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AUTONOMY ORIENTATION IN THE SOCIALIZATION OF ESTONIAN CHILDREN¹

Tiia Tulviste

The purpose of this article is to examine the tendency to express and promote autonomy in the socialization of children in Estonia, a society with rapid ongoing social, political and economical changes. *Autonomy* has been regarded as being self-initiating in actions, feeling ownership of them, and expressing one's opinion, preferences and feelings. This contribution reviews the findings from our previous research on child-rearing practices and values in Estonia with focus on the promotion and support of children's autonomy. Conclusions about the extent of autonomy promotion in the socialization of children across cultures will be discussed along with consideration of the possible reasons for cultural variability.

CULTURAL VARIABILITY IN CHILDREN'S AUTONOMY SOCIALIZATION

Cross-cultural research on the socialization of children has shown that autonomy is a desired developmental outcome in families from Western industrialized cultures, such as American, German or Swedish families, rather than in those from non-Western cultures (Harwood, Handwerker, Schoelmerich, & Leyendecker, 2001). Two different cultural pathways of development have been identified (Greenfield, Keller, Fuligni, & Maynard, 2003): *socialization towards independence* with an emphasis on individualistic values connected with self-achievement, self-actualization, self-expression and autonomy; and *socialization toward interdependence* that places importance on group membership, interdependence, and conformity. When the cultural ideal is independence, individual inputs, rights, choices and opportunities are stressed, and social obligations are individually negotiated (Raeff, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2000), whereas with interdependence as the cultural ideal, decency (responsibility, honesty) and proper demeanor (politeness, respect for elders), conformity, and social obligations to others are stressed.

The values parents hold are changeable (Kuczynski, Marshall and Schell, 1997). Alwin (1988) found that since 1958 in the U.S. there has been a shift away from stressing the value of obedience towards a preference for autonomy. Recent studies have demonstrated that individualization in cultures that socialize for independence

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change toward being more individualistic with an emphasis on the capacity of the individual to stand as a self-sufficient person. Arnett (2001) found that adults preferred qualities in children linked to autonomy and self fulfillment and agentic in criteria (self-sufficiency, self-reliance) over traditional, other-oriented qualities of the past. A study of adults' self-representations showed that young and middle-aged adults used significantly more agency attributes, whereas older adults used relationship-oriented attributes (Diel, Owen, & Youngblade, 2004).

Changes in the same direction are also evident in different approaches to socialization. Instead of seeing children as passive objects of socialization, psychological theories have begun to perceive them as socializing agents (Kuczynski et al., 1997). Theorists propose that views on the socialization of children should change from treating children as objects of care and teaching toward treating them as equal partners; an important parental task is facilitating the child's independent exploration of ideas rather than demanding rigid conformity to social norms and values (see Grusec & Goodnow, 1994).

Empirical data support the notion that children are active participants in the socialization process. In modern socialization practices the bi- or multidirectional nature of the process is stressed (see Grusec & Kuczynski, 1997). Thus, children get things explained to them and negotiations are encouraged. The child as an active participant in the socialization process has been stressed by sociocultural theorists (Rogoff, 1990). According to this approach, socialization occurs through interaction with more competent and knowledgeable members of the culture. Modern theories stress the greater knowledge and expertise of children, especially of teenage children even more than the sociocultural approach.

AUTONOMY ORIENTATION IN RAPIDLY DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Less is known about parental practices and values in respect to the promotion of children's autonomy in rapidly developing countries. There seems to be a shift towards individualization in such countries. Lin & Fu (1990), for example, found in China that parents emphasize and encourage characteristics desirable for meeting the demands of rapidly changing societies such as achievement and independence. Wang and Tamis-Lemonda (2003) demonstrated the complexity and diversity of Taiwanese mothers' child-rearing values compared with those of American mothers, ascribing it to rapid social and political changes in Taiwan.

The current article observes parental practices and values in respect to the promotion of children's autonomy in Estonia—a country where rapid political, economical and cultural changes have been taking place since 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed. For fifty years, Estonia was isolated from countries that did not belong to the Soviet Union and with whom it historically had close economic and cultural bonds (such as Finland and Sweden). Estonian parents were, among other things, sheltered from modern ideas of more democratic and liberal child-rearing practices.

In our previous studies reviewed here, two types of data—mothers' answers to the *Child-Rearing Goals Questionnaire* (Tulviste, Mizera, De Geer, & Tryggvason, 2005) and video recorded real-life family interactions—were used. The present article examines results of these studies with the aim to determine how autonomy is expressed and promoted in Estonian families.

