CHAPTER 10

Culture and the Challenges of Being a Good Parent

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The young mother in Norman Rockwell's famous portrayal sits bolt upright on a chair, hairbrush in her right hand, which also grasps the shirt of the little boy splayed across her lap, tummy down, waiting for his expected spanking. In her left hand, however, the mother is holding a book, *Child Psychology*, with an expression on her face that combines consternation with anger (Rockwell, 1933). She has plenty of reason to think her son deserves a punishment, as the broken objects strewn on the floor show – a vase, a tennis racquet, and a clock, along with a hammer. Yet she hesitates to carry out the punishment that is most familiar to her for such a transgression. "Child psychology," a new kind of way to think about children's behavior, has just begun to take hold in this young mother's world. And the book in her hand is probably telling her that the old forms of discipline need to be replaced with new, more "scientific" guidance. Clearly, this mother wants to do the right thing. But what actually is the right thing?

Ideas about how to be a good mother – or good father – have varied across historical time as well as across cultures, but they consistently play a major role in parents' own sense of well-being and thus emotion regulation. Norman Rockwell's picture was first published on the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1933, just 5 years after John B. Watson's slim but extraordinarily influential book *Psychological Care of Infant and Child*, in which he prescribed a business-like approach to child-rearing and pressed his case for reward-and-punishment behaviorism (Watson, 1928). In contrast to Watson's views, however, other influential professionals such as Arnold Gesell (Gesell & Ilg, 1943), saw child development as a natural, maturational process. According to family historian Ann Hulbert, the dueling opposites set up at that time have endured to the present (Hulbert, 2004). In short, for present-day US parents, the question of how to be a good parent has yet to be answered satisfactorily.

10.1 Mothers as Cross-Cultural Pioneers: The Experiences of Expatriate Journalists

In recent years, however, American parents – as well as parents in other postindustrial societies – have begun to look beyond local sources of advice to what can be learned from other cultures, both within and beyond the middle-class Western world. Among the pioneers in this quest are mothers living in cultural places different from where they grew up, who have produced books written as participant observers of what they see as better ways to be a good parent.

Perhaps the most widely read example of this new genre is Pamela Druckerman's account of French parenting (Druckerman, 2014). In her book *French Children Don't Throw Food*, first published in Great Britain and later republished in the United States under the title *Bringing up Bebé*, Druckerman describes her experiences as a new mother living in Paris, where (as noted in the book's subtitle) she "discovers the wisdom of French parenting." Druckerman presents herself as a confused American new mother, desperate for guidance but shocked by the parenting practices she observes when she goes home to visit. Her new discoveries include a range of topics, from establishing regular schedules of eating and sleeping in the opening months of the baby's life, to teaching the baby to "wait" for a response from adults, to advantages of the infant *crèche* for full-day care whether the mother is employed or not. Two themes appear repeatedly in her French experience: one, that the task of parents and other caregivers is to "awaken" babies' senses and encourage them to "discover" the world around them; the other, that babies need to understand from the beginning that they are not the center of the universe, their parents also have needs, and they must learn to be patient, entertain themselves, and not expect frequent expressions of praise. Notably absent are concerns about stimulating children's school-related skills; for example, the infant *crèche* has no apparent curriculum, though they do serve the children four-course lunches (puréed or cut in small pieces depending on the age of the child).

Two other books – one about Danish parenting and the other about Dutch parents, both written by expatriate American or British mothers married to local citizens – offer further perspectives on how to raise children successfully with a lot less stress than they attribute to their home countries. The premise of both books is that residents of their respective countries have received top ratings from international organizations as being the "happiest" in the world, thus they must have something helpful to offer the rest of us. The main idea, or "parenting theory," put forth by American author Jessica Alexander and her Danish coauthor Iben Sandahl in *The Danish Way of Parenting* (2016, p. 21) is

