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Kathleen Crowley

*The College of Saint Rose*, crowleyk@strose.eduFollow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/iaccp\\_papers](https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/iaccp_papers)Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

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# Understanding Uzbek Child Rearing as a Mediating Factor in the Government's Reliance on Child Forced Labor During the Annual Cotton Harvest: A Pilot Project

**Kathleen Crowley**

The College of Saint Rose

(crowleyk@strose.edu)

## Abstract

In this pilot study, 11 international students studying in the Capital District region of upstate New York completed the *Parental Authority Questionnaire* (Senseless, Bornstein, Haynes, Rossi, and Venuti, 2012) and two also completed the *Parenting Style Questionnaire* (Robinson, Mandleeco, Olsen, & Hart, 1995) in an attempt to validate these instruments for diverse cultures. All participants contributed to focus group discussions of parenting attitudes and practices in their home countries to refine the focus group methodology. Two participants from Uzbekistan were interviewed individually to explore parental attitudes and practices that may relate to that country's ongoing reliance on forced child labor during the annual cotton harvest. Results indicated that the questionnaires did not appear to be valid for international participants. The focus groups, however, provided rich and detailed responses about cultural differences in parenting practices and attitudes, although better recording procedures were needed. Interviews of the two Uzbek nationals provided tentative confirmation of the Eriksonian (1950) assertion that economic and cultural imperatives drive (and are reciprocally shaped by) parenting practices and attitudes, as evidenced by changing Uzbek attitudes toward the use of child labor during the annual cotton harvest as modernization occurs.

## Introduction

For years, the U. S. Department of State has reported on the use of forced child labor during Uzbekistan's annual cotton harvest. The *2013 International Human Rights Report* (U.S. Department of State, 2013), however, noted a decrease in Uzbekistan's use of child labor during the harvest for the second year in a row, although forced labor of teens and adults persisted:

Government-compelled forced labor occurred during the cotton harvest, when authorities applied varying amounts of pressure on many governmental institutions, businesses, and educational institutions to organize college and lyceum students (15- to 18-year-old students completing the last three years of their secondary education).... The scope of such mobilizations differed significantly from region to region, especially regarding the 15-18 year old bracket. For the second year in a row, the government forbade the mobilization of children under 15 and effectively enforced this decree. (Section 7 b. paragraph 2)

Despite these improvements, forced child labor in Uzbekistan has been (and remains) an ongoing concern for many organizations in addition to the Department of State. For example, the European Union, the ILO, and countless human rights organizations (e.g., Human Rights Watch, The Cotton Campaign, and the International Labor



Rights Forum) have organized to protest and combat the reliance on child labor in Uzbekistan since the country's independence from the former Soviet Union in 1991. Bi- and multi-lateral talks, however, suggest that the Uzbek government, and even its people, often express puzzlement as to why the West frowns upon the use of forced child labor to bring in the annual cotton harvest. This disconnect between Uzbek and Western cultures leads to the question of why so many Uzbeks find the practice of child labor to be acceptable—and perhaps even desirable—in the treatment of children, teens, and young adults, while the West considers it immoral and deleterious to children.

In a country where approximately 40% of the population is under 18 (Baykagulova, 2009), child rearing practices obviously are key in shaping the future of Uzbekistan—economically, socially, culturally, and internationally. As such, it is important to shed light on how evolving Uzbek child-rearing practices inform domestic and international policies that may influence the Government of Uzbekistan to end its reliance on forced child labor. Thus, key research questions underpinning this pilot study are: 1) what are current attitudes toward children and parenting practices in Uzbekistan? 2) How do these existing cultural norms and child-rearing goals, beliefs, and practices (Hoffman, 1988) relate to and reflect changing economic conditions in the country? And 3) to what extent are Uzbek parenting practices shifting toward more authoritative styles (Baumrind, 1966; 1975; 1978) which might be resulting in less societal approval of child labor to harvest cotton?

