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## **Developmental Psychology in Its Social and Cultural Context**

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The recent article by Judy Rosenblith and Derek Price in the SRCD Newsletter on “Continuing Greenfield’s Initiative” caused me to go back and read Patricia Greenfield’s wonderful article, which I somehow overlooked back in 1995. For over 10 years I have taught developmental psychology in its social and cultural context, drawing upon sources in anthropology, sociology, philosophy, and literature, in addition to more traditional psychological sources. Most years I have followed the large lecture course with a smaller seminar and have placed each of the seminar students with a family from a culture different from that of the student (such as an immigrant family, an Amish or Mennonite family, or a family of orthodox Jews or fundamentalist Christians). The students spend an extended period of time living with the families and write a paper about their experience, drawing on material covered in the course. The lecture course is based loosely on George Goethals’s remarkable course on developmental psychology throughout the life cycle that I had the great good fortune to TA as a graduate student, while the seminar grows out, in part, of my graduate experience in the Whiting-LeVine training group in cross-cultural research.

Besides the goals laid out by Greenfield of understanding others better, I hope my courses also help students understand themselves better, widening their notions of the possible, questioning assumptions they might have previously taken for granted, and recognizing and embracing the contradictions in all of us. For example, all of us want intimacy as well as autonomy, individuality as well as group belongingness, and to be connected to and respectful of our parents yet also “our own person.” Along this vein, in Takeo Doi’s wonderful explication of the Japanese notion of “amae,” he argues cogently that *all* people, to some extent, would like to receive as adults the idealized love of a parent for a child -- a love that is unconditional, that does not have to be continually earned and cannot be lost. All of us, Doi asserts, would sometimes like to be taken care of and indulged, i.e. to allow ourselves to be dependent. Doi goes on to assert that Westerners, to the detriment of their psychological health, try to deny this need, striving toward a wrongheaded ideal of complete self-reliance and independence. We tend to be ashamed of our desire for “amae,” instead of recognizing that it is natural and normal.

By viewing ourselves and our assumptions through the perspectives of other cultures, we can gain insights into our shortcomings and shortsightedness. The egocentricism of our Western perspective is brought home cogently in the following passage by Dorothy Lee (1950): "The Wintu [Native Americans'] use of *left* and *right*, as compared to ours, shows the difference in orientation. When we go for a walk, the hills are to our right, the river to our left; when we return, the hills change and the river, while we remain the same, since we are the pivot, the focus. Now the hills have pivoted to the left of me. This has been English practice for many years, since at least the fourteenth century.... When the Wintu goes up the river, the hills are to the west, the river to the east; and a mosquito bites him on the west arm. When he returns, the hills are still to the west, but when he scratches his mosquito bite, he scratches his east arm. The geography has remained unchanged, and the self has had to be reoriented in relation to it."

### **Harry Stack Sullivan**

While Patricia Greenfield is correct that most of Western developmental psychology has held up independence and individuation as the goals of development. There has long been another, minority voice even within Western psychology. For example, Harry Stack Sullivan conceived of the goal of personality development, not to be better able to stand alone on one's own two feet, but to be better able to interact with and get close to others. Very much in sympathy with Chinese notions of "jen," and with the ideas of many Asian, Latin American, African, and Native American peoples, Sullivan saw human beings as fundamentally social. For Sullivan, the basic unit was the individual-in-social-context rather than the individual alone. He talked about personality being "field-dependent," rather being unchanging and independent of social context. Situational personality theorists, such as Mischel and Gergen, have greatly elaborated on this particular thread. The fundamental interpersonalness of the human being also meant for Sullivan that the boundaries between people are porous and do not stop sharply at the body boundaries. We sense, and are affected by, the feelings of those around us. We become ill, theorized Sullivan, because of lack of social supports or because of social conflicts. Family therapists, such as Minuchin, Napier, and Whitaker, have greatly elaborated upon this thread. It would not be too far off the mark to substitute "Sullivan" each time it says "African" in the following quotation from Thomas Lambo: "Africans believe in the relation between man and man; Westerners increasingly believe in the relation between man and object. African philosophy bases all explanation on human relationships; Western philosophy bases them on science. Medicine is a good illustration of this difference. Africans believe that to protect oneself and one's family from disease, one must live peacefully with one's neighbors.... Westerners believe that one

need only take the right pill, or have the right operation, but Africans define disease socially, not biologically."