AUTONOMY ORIENTATION EXPRESSED IN PARENTAL GOALS

The results of a comparative research involving Estonian, Finnish and Swedish mothers of 4- to 6-year-old children (Tulviste et al., 2005) showed that in answers to the open-ended questions about what mothers like about their children, and what they would like them to be as grownups, the characteristics of children connected with self-maximization dominated across samples. At the same time, Estonian mothers listed characteristics related to conformity and academic success, while Swedish mothers mentioned characteristics related to self-maximization more often than the others. In the salience ratings of single items, child-rearing goals of Swedish and Finnish mothers were relatively homogeneous, as the majority of both groups rated “to believe in his/her abilities” as most important. The child-rearing goals of Estonian mothers were diverse – they did not have very clear preferences and were less focused on any specific goal. Such results seem to be typical of values held by parents from rapidly developing countries (Wang and Tamis-Lemonda, 2003), as compared to those from relatively stable welfare societies like Finland and Sweden.

AUTONOMY SOCIALIZATION OF CHILDREN OF DIFFERENT AGE

A recent study (Tulviste, unpublished material) addressing Estonian maternal values showed that contrary to expectation, mothers of toddlers and preschool children reported characteristics related to self-direction (independent, creative, making their own choices, success) and hedonism (happy, cheerful, positive) more frequently, and characteristics related to security (good health, neatness) and “hard work” less frequently than mothers of school-age children and adolescents.

An item-rating task yielded similar results. Items related to self-direction (independence, believing in his/her abilities, freedom of actions, creativity, choosing one’s goals, curiosity, success) received higher ratings, and traditional goals (politeness, respect for adults, obedience, responsibility) and “hard work” received lower scores from mothers of preschool-age children (2-6 yrs.) than from those of older (7-15 yrs. old) children. The salience ratings of single items showed that “independence” was the most popular choice among mothers of toddlers, but the third popular choice among the mothers of older children. The mothers of school-children clearly preferred the item “to be hard-working”. “To be trustworthy” was the second ranked value for the mothers of all age-groups. These age differences in maternal child-rearing goals seem to reflect parents’ attempt to assist their children in adapting to the high demands of Estonian schools.

AUTONOMY AND CONTROL IN THEIR REAL-LIFE FAMILY INTERACTIONS

Autonomy means to be self-initiating in one's actions and to feel ownership of these actions. Previous research has found Estonian mothers to be highly directive, foremost concerned with controlling children's attention and behavior, and favoring imperatives over other forms of regulatory speech. These characteristics have been found to hold in comparing mothers' interaction with 2-year-old children at meals and during puzzle solving in Estonia, Sweden and the U.S. (Junefelt & Tulviste, 1998), and in subsequent studies on Estonian mothers' interactions with 4-year-old and 6-year-old children in the same interactional contexts (Tulviste, 2001; Tulviste & Raudsepp, 1997). These findings received additional support in comparative studies of mother-adolescent interactions at family meals. More specifically, Estonian mothers living in Estonia also appeared to put considerably more effort into controlling their teenagers' behavior. The directive conversational style preferred by Estonian middle-class mothers distinguishes them not only from the US culture (Tulviste, 2000), but also from the mothers residing in neighboring countries (in Finland and Sweden), including Estonian-speaking mothers who live in Sweden (Tulviste, Mizera, & De Geer, 2004).

The degree to which the high directiveness of Estonian mothers influence the social development of the child, especially the development of his/her autonomy, is an intriguing question. How is strict parental control related to autonomy development? It is generally known that external control and regulation of toddlers' behavior is valuable as a source for self-regulation and self-control (Kochanska, Coy, & Murray, 2001). The results of our study supported this view: Estonian mothers' strategy of encouraging toddlers to be attentive and to concentrate on the ongoing activity by using a lot of imperatives made Estonian children more successful in solving the puzzle tasks than American children (Junefelt & Tulviste, 1998). Thus, detailed control of toddlers' behavior seems to be a good strategy to promote children's autonomy development, as it is needed for the development of self-regulation and self-control. However, the same strategy may not be the best for autonomy development for older children, especially for adolescents. Although, parental monitoring during adolescence is still valuable, effective socialization at this age relies on reasoning, suggestions, and negotiations, rather than on direct commands and orders (Collins, Gleason, & Sesma, 1997). Previous studies have shown that mothers' directiveness and frequency of imperatives decreases with children's age as children are increasingly able to perform autonomously and do not need as much maternal guidance in the form of behavioral directives. It also decreases in Estonia, but remains relatively high in comparison with the amount of directives received by teenagers in Finland, Sweden and the U.S. Swedish teenagers were found to differ from Estonian and Finnish teenagers by talking more (Tulviste, Mizera, De Geer, & Tryggvason, 2003), using more directives to control and regulate their parents' behavior (Tulviste, Mizera, & De Geer, 2004), and negotiating viewpoints with other family members (De Geer, Tulviste, Mizera, & Tryggvason, 2002). Thus, Estonian children's contribution to the family discussion is slightly less, reflecting the fact that Estonian adolescents were lesser conversational partners with their family members than Swedish teenagers. In addition, there were significantly less instances where teenagers expressed their autonomy by talking about their personal opinions,