Some recent UNICEF-sponsored educational innovations in the country (McBride, 2012; Baykagulova, 2009) suggest that a shift toward more authoritative parenting practices (Baumrind, 1966) may be underway in Uzbek society as the country develops economically. The idea that cultural norms regarding the rearing of children are instrumental in reaffirming, creating, and/or reflecting changes in the economic and political order of a society in reciprocal fashion is not new in psychology. Famed developmental psychoanalyst Erik Erikson (1950) made this point compellingly in his own cross-cultural research:

....child-training systems....persist because the cultural ethos continues to consider them “natural” and does not admit alternatives....[b]ut values do not persist unless they work economically, psychologically, and spiritually....child training, to remain consistent, must be embedded in a system of continued economic and cultural synthesis (p. 138).

Erikson's insights provide the overarching framework for this study: Changes in Uzbek child rearing practices should be occurring as the culture and economy modernize, and those changes should, in return, spur additional evolution in that society's economic and social norms. As such, it seems likely that modernization will gradually increase societal resistance to child labor during the cotton harvest.

Many psychologists have noted societies that value social order and stability over in-



dividual development (Keith, 2008; Hoffman, 1988) often employ child rearing practices that emphasize obedience over independent thinking (Rothbaum, Pott, Azuma, Miyake, & Weisz, 2000; Kim & Drolet, 2003). Individuals raised in such cultures have been shown to lack a sense of agency over their lives. Conversely, individuals raised in societies that emphasize autonomy express greater optimism about their abilities to control events and to change situations affecting their lives (Oettingen & Seligman, 1990).

Oettingen, Little, Lindenberger, and Balter (1994), who compared samples of East and West Berlin citizens three months prior to reunification of the city, found that in the authoritarian, Soviet-style, Eastern portion of the city "... parents wanted their children to be less autonomous, less self-reliant, less open-minded, and less critical"(p. 590) than those in West Germany. There is substantial evidence that such attributes are deemed desirable in societies that valorize stability and authority, in part, because they reduce the risk of political or economic change. By analogy, Uzbekistan (which has a highly centralized, authoritarian government, rooted in the cult of personality fostered by its President of 22+ years, Islam Karimov) has, in the past, been able to force the participation of children (and adults) during the annual cotton harvest without significant opposition from its citizens because (in part) obedience to authority is an ideal passed down from generation to generation. There are, of course, a number of coercive measures used by the government to ensure that there is adherence to its demands that everyone heads to the fields to harvest cotton each fall. But virtually all of the dozens of Uzbeks I have met state that they view participation in the harvest to be an acceptable duty, despite the fact that the children and teens often endure deplorable working conditions, time lost at school, and government retribution should quotas be unmet (U.S. Department of State, 2013).

Erikson's cultural views on parenting suggest that efforts designed to promote authoritative child-rearing practices via education, programming, and diplomacy should increase feelings of empowerment among children and young adults in Uzbekistan, and consequently should contribute to changing attitudes that may tacitly affirm, or at least accept as inevitable, the use of forced labor. Related efforts by international agencies are already underway. For example, Baykabulova (2009) discusses the importance of children's empowerment in regard to resistance to forced labor in her update on an Uzbek UNICEF initiative, the *Children's Parliament*. In her report, she notes that "It is important to make children aware of the differences between acceptable work and child labour that affects their health, education, and moral development. Understanding laws and rights will enable them to influence adults' current decisions and practices that impact their lives" (no pagination).

As a former Soviet Republic (Press, 2012), mainstream Uzbek cultural norms regarding children were strongly influenced by educational and parenting systems that emphasized that "the best behaviour was for children to sit quietly and just to follow the instruction" (McBride, 2012, no pagination). More than two decades after independence,



however, many Uzbeks appear to be increasingly interested in child-centered, authoritative approaches to parenting, so it is important to seize this opportunity to document any changes that may be underway. Thus, the major goal of this study was to adapt existing cross-cultural interview and focus group techniques (e.g., Durgel, van de Vijver, & Yagmurlu, 2012), the *Parenting Authority Questionnaire* (Senseless, Bornstein, Haynes, Rossi, and Venuti, 2012), and the *Parenting Style Questionnaire* (Robinson, Mandleeco, Olsen, & Hart, 1995) to determine their validity and utility for research with Uzbek nationals.