### **The Students Speak for Themselves**

I always ask my students to write a paper on their experience of going away to college, using the material covered in the developmental psychology course to help them reflect on their own experiences. This assignment is also a wonderful way to help students empathize with the experiences of anyone moving from one social and cultural context to another (immigrants to a new country, socially mobile or displaced persons, soldiers returning from war, etc.). In the space remaining, I would like to share a few of the experiences and insights of students from the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard University, MIT, and Washington University.

First, from a student who was deeply rooted in the home she had grown up in, and felt out of place at college, but who has built a life for herself at college: "During my first year at [University X], I was acutely aware of not belonging here. I was different from everyone else in so many ways: I was a Southerner, I went to public schools, and I was totally unfamiliar with the urban northeast and its mixture of cultures and races. My family history was rooted in rural Mississippi and Arkansas, and only in the last couple of generations had anyone in my family gone to college. I felt that my previous education was inferior to most other students. I walked, talked, and even thought more slowly than everyone around me, and often I felt as stupid as many people treated me.... I tried very hard during this period to find people and things that reminded me of [MyHometown], of 'home.' I visited Baptist and Episcopal churches around campus, trying to find a church similar to those I attended while growing up.... My accent actually became deeper, because I was making such an effort to hold on to my old identity, which was strongly tied up with the part of the country I had come from.... I didn't feel comfortable at [University X], even in my dorm room. My roommate plastered her half of the room with posters and photographs, while mine was bare of decoration. I lived as if I was staying at a hotel, unwilling or unable to give any of myself to my surroundings.... At the end of my freshman year, I felt less like a stranger at [University X]. However, I still considered [MyHometown] my home.... Then I went back to [MyHometown] for the summer. My first reaction to my old neighborhood felt like the kind of dream in which your surroundings are very familiar, but something about them doesn't seem quite right..... I had been expecting and longing for 'home,' a place where I felt comfortable and confident, where I truly belonged. I felt betrayed by this place that made me uneasy, like a guest or a stranger.... I spent much of the summer trying to recover my feeling of confidence in home, almost like trying to fit into a pair of shoes that is too small.... In the next

few years, my opinions and values continued to change.... I became more accustomed to [the city of University X], learning to navigate the subway system with ease, finding a Lutheran church in which I felt able to worship, and getting close to a few friends I could really talk to. My room looked less like a hotel and more like the residence of a college student....The first few times I caught myself referring to [the city of University X] as 'home,' I felt guilty, as if I was the betrayer now. But in three years here, it had really become my home. I didn't feel out of place any more. Although I still saw the ways in which I was different from other people at college, I also saw all the ways that I was similar to them.... My sense of 'home' changed as the amount of my investment in college life changed. I believe that one doesn't find or discover a place called home, or stumble on it as if by accident. [The city of University X] became my home when I devoted more time and energy and emotion to my life here.”

Some students wanted to leave home far behind them, wanted to distance themselves from their history and their background, but rediscovered a new appreciation for home instead. Here, are the words of one such student: “First... you have to understand that I didn't cry at my high school graduation. You are *supposed* to cry. My classmates cried.... After spending twelve years with the same small group of people from the same small, rural, South Dakota community, who all had the same ideas about me, I was ready for a change.... I had been pigeon-holed early in life and had little in common with my peers.... I had always known that I would have to leave our community and it showed in my attitude. There was a certain backlash to this, especially as I became older.... Imagine my surprise when I discovered that although I fit into this new environment, it did not always fit me.... In a small town...there is no replacement for anyone. The number of potential friends, neighbors, lovers, and peers is finite. Therefore every member of the community is unconditionally accepted to some degree. Even the most ostracized urchin can depend on a certain amount of acceptance and care from the community at large. In the smaller communities the whole effective universe can have characteristics similar to that of the family unit..... The isolated urbanite often seems to be searching for he knows not what and then rejecting a relationship that leads to commitment or dependence.... I especially do not understand the desire for independence as they seem to define it. Self-sufficiency, competency, and creating an environment that allows personal fulfillment, I can understand, but independence in the sense of being free to do whatever one likes without responsibilities to anybody or taking the larger community into account, I don't understand....If even I, the marginalized child who always knew she was going to grow up and go to college far away, could find an intrinsic value in that dependent way of life, perhaps there is something to it after all. Leaving home has given me a novel perspective from which to view home and has brought into relief aspects of it that were too close to see before.”

