. On the contrary. It is a way of making the child more self-reliant—forcing him to think for himself—to discover for himself the reasons for his father's instructions. Thus, if one looks at the situation more closely, there is no contradiction between telling a child to obey and letting him have his own way.

To recapitulate: Eskimo children are not confused because they are required, or allowed, to be both autonomous and obedient. The spheres of each value are quite clearly laid out and rationalized. And children are not "spoiled," either by being totally gratified up to the age of three or so or by being allowed to "have their own way" when they insist on it all through childhood. The expectations of parents and of society in general are quite clear throughout childhood; and the demands made upon each child are much like the demands made upon his peers. "Spoiling" results either when a child is unrealistically protected from situations normally faced by his peers or when parental or societal expectations are perceived by the child as unclear or contradictory, so that he doesn't know how he should act and is willful as a reaction to frustration or as a way of testing limits.

I don't want to be understood as saying that there are no conflicts in the lives of Eskimo children. There are, and I have described some of them elsewhere.[c] Neither do I mean to imply that experiences such as the rather abrupt shift from extreme indulgence to training in self-control have no effect on Eskimo children. This shift is clearly experienced as a discontinuity, even though it is quite consistent with Eskimo doctrines concerning human nature and the learning process. And obviously, such sharp changes do have effects. My point is that they do not have the *same* effects they would have in a different cultural context. A child must interpret painful experiences differently depending on whether he alone has to undergo them or whether all his friends are experiencing the same thing. He must also interpret them differently depending on how they are explained to him and what he perceives the motivation of his parents to be.

In the case of the discontinuity that I've described here, some of the effects seem to be the following:

1. At the time the transition occurs, there is conflict, expressed in temper tantrums, nightmares, and sulking.
2. In some children especially in those who have been pampered longer than the usual three years the wish to be the focus of attention persists throughout life and expresses itself in some more and some less legitimate ways, such as a tendency to express one's wishes directly, instead of in the more approved form of a hint; or by being "bossy," which is considered unpleasant; or by becoming a joker, a good storyteller, or dancer. (These children, incidentally, I might be inclined to call "spoiled" in that they have been protected longer than their peers from the disciplinary experiences that are appropriate in Eskimo society. Eskimos call them "spoiled," too.)
3. Other children may overcompensate for their wish to be demanding by becoming overcontrolled or extremely shy.
4. The early experience of gratification may be one reason for a tendency to gratify oneself by eating when one is unhappy in later life. Food is equated with affection.
5. This early experience may also provide a necessary foundation for the ability to nurture others, even at considerable cost to oneself, which is characteristic of many Eskimo adults.

The moral of my tale, then, is that it is necessary to look at family behavior in its cultural context. And specifically, in interpreting any interactions between parents and children in another cultural context, one must ask: What motivates the actors? What assumptions do they make about the nature of human nature that is to say, what theories have they about what motivates people? What values have they and what assumptions do they make about the best ways to communicate these? How do they think people learn? And what expectations do they have about the effects of their various actions? because these expectations will certainly act as self-fulfilling prophecies influencing the actual effects of their behavior. It is not enough to look at family structure alone or at a single item of family behavior alone and out of context.

[c] *Never in Anger: Portrait of an Eskimo Family*, Harvard University Press, 1970; "The Issues of Autonomy and Aggression in the Three Year-Old: The Utku Eskimo Case," *Seminars in Psychiatry*, Vol. 4, November, 1972; "The Origins of Non-Violence: Eskimo Aggression Management," to be published in Warner Muensterberger (ed.), *The Psychoanalytic Study of Society*, International Universities Press, New York, 1974.