## Method

### Participants

Gaining access to participants from Uzbekistan proved to be a major challenge since many prospective participants I had initially identified were reluctant to participate in the study, often citing political concerns. To compensate, I began the pilot phase of this study by administering the questionnaires and interviewing 11 international students (10 women, 1 man) in the Capital District region of upstate New York to determine if the questionnaires and interview techniques were cross-culturally appropriate. Of the 11 students, one was from Saudi Arabia, two were from China, one from Mexico, two from Ghana, one from Honduras, one from Ukraine, one from Cote d'Ivoire, and two from Uzbekistan. All of the participants were between 20-30 years old. Eight were undergraduate students, two were enrolled in master's degree programs, and one was a doctoral student. Only two of the students are parents, and only one of them is the primary caretaker. One had a son, the other had two children, one boy and one girl.

### Procedures

After receiving a detailed description of the risks and benefits of participating in this study, participants completed informed consent forms and a brief demographic questionnaire, coded for anonymity. The demographic questionnaire asked for age, nationality, years of education, marital status, and status as a parent. It also included questions about family of origin—including number of siblings, total members of the family, and who their primary caretaker(s) had been during childhood. Demographic data were coded and stored separately from questionnaire and interview responses.

All participants then completed the *Parental Authority Questionnaire* (Senseless *et al.*, 2012), which contains 30 items rated on a five-point Likert-type scale (Agree/Disagree). This scale is intended to assess via retrospective reports the degree to which authoritarian, authoritative, or permissive parenting (using Baumrind's 1966 model) was used in the participant's home of origin. The two participants who are parents also completed the *Parenting Style Questionnaire* (Robinson *et al.*, 1995), an eight-point Likert-type (Never/Always) a 30 item instrument designed to identify whether the participant relies primarily on authoritative, authoritarian, or permissive parenting techniques (Baumrind, 1975).

In addition, all participants engaged in a semi-structured interview as a part of a focus-group discussion (in three separate groups) inspired by the methodology used by Parker, Halberstadt, Dunsmore, Townley, Thompson, and Beal (2012) in their cross-cultural qualitative analysis of parental beliefs about children's emotions. The purpose of conducting the focus-group sessions was to allow participants to compare, contrast, and share ideas about parenting. Since all of the participants were international students, fluent in English, they were able to exchange ideas easily—and they did so most readily when they were making comparisons to the parenting moments they had observed while in the United States. These exchanges provided rich sources of information revealing cultural differences and similarities in their expectations for children's development and behavior, their views on “proper parenting,” and ideas about gender differences in childhood and as parents (see Appendix A). As Parker *et al.* (2012) note:

The reliance on social interaction in the focus group actually produces the data... as participants are able to gain insight and make connections among their own thoughts through conversations with other participants. The comparisons that participants make among their experiences are a valuable source of insight into complex beliefs and behaviors.... (p. 30).

As a follow-up, however, the two participants from Uzbekistan (one male, one female) also were interviewed a second time (using the same questions) individually for approximately an hour each. It is their responses that are the focus of the pilot phase of the study reported here.

## Results

### Questionnaire Usefulness

It became evident very early in the first focus group session held that the Likert-type questionnaires were not useful instruments for understanding parenting behavior, attitudes, and values for any of the participants. Many of the statements (*e.g.*, “...children should have their way in the family as often as the caretakers do”) were confusing and had little meaning to most participants, especially those from Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, and Uzbekistan. In the focus groups, students from those countries were puzzled by the idea that a parent would even seek the opinion of the child on routine matters. Of the 11 participants in this pilot study, nine admitted to just randomly selecting numbers on *the Parental Authority Scale* for the majority of the questionnaire items. As such, it was clear the scales lacked even face validity for the participants.

### Focus Group Findings

The primary purpose of the focus groups at this phase of the research project was to determine their usefulness as a research tool for gathering information from members of different cultures about parenting practices and to refine techniques for moderating them effectively. As it turned out, the group discussions clearly became the best means of gathering information. All participants participated eagerly in each of the three sessions



that were held. In session one ( $n=5$ ), two participants from Ghana exchanged ideas with a participant from Ukraine, a participant from Cote D'Ivoire, and another from Honduras. In session two ( $n=3$ ), two participants from Uzbekistan and one from Mexico exchanged ideas. The last session ( $n=3$ ) included two participants from China and one from Saudi Arabia.