straightforward: "Happy kids grow up to be happy adults who raise happy kids, and so on." Invoking our work on "parental ethnotheories" (Harkness & Super, 1996), they urge readers to pay attention to their own "default settings," that is, the implicit, taken-for-granted ideas that guide the way they raise their children. The "Danish way of parenting" is contrasted to what they describe as the "epidemic of stress" in the United States, where parents compete with each other to raise the highest-achieving children but where prescription drugs – Ritalin for children, antidepressants for both adults and increasingly young sufferers – are used at much higher rates than in Europe. In Denmark, on the other hand, they describe an approach to parenting that emphasizes letting children learn on their own as much as possible, through play rather than direct instruction. Humility is valued, and praise for children's accomplishments is given out sparingly. Paradoxically, they note, Danish movies often have sad endings (unlike typical American movies) – but they see this as an aspect of "authenticity," another key feature of Danish parenting that should produce children who can recognize and accept their own emotions – and relatedly (as they see it), know their own limits. Last but not least, they describe the importance of "cozy" (*hygge*) family times that help everyone feel connected, an idea that they contrast to American "individualism."

Although Danish people have been ranked at the apex of happiness (according to a worldwide survey by the United Nations), Dutch children come out at the top in a UNICEF report (2012). These rankings may be taken with a grain of salt because they seem to vary a bit from one survey to the next (Norway edged out Denmark as the "happiest" country in 2017). Another caveat relates to the definition of "happiness" in such surveys, which includes measures of economic well-being, health, and educational achievement in addition to simply asking people how happy they feel. Not surprisingly, given their strong social benefit programs and low poverty rates, the northern European countries hover around the top of the scales.

But is there more to actual "happiness" in Denmark and the Netherlands than just rankings of overall socioeconomic well-being? In *The Happiest Kids in the World*, American writer Rina Mae Acosta and her English colleague Michele Hutchison set out to explain just why Dutch children are given such high grades for happiness (Acosta & Hutchinson, 2017). Both authors are expatriates in the Netherlands, married to Dutch men and bringing up their children in a foreign environment that they find increasingly home-like. Some of the themes they invoke are familiar. In contrast to super-stimulated American and British children, Dutch children have more time to play without an imposed educational agenda. Parenthood is not a competition about whose child achieves the most. In fact, a teacher urges

one of the authors not to help her young son prepare for an important test, as it might create a "strain" on him. There's more time for families to enjoy being together. The term *gezellig* (which the authors compare to the Danish *hygge*) captures the cozy, comfortable sociability that is the essence of a good life. In addition to these similarities, though, Acosta and Hutchison also discover a uniquely Dutch mainstay of parenting: the emphasis on rest and a regular schedule as key to children's healthy development and – yes – happiness.

10.2 Academic Research on Parenting

Academic research on parenting across cultures is generally consistent with the more journalistic accounts by expatriate mothers (it should be acknowledged that they too relied on scholarly sources). In our own research with Dutch families in the 1990s, for example, we found that Dutch mothers tended to rate their days more favorably than did mothers in six other Western cultures, especially in relation to their child's sleeping patterns, the time and energy they had available for their child, and the balance of parenting with other tasks. The importance of the Dutch Three R's – rest (*Rust*), regularity (*Regelmaat*), and cleanliness (*Reinheid*) – became obvious in our interviews with parents and observations of infant behavior: compared to same-aged US children, the Dutch babies in our study were sleeping two hours more per 24-hour day at 6 months of age. This difference continued to our oldest measurement point when the children were 7 or 8 years old, although it diminished over time (Super et al., 1996). A detailed analysis of how Dutch and US mothers of 2- and 6-month-old infants talked about regularity revealed a fundamental difference in ideas about "getting the baby on a schedule": whereas the US mothers "hoped" that their baby would settle into a regular schedule for the sake of the whole family, the Dutch mothers were confident that regularity in sleep, eating, and other activities was essential for the baby's healthy development. In addition, the Dutch mothers evidently felt more entitled to take their own needs and the needs of the rest of the family into consideration than did the US mothers, who seemed convinced that being a "good mother" necessarily entailed prioritizing the baby's perceived needs almost to the exclusion of their own (van Schaik et al., 2020).