needs, likes and dislikes in Estonian than in Swedish-Estonian or Swedish family conversations (Tulviste & De Geer, 2005).

CONCLUSION

Existing studies of child-rearing goals have found that Estonian mothers combine the transition toward individualistic values with an emphasis on values typical of socialization towards interdependence. They give priority to self-maximization over conformity, but stress the latter more than mothers from Finland and Sweden. Their views are somehow contradictory: on the one hand, they want to have “a polite, obedient, hard-working child who respects older people”, and on the other hand, they would like the child to be “an independent, creative person, making their own choices”. The finding that parents have both individualistic and conformity values suggests that a more liberal and democratic child rearing orientation has gained some popularity in Estonia. Yet these modern views are not reflected in real-life family interactions.

Observational studies found that the pattern of family discourse in Estonia is traditional. Estonian mothers support self-initiated actions and promote the feeling of ownership of their actions to a lesser extent than mothers from Finland, Sweden and the U.S. even when their children are in adolescence. In addition, Estonian teenagers showed little autonomous orientation. Based on observational data we can conclude that Estonian mothers do not support children’s autonomy to the same extent mothers from other countries do.

The gap between holding individualistic parental values and attitudes, and, yet, being traditional in child-rearing practices might be caused by the fact that the tempo of political, economical, and cultural changes has been different in various spheres and strata. In spite of many dramatic changes that have been taking place over these years in Estonia, there have not been any serious school reforms in the direction of democratization and liberalization. The fact that the Estonian schools are still known for their relative strictness and high demands seems to play a special role in determining the pattern of family socialization. Currently, in order to be successful in school the traditional norms and values (obedience, respect for adults, politeness, responsibility, and hard work) are needed. Since parents are helping their children to adapt to the traditional schools, school children seem to feel stronger socialization pressure than younger kids. This could also explain the finding that Estonian mothers of toddlers and preschool children value characteristics related to self-maximization and independence more highly than the mothers of school-age children and adolescents. However, it might be that Estonia parents want their children to be obedient at home and in school, but feel that once they are grown-ups, they will need qualities related to self-maximization.

Results of several studies showed the relations between values that parents hold for themselves and parental values for children. In a comparative study on maternal value preferences, Estonian mothers living in Estonia were found to differ from the Estonian, Finnish, and Swedish mothers living in Sweden and the Finnish mothers in Finland by a considerably lesser emphasis on the value of self-direction (Kants, & Tulviste, 2000). At the same time Estonian mothers valued characteristics connected with self-direction (e.g., independent, making their own choices, creative) highly when talking about their children (Tulviste, et al., 2005). It may be that the mothers feel that the values they hold do not apply with a rapidly changing society, and they may have changed some of their previous behaviors, values and attitudes to adapt to these changes. They might

wish that their children held values different from their own to be successful in a rapidly changing society. It is also possible that parents' ideas have changed because adolescents have socialized their parents to accept their own modern values. The findings of a study on value preferences of Estonia teenagers by Tulviste & Gutman (2003) showing that they score high on achievement and self-direction support this latter view.

Of course, it is also possible that strict control stems from the mothers' own upbringing in an authoritarian society, but the relatively low maternal control towards teenagers in real-life verbal interactions in Latvia—a country similar to Estonia in its Soviet past—did not support the view (Tulviste, 2004).

In sum, psychologists are theorizing about the importance of supporting autonomy in the socialization of children to adapt them to the demands of modern democratic societies changing generally in the direction of individualization. Changes in family socialization patterns towards democratization are also evident in transitional societies, but they differ from those of stable welfare societies in many respects. In the case of Estonia, parents have adopted the values that stress self-maximization in addition to the existing traditional ones, rather than replacing the value of conformity with a growing preference for autonomy. A reason for it seems to be the fact that school reforms into the same general direction—towards democratization and liberalization—are only beginning.

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