These sessions were also structured around the questions presented in Appendix C. The questions were very effective for eliciting very specific comments about parenting practices in each participant's home country. The discussions that followed thereafter were often wide-ranging and free flowing, making transcription challenging. It is clear that the participants were eager to compare beliefs and practices. While many differences were noted among the participants (especially in the timing of milestones such as weaning and toilet training and in girl-boy differences), the area of largest disagreement was on the degree of autonomy, independence, and permissiveness permitted children of all ages. The participants from Saudi Arabia, China, Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, and Uzbekistan all described Western children (especially those in the USA) as "disrespectful," "willful," or "disobedient." The participants from Honduras, Mexico, and Ukraine, conversely, felt it was important to "allow children choices" and that children in the USA were raised in ways that were quite similar to their own. It is interesting to note these responses reflected differences related to the degree of collectivism (Matsumoto & van de Vijver, 2010) that has been identified in these societies.

### **Interviews of Uzbek Participants**

Of the dozen Uzbek nationals I invited to participate in this pilot study, only two agreed to respond to questions—and both requested anonymity to prevent repercussions by officials at home. Each participant was again briefed on the nature of the study and they completed a second set of informed consent forms. They were told they could skip responding to any question that they did not care to answer. Neither declined to answer any question, but both indicated that they did not want their comments to be recorded via iPad as intended. The interviews occurred in a private office on two separate dates in April 2014. Both interviewees are graduate students studying at different schools in upstate New York. The female participant was a single 29 year old from a metropolitan center. She has spent two years in the United States. The male had spent almost five years in the USA. He has a wife and young son still living in Uzbekistan in a small city. He notes he hopes to enter politics in his home country when he returns.

Each interview lasted approximately one hour and covered all of the questions contained in Appendix C. Both participants are completely fluent in English and were eager to contrast Uzbek and American life, as long as complete confidentiality was assured. A summary of their responses to key interview questions is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

Summary of responses to semi-structured interview Uzbek participants

Questions	S10: Major city, 29 yrs. Female	S11: Small city, 28 yrs. Male
Early developmental milestones	Breastfeed until 24-30 months Co-sleeping for first year Toilet training ~ 9 months	Breastfeed until 24-30 months Co-sleeping for first year Toilet training ~ 24 months
Chores	3 yrs.—If rural, farm chores. In city, help with dishes set table for girls. Boys given fewer chores than girls. 6 yrs.—Sweeping, dishes, clean room. 11+ yrs.—Housework; if rural, picking cotton—“It is a part of the culture.”	3 yrs.—Play 6 yrs.—Girls help moms inside the house, boys do gardening and yard work. 11+ years—Cotton harvest, but this is in transition. The news misrepresents what happens, especially in the West. It will take time for the economy to change.
Desirable qualities for children	Girls: Obedient, polite, chaste, good grades, helpful around the house, devoted to parents. Girls should live at home until they marry. Men can live alone, but not women Boys: Stricter rules, higher expectations, more use of physical punishment for boys.	Devotion to parents most important. Children owe their parents everything. Adult children must care for their parents even before caring for their spouses and children. Strong allegiance to family essential. Girls should grow to be good mothers. Fathers care for their children, but not physically (e.g., no diaper changing.)
Contrast to USA Parenting	USA children are rude to adults and claim abuse if they are disciplined. Uzbek children are much better behaved and more obedient. Disrespecting parents or teachers is not tolerated.	Children in the USA are disobedient and do not care for their parents as they should. Adult children in America put their parents in a nursing home. That never happens in Uzbekistan.

## Discussion

Obviously, the responses of two individuals do not constitute a sufficient basis for drawing conclusions that can be generalized, but the results of this pilot project are nevertheless useful for shaping research going forward and to suggest some general support for hypotheses already established in the literature using cross-cultural studies in places other than Uzbekistan. First, it was clear that the use of the *Parental Authority Questionnaire* (Senseless *et al.*, 2012) and the *Parenting Style Questionnaire* (Robinson *et al.*, 1995) to assess parenting style and attitudes in these particular contexts did not work well. The participants expressed difficulty in understanding the questions in relation to



their cultures, although both affirmed that the translations of the scales into Uzbek that I provided them were accurate and grammatical. The issues were with the concepts, not the language, in each of their views.