The emphasis on the importance of a regular schedule carried through to these Dutch mothers' talk about their children's daily routines at older ages. The mother of 7-year-old Willem described her son's typical weekday, in the process incorporating her own day:

> Now, he gets up in the morning around 7:00 AM, and he sits in front of the TV watching "children's TV." At about 7:30 or quarter of 8:00, I get

up, and he gets his orange juice and bread with butter and chocolate sprinkles, we drink coffee . . . then we go wash and get dressed, then he goes to school – nowadays, on his own. At 12:00 I pick him up at school, and we come home on our bikes, we eat something, he plays inside or outside. Then I bring him back to school, on our bikes. At 3:00 I usually pick him up. And then we come home, or he goes to swimming lessons, or tennis, or he plays outside or he brings a friend home, or he goes to a friend's house. We eat dinner late – about 6:30 or 7:00. Then he watches TV, usually Sesame Street, or now, with good weather he might even go outside. At 7:30 we go upstairs again, pajamas, wash up, brush teeth . . . at about 8:00 he's in bed. A normal day, right?

(van Schaik et al., 2020)

Weekends are different, according to Willem's father, although Willem still gets up at the same time. "We lie in bed longer, if possible. Then when he's tired of watching TV, he often comes upstairs to see if we're still in bed, and sometimes he climbs in with us." The father continues, "So we get up at around 9:30, have coffee and bread (orange juice for him). Then, if I don't have to work, the three of us go grocery shopping in town."

In the accounts of both Willem's mother and father, the theme of regularity is expressed through frequent references to the times of day when certain activities take place, with eating and sleeping schedules, plus school, as guideposts for variability in other activities. Being a good parent, in this context, includes providing emotional security through a regular schedule that the child can rely on. As the father of a 5-year-old girl said, "Regularity is the most important . . . so much happens in her little world. It's important that promised things are as promised, and that means some regularity. Go to bed on time, eat on time." The mother agrees, "Yes, regularity and rest, I think."

10.3 Parents' Ideas in Action: The Power of Parental Ethnotheories

As the stories of family life that we heard from Dutch parents illustrate, parenting practices in various cultural places are shaped by shared ideas about parenting. Parents' ideas exist at many levels, from the most general and abstract to the specific and concrete. They also vary in how available they are for identification and explanation by the parents who hold them. The Three Rs of Dutch parenting are an example of a well-known, historically grounded principle of child-rearing (Super et al., 2021); parents in our research were able to explain them to us as well as illustrate them with actual stories about daily life for their children and themselves. In anthropological terms, such constellations of beliefs are often referred to as "cultural models" that have strong motivational properties. They are not just mental representations of the way that things

are but also of the way things should be (D'Andrade & Strauss, 1992). We refer to such cultural models, when related specifically to parenting, as "parental ethnotheories" (Harkness & Super, 1996).

Parental ethnotheories can be thought of as a cascade of ideas, constraints, practices, and outcomes (Harkness & Super, 2006, figure 1, p. 71). The cultural models at the top of the model are the most general, often implicit ideas about the nature of the child, parenting, and the family. Below this triad are ideas about specific domains, such as infant sleep or social development. These ideas are closely tied to ideas about appropriate practices (such as strict bedtimes), and further to imagined child or family outcomes. The ideas are translated into behavior but only as mediated by factors such as the child's temperament characteristics, parents' schedules, and competing cultural models and their related practices. The results can be seen in actual parental behaviors and ultimately in actual child and family outcomes. In the example of the Three Rs of Dutch child-rearing, the triad of rest, regularity, and cleanliness appears to be an implicit template for much of family – indeed, societal – life, and it flows easily into the second level, regarding specific beliefs, in this case about the importance of rest etc. The daily routines that these families described were instantiations of the Three Rs, and they were often accompanied by comments about their benefits. During our time living with and learning from these Dutch families, we were struck by the implicit emphasis on emotional regulation inherent in the Three Rs. For example, a typical comment from a parent in support of a regular and restful routine was, "If he doesn't get enough sleep, he's fussy the next day." Likewise, parents alluded to their own need for adequate rest and some time for themselves after the children were in bed. For these families, it appeared, keeping daily practices consistent with the principles of the Three Rs did not seem to be a problem; but as any parent knows, one cannot assume that practices will always reflect principles. Thus the parental ethnotheories model includes space for things that interfere with parents' ideas about being a good parent.