The issue of questioning values once held unquestioningly and of having “one foot” in the world at home and “one foot” in the new college world arise for many different reasons, not only because of moving from one part of the country to another. Here is a student whose struggles center around conflicts between her religious beliefs and practices and the secular world of the university: “I was shocked when he kissed me. Truthfully, I felt attractive and desirable.... [But] I knew it was not right to kiss someone on the first date, let alone, the first time you meet him. I waivered between being the "good Jewish girl" and the "typical" college student. I thought this was supposed to happen in college so I should get used to it. I attributed my confusion to the fact that I had led a sheltered life.... It was right to say a blessing before eating and it was wrong to use the phone on the Sabbath. My adolescent identity was as clearly defined as these values. Judaism dictates a certain way of life that I had no problem adopting. I molded my identity according to the axioms of Judaism, my parents and my peers, who were all identical to me.... The first Friday night at [University X] forced me to reconsider my past identity and choose one for the future. After the sun set, I curled up in my bed with a book, just as I had done every Friday night. When my roommate invited me to go to dinner and a party with her, I almost responded, "We can't go out - it's Shabbas!" After my roommate left, alone, I sat and wondered if my old behaviors were appropriate in this new environment. I realized that I would be bombarded with choices that conflicted with my religion, and my identity; therefore, I had better decide who and what I wanted to be. I had to choose whether I wanted to be the "good Jewish girl," or what I thought was the "typical" college girl, or find a happy medium between the two.... It was easy to have a clear sense of identity when that identity is laid out for you. This all changed when I arrived at [University X].... I was free to do and be whatever I pleased. My identity that was so stable in Yeshiva was now shaky in college.... I searched for a personality that would fit in with life at [University X]. I turned to peers for help. I spent a lot of time with my roommate and her friends whose conversations revolved around nail polish and hair color. After I realized that I could not emulate their accent and whine, I decided this was not the identity for me. I then met a group whose nightly activity was smoking marijuana. Their characters were also not right for me. I finally developed a friendship with a nice Midwestern girl with the same values that I have.... I thought I could limit my change so that I would not violate any major Jewish norms. I felt in control and well-adjusted, until Peter came along. Peter was tall, blond, blue-eyed, and not Jewish. I knew that dating a non-Jew was one of the cardinal sins, and I knew my father would disown me if he ever found out. Yet, I still dated him. Peter offered me the perfect transition into the identity that I thought I wanted to adopt. He was the "typical" college guy and he could teach me about the "real" world. I persisted to justify and rationalize the relationship by saying it was nothing serious -- we were just having fun. But, it became serious....

By my junior year, I had made a full circle. I dated Joshua, a tall, good looking, pre-med, Orthodox Jew. He was my parents' dream-date. Through him, I returned to my old observant self, the way I was in high school. Instead of going out on weekends, we sat around and studied the Talmud. I was very bored. I realized that I had given up too much of what I had gained the previous year. I did not want to be the party girl, but I did not want to be the strictly observant Jew either. I needed a balance between the two.... I am living in two different worlds-- the Jewish world and the college world.... I have decided what is important and what I am willing to give up from both of these worlds. I have broadened my definition of an Orthodox Jew, so that I have more leeway to fit into this category, which is a compromise between two different worlds.”

Usually one thinks of problems coming from moving from an environment where most people were like you to moving to an environment where one is in the minority. However, the next excerpt describes an issue that arose from moving in the opposite direction: “I am Jewish. In Oklahoma, I had no Jewish friends, but I had a very strong Jewish identity. Being Jewish is very important to both of my parents, and growing up in their presence gave me a strong sense of who I am.... Since coming to University X, I have had a very “Jewish” social life. Interestingly enough, only by having a large number of Jewish friends could the strength of my Jewish identity be challenged....In Oklahoma, being different taught me to have a high level of tolerance.... I learned the importance of accepting everyone for who they are, and furthermore I learned the value of being loving and giving to more than just one's own "pack."...The Jewish friends I have here, come from very different environments. I have some friends that just blanketly like people better only because they are Jewish. They are nicer and friendlier to new Jewish acquaintances, as opposed to how they treat new Gentile acquaintances. This shatters my sense of what is right. I learned the golden rule in Kindergarten. I would hate it if someone wasn't friendly to me simply because I didn't share their religious identity.... I want my children to learn the same tolerance that I learned growing up. To achieve this goal, must I take my family to a town such as [MyTown] with a similarly diminutive Jewish population?”