The use of the focus groups, however, was quite effective for providing rich data as a result of the groups' interchanges in response to the semi-structured interview questions. Much of the useful information garnered came as a result of the comparisons and contrasts the participants made between parenting practices in their home cultures and those of the other cultures represented in the room. Contrasts to American parenting styles were particularly popular in each focus group, and participants made them with great enthusiasm. An important lesson learned, however, from this pilot phase is that there needs to be electronic recording of such sessions (if participants are willing to be recorded) to better capture the richness of the exchanges. If, however, recording is not acceded to, then multiple transcribers are needed to capture more of the sessions than was possible during the pilot phase when there was only one transcriber present.

On a theoretical level, the experiences of these two participants seem to affirm the general principles put forth by Erikson (1950) linking economic and cultural needs to parenting practices, and the more specific findings of Oettingen, Little, Lindenberg, and Balter (1994) regarding societies that emphasize stability and authority in order to reduce the risk of political or economic change. It seems likely that the collectivist (formerly Soviet) and Islamic traditions in Uzbekistan stem from, and in turn recreate, strong emphasis on obedience to parents and authority, concern for the extended family and community, accompanied by a lack of emphasis on individualism (especially American-style individualism), independence, and valorization of obedience to authority—parental and governmental. Thus, families still participate in arranging marriages and selecting careers for their children—factors revealed through comments made by each Uzbek participant as each marveled at the lack of consideration American children have for their parent's preferences. Similarly, both participants indicated that breastfeeding and co-sleeping continue to be practiced for relatively long periods (two to three years), which, of course, emphasizes the importance of close familial bonds for the young child. Rural vs. urban fractures may be emerging, however as noted in recent UNICEF projects (McBride, 2012), with the participant from the larger city noting that metropolitan citizens are increasingly eschewing child participation in the cotton harvest, whereas the participant from the smaller, more rural portion of the country noted that “change in the economy and harvest will take time.”

### **Future Research**

This pilot study provided vital information for preparing for a larger planned study focused specifically on Uzbek child rearing practices and parental attitudes. First, it is clear that Western questionnaires are not appropriate for this type of research. Focus



groups, however, based on the methods described by Parker, Halberstadt, Dunsmore, Townley, Thompson, and Beal (2012) appear to be ideal for gathering rich and detailed information about parenting practices and values, although better recording methods need to be put in place to fully document these sessions. Ideally, these focus groups will be supplemented by careful observations of direct parent-child interactions in Uzbekistan, supplemented with detailed parent interviews. To complete the full study, therefore, I am actively seeking an academic partner within Uzbekistan who can help facilitate both the formation of focus groups and opportunities to observe family interactions at Uzbek schools, family centers, and UNICEF sites. Plans are in place to seek IREX funding for the larger project and a visa for travel to Uzbekistan to conduct more extensive interviews and direct observations of Uzbek parent-child interactions. Clearly, this research will fill a gap in our understanding about this part of the world, and will contribute a new facet to the cross-cultural literature on parenting effects in a part of the world that is not often studied in developmental psychology.

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## **Appendix A**

### **SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Tell me how you cared for your infants—feeding, weaning, co-sleeping, other (specify) crawling/walking, toilet training? At what age did each of these events occur?
2. Describe a well-behaved girl at 3, 7, 11, and 16 years of age.
3. Describe a well-behaved boy at 3, 7, 11, and 16.
4. How should one discipline children? Teens?
5. What sort of chores do you expect children to do at ages 3, 7, 11, and 16?
6. When do young men and women typically move out of their parents' home—if ever?
7. What are the most important qualities you want your children to have when they grow-up?
8. What sort of occupations would you like your children to pursue as adults?
9. What are some of the biggest challenges you face as a parent?
10. What are the most important things for a good parent to do while raising their children in your home country?