The parental ethnotheories model ties together culturally shared ideas, practices, and outcomes. Thus, learning about one part of the model can lead the observer to explore how it functions in relation to other parts, as well as how it may vary across cultures. For example, learning about the Three Rs from Dutch parents aroused our curiosity about what parents in other cultures – even within Western Europe – might think about the importance of a regular and restful schedule for children. When we asked an Italian mother what she thought about feeding her baby on a regular schedule, her response was emphatic:

> No, absolutely not – no scheduling with this one. With the other one
> I did … Because with the bottle you give him 200 ml at two o'clock, so

you can't give him 100 ml at three... It's completely different, in my opinion. When you breastfeed, you not only give your milk, but many more things so you can't refuse it – it's not that you don't want to, it's just unthinkable, it's as if your child said, "Mummy, give me a kiss," and you said, "Not now, Sweetie, at three o'clock!"

<div align="right">(Harkness et al. 2007, p. 24)</div>

In contrast to the Dutch mothers, the majority of mothers in our Italian sample did not expect their babies to self-regulate their state of rest and arousal; rather, they tended to accommodate to the infant's inborn sleeping and feeding schedules without imposing any rules, because "babies learn to regulate themselves." This idea in turn related to a more implicit principle that our Italian colleague, Vanna Axia, explained to us, that is the importance of emotional closeness, especially within the family. As with the Three Rs for the Dutch parents, the cultural model of emotional closeness for the Italian families could be related to various aspects of family life. For example, when we asked the Italian parents about whether children should have a regular bedtime, the general response was "yes … " but then with numerous exceptions. The mother of one 4-year-old girl stated firmly that "the rule is going to bed in the evening not after 9:00 – unless there are friends, parties, or we are out – then the rules are broken." In this cultural scenario, emotion regulation for both children and their parents was a joint project, supported by a close and loving relationship.

10.4 The Importance of Context: Parenting across the Globe

The Dutch and Italian parents whom we met through our research lived in somewhat similar circumstances. Thus, the differences we observed in parenting might be seen as dictated more by cultural traditions than by what John Whiting (1977) called "maintenance systems," including economic structure, government, and the overall organization of society. A quick hop across the globe and across time to Kokwet, the rural African community where we carried out research with children and families in the 1970s, provides a contrasting example (Harkness & Super, 1985; Super & Harkness, 1986). Our images from those times include a photograph of Mrs Mitei (as our local research assistant always referred to her) seated on the ground outside her mud-and-wattle hut with the youngest three of her eight children as they work together peeling maize kernels off the dried cob. The photo catches her in an affectionate interchange with the toddler seated next to her, who is too young to participate but content to stay with his siblings and his mother. The maize kernels will be ground for making *kimiet*, a thick porridge that

is the staple food in this community. Mrs Mitei's day includes cooking *kimiet*, garnished with wild leafy vegetables that grow between the rows of maize on their plot of land. Kipsigis tea – a hearty beverage of milk and tea leaves boiled together and sweetened with a generous spoonful of sugar from the local store – accompanies every meal. Mrs Mitei and her children eat together, seated on the ground, while her husband, Arap (or "Mr" in our parlance) Mitei, eats off to the side, following Kipsigis etiquette. Mrs Mitei also goes down to the river to bring back a bucket of water, balanced on her head, for cooking and washing, and she spends several hours in her fields weeding, along with several neighborhood women who take turns helping in each other's gardens, while older siblings take care of the younger ones at the edge of the field. At night, Mrs Mitei will sleep on the sculpted mud floor of her own hut, with her youngest child at her front and next-youngest at her back; the older children sleep in a separate hut across the compound, and Arap Mitei has his own. When the children are not with their mother, they are mostly busy helping out, for example, 4-year-old Kipkoech, captured in another photo, is posted by maize kernels spread out to dry on cow hides, where he drives away an errant calf from this tempting snack.

