

Cultural biases may influence parenting studies, scientist finds

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When two University of Illinois scientists set out to learn about the differences in Chinese and American parenting behaviors at mealtime, they learned something important about the reliability of cross-cultural research.

In the study, 22 first-generation Chinese immigrant families with at least one 2-1/2 to 5-1/2-year-old child were videotaped during a shared meal. Two female Chinese research assistants and two female European-American research assistants then analyzed 755 minutes of video to get a large sample of a wide variety of behaviors.

Analysis was done by research assistants who were trained to categorize certain behaviors as either sensitive, intrusive, detached, having negative affect (do family members appear angry or hostile?), having positive affect (do family members seem to enjoy each other?), and the degree of parents' confidence.

When their work was complete, the research assistants were asked to give detailed reasons for their ratings. Their reasons highlighted their different cultural perspectives about parent-child relationships.

“Although you can train a Chinese research assistant to say that it’s intrusive for a parent to put a bite of food in a four-year-old’s mouth, you can’t actually get him or her to believe it. Their cultural bias causes them to see this behavior as sensitive and loving,” said Angela Wiley, a U of I associate professor of human and community development.

“That’s important because those biases influence their coding in subtle ways, calling into question the validity of much of our past research that compares parenting behaviors across cultures,” she said.

Even when cross-cultural research assistants evaluate behavior as U.S. researchers train them to, the parenting behaviors of other cultures often suffer in comparison, she said.

“If an American research assistant notes behaviors such as the Chinese parent feeding the four-year-old, the researcher will conclude that Chinese parents are suppressing the independence of their children. There’s an inevitable bias toward our own cultural interpretations,” she said.

For example, in European-American cultures, parents stress the development of independence in their children. Chinese immigrant culture, on the other hand, values mutual obligation, including strong parental responsibilities and children’s obedience.

European-American cultures value parents’ consistency, whereas Chinese culture values flexibility and reacting in a context-sensitive way.

Chinese culture deems verbally and emotionally expressive persons as socially immature and lacking in self-control. In contrast, expressiveness, including direct verbal communication, is a major behavioral component by the individualism valued by Western cultures.

The influence of these perceptions on cross-cultural studies can be difficult to eliminate, Wiley said.

“Even so, it’s clearly important to continue and expand observational cultural research in an era of increasing contact with other cultures,” she said.

In the study, published in the January issue of *Social Development*, Wiley and her colleagues recommend using a combination of research assistants from both cultures for all data to minimize the researcher's tendency to interpret behaviors using their own cultural framework. This collaborative approach maximizes cultural understanding in addition to improving the quality of comparative research, she said.

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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