Not all the students had found a comfortable resolution, at least not at the time they wrote their papers. Here are the words of a student caught in a role conflict for which no solution has yet emerged, “I wanted to be true to myself while at the same time please other people and fit in. As a result, I assumed a number of roles and acted differently around different people. Around my black friends, I acted “down,” and was loud. My speech patterns were different, and I spoke in what most people call, Black English dialect. When I was around white people, my behavior was totally different. I was more composed, more careful of what I said and how I said it, and I didn't speak much. I didn't want the white people to have

the negative stereotypes of me that they have with many other black people. When I was doing this, I felt that I was betraying my black community and trying to separate myself from my race. At the same time, my black friends questioned my ethnicity because I decided to attend an elitist white university. They called me a traitor and said I was not as "black" as I used to be. Many of them thought I had changed and acted "different". I didn't think I changed, but I guess I had.... My black friends at home don't consider me one of them, and I don't fit in with my white friends at the university. Hence, I ask myself over & over again, who I am. I find myself constantly trying to prove myself without having to denounce my race.”

Many students clearly felt ambivalent about both home and the university or wanted to be fully a part of each world without giving up either. “How can I live according to the values and expectations of home *and* of school if those values and expectations are not in agreement?”

“When I was in high school, I could keep the two worlds in which I have quasi-membership (black and white, to put it crudely) separate. When I was in class, I was in class; when at home, I was at home; and I made sure I never forgot where I was. My classmates accepted me as a student, but not necessarily as a black; my friends accepted me as a black, but not necessarily as a student. But everything was okay since I could go to class and belong in at least one way, and go home and belong in another way, even though I didn't really belong any place and nobody really accepted me for all of what I was. At least I pseudo-belonged in every situation I was in. But, needless to say, when I came here to school, the two worlds weren't so neatly separate (here both black and educated come in the same package), and it's even harder to fit in socially -- I can't just separate one situation from another and be in turn the person that each situation requires me to be. I had thought that once I got away from home where people have known me so long and have so many pre-conceptions about me, I would be able to find some people who would accept me and take me for what I am, and not for what they want me to be. I was wrong.”

Other students feared that when they returned home they would revert back and lose the changes of which they were so proud. Or, students felt the pressure of conflicting role demands at home but felt free of those at college. Some students had felt different, lonely, or uncomfortable at home and finally found a place where they “fit” at college:

“For me, college was a huge relief, as if parts of myself that had previously been squeezed into social norms that didn't fit were finally set free. I learned that I wasn't a freak, I just needed to find the right place for me.... Here I could talk about my off-the-wall, intellectual thoughts that mostly got me weird looks in h.s., and people would join in, and even out-do me.”

“Growing up as a poor Japanese-American kid in a 99% Hispanic neighborhood certainly gave me many roles in many different places. In school, I stood out as an Asian kid, but since my friends were Hispanic, I

tried to make my role... the class clown, or the jock, or the math whiz -- anything that would make my 'Asian-ness' not stand out too much..... At times I even wanted to take on the role of a Hispanic person by trying to talk and look like my friends.

At home, I had to take on a whole new set of roles, roles that were acceptable for my parents.....With my parents' Japanese friends it was certainly unacceptable to act the way I did with my friends at school, so I had to try to hide my 'Hispanic-ness' that I was trying so hard to acquire.

At Univ. X, the 'racial pressure' was completely gone. Since Univ. X is much more diverse than my high school community, I felt that there was much more tolerance here. Also, there are so many Asian-Americans here that I do not stand out like a sore thumb like I did in high school...The interesting thing is that I did not have to set my role behavior at such a fine resolution for every single situation that I would encounter, like I did at home. I can more or less be the same in every situation. This is very comforting because I can act the same way in most situations/environments without feeling like I'm holding things in. In other words, I find that I am the same 'me' most of the time.”

Another student: “When I was in high school, I wore a jacket and tie, and kept my hair short. It was a private school, and the formal dress code and informal social code did their part to mute my individuality.... I was quiet..., a new kid in an incredibly cliquy school. However, as time went on, I began to grow my hair slightly longer as I became more comfortable with my surroundings and myself. By the time I came to Univ. X, I was ready to accept myself and force those around me to do the same. The jacket and short hair were replaced by blue jeans and a ponytail. Along with that came expressiveness and a willingness to show other people what I was really like that I never found in high school. I imagine that a great deal of it is based on this place, on the openness and friendliness of the particular subset of Univ. X that I affiliate myself with. In high school, I was surrounded by people who seemed to put uniformity and collectivism before acceptance. In that atmosphere of exclusion it was difficult for me to assert myself. Once I reached Univ. X, however, I found an acceptance I had not known before. It was because of this approval of differences that I found the courage to be different.”

Although the students quoted above were talking of their own personal experiences, these experiences contain threads that helped the students better understand what other people, arriving in America from other cultures, or in other social situations, might be experiencing, and reading about the experiences of other people and the rich anthropological and sociological literature helped my students better understand and grapple with issues in their own lives. In turn, my students have taught me a great deal.