10.5 Cultural Typologies of Mothers

What Mrs Mitei does as a "good mother" is quite different from the European mothers mentioned previously, even though their fundamental goals of raising healthy and productive children are no doubt the same. Mrs Mitei and mothers like her are described by anthropologist Beatrice Whiting as "training mothers," whose communications with their children often revolve around assigning tasks that contribute to the whole family's sustenance (unlike picking up one's toys or even setting the table for dinner). Based on observations of mothers' behavior with their children in 12 cultural places, Whiting and her colleague Carolyn Pope Edwards proposed three maternal profiles (Whiting & Edwards, 1988). The "training mother" profile was found in all their sub-Saharan research samples. In contrast to this profile was the "controlling mother," whose interactions seemed more oriented to managing the child's behavior. This profile was most prevalent in agricultural communities of the Philippines, Mexico, and north India, where – as Whiting theorized – children were not needed as much for household or farm work. The last profile, the "sociable mother," was found only in the American community of "Orchard Town," a western suburb of Boston. In fact, these mothers also used primarily "controlling" speech with their children; but unlike the other cultural places, sociable interactions were second most frequent in

this place. Whiting and Edwards suggested that this maternal style was due in part to the social isolation of these mothers: in contrast to all the other cultural samples, the mothers of Orchard Town often had no one to talk with except their children.

To this triad of mothers' parenting styles, we might add another, the "educating mother" or father. This approach to parenting has long been recognized as important in East Asian cultures, and it has become increasingly prevalent among middle-class families in post-industrial Western societies, especially the United States (Harkness et al., 2007). A Korean mother interviewed about her 2-month-old infant expressed the Asian version of this theme: "My baby looks at new things very intensively for a long time. I think he recognizes things and he is thinking. I like it. It is his brain development. I would like to show him lots of things to help and encourage his brain development …. I put some pictures on the wall to show him things" (ibid., p. 30). Another Korean mother recounted, "I play music to her or I play tapes of stories so she could listen to them. The stories are recorded in Korean and in English. The earlier she starts the better" (Harkness, Super, and Mavridis, 2011, p. 84).

The "educating mother" is well represented in studies of Asian parenting through adolescence and even into college. For example, Korean mothers of preschool children reported spending most of their time in educational activities with their children, even though in principle they claimed that raising children to have good socioemotional qualities was their highest priority. Many of these mothers expressed anxiety about the conflict between their beliefs and practices but explained that it was necessary to help their children meet academic expectations for children entering kindergarten (Park & Kwon, 2009). A further explanation for Asian mothers' focus on their children's academic achievement is that, as the title of one report quotes, "My child is my report card" (Ng et al., 2014). As the authors suggest, the higher rate of controlling behavior that they found among Chinese mothers, in contrast to American mothers, may well be due to differences in the extent to which mothers' feelings of self-worth are contingent on their children's academic success, with Chinese mothers rating higher on this association.

A frequently noted aspect of the Asian "educating parent" style is the emphasis on criticism as a motivating force for both intellectual and moral development. Florrie Fei-Yin Ng, now a professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, for example, recounted a childhood memory of coming home with a score of 95 (out of 100) on a school assignment (Center for the Study of Culture Health and Human Development, 2021). Although 95 was in fact an excellent grade, her mother's response was to focus on the missing five points, that is, what went wrong, and how could she have done better? Professor Ng's own research aligns closely with her

personal experience. She and colleagues Eva Pomerantz and Shui-fong Lam, for example, note that Asian parents tend to emphasize failure and deemphasize success in their children's academic performance. Explanations of this cultural pattern include the traditional Confucian focus on self-improvement, a belief that effort (rather than innate ability) is the most powerful influence on success, and the economic importance of academic achievement in Chinese society (Ng et al., 2007).

Middle-class American mothers also exemplify the "educating mother" profile, but with a distinct focus on "stimulation" for growth rather than learning per se, and praise rather than criticism. In our research, American mothers of 2-month-old infants, like their Korean counterparts, talked about their babies in cognitive terms (Harkness et al., 2007). As one mother recounted:

> Somebody got us a video. It's Baby Einstein. It works a lot with colors and music and just stimulating, so we play that for him. Not every day, but almost every day. Just, there's a whole different range of things. One of them is colors. One is language. The other one is just, you know, shapes and . . . It's stimulating to him. We try to stimulate him in some way.
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> (Harkness et al. 2007, p. 18)

These US mothers' attention to their babies' cognitive development often seemed to refer to norms that they had learned about by reading books of advice for parents. One mother explained:

> I definitely try and do some introducing her to the toys and having her like, just in the past week and a half I brought out the little gym that goes above her so she can start batting at some rattles and she is starting to kind of figure out, but you know her hands are doing that . . . um, so yeah, making sure, I try and read up on you know what a 2-month-old should be doing, what a 3-month-old should be doing, so I can make sure that I do some activities that are helping her develop those skills and things that she needs to do . . . some stimulation where she can start focusing on things, but not overstimulation 'cause I can see that really, you know, makes her crazy.
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> (ibid., p. 19)

As these babies grow into early childhood, the American parents' focus on teaching extends to getting their child ready for kindergarten or even preschool. In a comparative study of parents and preschools in the United States, Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands, for example, almost 70% of the US parents said they thought that parents should teach their preschool child school-related skills. In contrast, parents in Spain, Italy, and the Netherlands overwhelmingly rejected this idea. As one Spanish mother explained, "I think that is the job of teachers who have studied for this [teaching]. The teachers don't know how to do my job, and I shouldn't

want to do theirs" (Harkness et al. 2020, p. 132). An Italian mother of a 4-year-old concurred, drawing a contrast with her perception of US ideas about parenting: "We teach him sometimes, but in a 'soft' way, and only if he asks for it. For example, I show him things, explain, but I do not insist, because children have their own maturation rhythms … yes, not like the Americans who want their children to grow up becoming little geniuses … I prefer to respect his developmental timing, he needs a time to play, because at primary school things get much more demanding" (ibid., p. 132). The Dutch parents were unanimous in their opposition to teaching their young children school-related skills, but they allowed for the possibility of doing educational activities with their children, as long as it was not (as one father put it), "with an eye to the future or his career." Another Dutch father commented on the approach to learning taken both at preschool and at home: "So, I don't think she has to learn anything. As long as she's doing things she enjoys … she's only 5" (ibid., p. 133).

The American parents' focus on the importance of supporting the child's self-esteem contrasts with not only the Asian parents but also the European parents in our research. We were prompted by the American parents' frequent reference to this idea to explore it with parents in our five European samples. Interestingly, we found that the term "self-esteem" itself was almost impossible to translate; the closest that our European colleagues could suggest was more like "self-confidence." A tabulation of themes in parent interviews across the six cultural samples showed a unique American emphasis on self-esteem, together with academic success and autonomy. These parents also talked about emotional closeness and a loving home, but less frequently than did all the European parents. The pairing of self-esteem with academic success in this analysis suggests why American parents seem to be so preoccupied with this theme. Namely, it is not easy to maintain a positive view of oneself in the highly competitive environment surrounding American children today. In this context, emotion regulation becomes a challenge of its own as parents attempt to maximize their child's development while keeping some sense of their own selves as beings worthy of praise or at least appreciation. The title of Jennifer Senior's (2014) popular book *All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenting* captures the essence of this challenge.

10.6 Culture Change and the New Challenges of Being a Good Parent

Traditional ethnographic portraits of faraway places that were the focus of anthropologists in the early years of the field often included a last chapter about culture change, implying a contrast with the ostensibly

stable social organization that had prevailed for generations. In reality, of course, cultures have always experienced change due to migrations, climate change, war, and population health events. Recent years, however, have brought more rapid change affecting families and communities. For example, Tsamaase et al. (2020) describe traditional child-rearing patterns in rural Botswana as involving the entire extended family and community, in which maternal grandmothers played a special role as overseers of care for both their daughters and their grandchildren. Recent economic changes, however, including the growth of the diamond mining sector, have opened new employment options for women as well as men. Many young women have migrated to cities for salaried jobs, far from their families of origin and thus deprived of the communal care that their children would have received. This demographic change has required newly isolated urban nuclear families to find paid help by women unrelated to their families, and often from different cultural backgrounds. Grandmothers, in the meantime, find themselves increasingly burdened with primary care of children whose parents are not available to participate.

As we write the final pages of this chapter, we have just received news of the death of a dearly remembered man of the community where we lived and did research in the 1970s, and where our first child was born. Arap Mitei was born in the 1920s and lived through multiple culture changes that affected him directly, from serving as a housekeeper to British settlers during the colonial era, to becoming a farmer of his own property after Independence in 1963. Upon our arrival, he drew from his earlier training to take care of us, our house, our garden. Over the years, Arap Mitei became a respected *boiyot*, an elder in the community with a wife and many children and grandchildren. He raised his sons to become successful farmers, a manager of a safari company, a driver for a non-governmental organization, and a security guard in a nearby town. His daughters are married and, like all mothers in Kokwet, farmers. In his last years, Arap Mitei suffered from dementia, but his family took loving and respectful care of him in his own home. His memory will be preserved through a new science lab for the local secondary school, a building originally constructed by the British settler who was given the land by the colonial government, and which became our home during our stay in the community before being changed into a school where none had been before, another bit of culture change in Arap Mitei's community.

Changes in European and other postindustrial societies, although perhaps less visible than the changes in rural Africa, also shift the challenges of being a good parent. All the fathers in our seven-culture study described being more emotionally close to their children than what they had experienced with their own fathers. Economic changes have altered

the predominance of the traditional single-earner family, and demographic changes include a wider variety of family forms and roles. A general although not universal trend is the increasing isolation of the nuclear family in both Western and non-Western settings. All of these entail changes in parental roles, with their accompanying demands on emotion regulation.

10.7 Culture and Emotion Regulation

The challenges of being a "good parent" are but one piece of the puzzle of culture (Harkness, 2023). Like a single jigsaw piece, they cannot be understood without some sense of the larger picture, for they necessarily reflect tradition and change, economics and psychology, and the experiences of individuals in families and community. Ideas about what makes a good parent are a core aspect of what it means to belong to a particular cultural place and time. Emotion regulation is a universal challenge of parenting (as well as successful functioning more generally), but its expression necessarily varies across cultures, even within the contemporary Western world, as captured by psychologist John Nash's account of passengers disembarking from ships at an Australian port:

> I had occasion twice in one week to meet passengers from ships at the ocean terminal in Sydney. One ship was the *Southern Cross*, from Southampton, and the other was the *Galileo Galilei* from Milan. In the one case the dockside was crowded with a throng of people, babies and grandparents, laughing, weeping, shouting. Men embraced and kissed; women shrieked and rushed into passionate greetings. There was tumultuous confusion. From the other ship the passengers passed sedately down the gang-plank, in orderly groups; there were waves of hands and smiles, polite handshakes, and impassive greetings such as "How nice to see you again."
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> (Nash, 1970, p. 428)

Based on the contrast between the Italian and British passengers in this scene, we might ask which group evidenced better emotion regulation. The answer, of course, is neither. Passengers in both groups were expressing their emotions in a culturally appropriate and thus well-regulated manner. In contrast to the process model of emotion regulation (Gross, 2015; see also Chapter 2), the passengers disembarking in Sydney may not have experienced any of the four stages of emotion regulation described by this model; rather, they arrived at the Sydney ocean terminal equipped with cultural models that directed their expression of emotion (and probably their inner experience of it) without any felt effort. Critically, they were met by other members of the same cultural places

who knew how to interpret their expressions, whether cries of joy or calm and pleasant greetings.

It is noteworthy that the contrasts observed by Nash were based on two cultural places that are rather similar in global perspective. Potthoff and colleagues (2016) have pointed to other differences in emotional display rules within the limited European context. In northern Europe, they found Germans and Dutch making less use of cognitive strategies such as rumination and other-blame, in regulating their emotional responses, compared to participants from Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Hungary. More widely, Matsumoto et al. (2008) have demonstrated large cross-national variation in emotional expressivity in general, as well as in the open display of specific emotions such as happiness. Developmental studies demonstrate that at least some of these "rules" are learned within the opening months of life (e.g. Lavelli et al., 2019).

Observations of parents and children in various cultural contexts illustrate variation in the challenges of parenting, in contrast to simpler formulations based on the purported value of children in relation to economic development. Nevertheless, cross-cultural studies suggest some basic universals in parents' ideas. In a recent survey of parents' definitions of the "ideal parent" in 37 countries, the authors found that the theme of being "loving" was "the core of ideal-parent beliefs" in all the Western "culture zones," whereas the African zone featured "responsibility" and "respect" and the Asian zone emphasized the themes of "family" plus "responsibility" (Lin et al., 2023). Although the cultural variability evident in these themes is evident, they all support a positive view of what it takes to be a good parent. Successfully meeting those challenges in their local manifestation is in turn the basis of parents' own sense of well-being and thus of their ability to regulate their own emotions and those of their children.

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