Theory Application Paper: Babies

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When an infant is introduced to the world, they can hardly see, much less comprehend any of their surroundings. Babies spend most of their time sleeping, eating, and crying. Although unaware of it, most babies are similar in the fact that they have the same needs and are completely dependent on their caregiver. As babies grow they start walking, talking, and playing. Soon they are completely aware of their environment and able to function within it. As they develop through these processes, they become more and more independent with characterized personality traits that initiate with each individual. Through genetics and environment, babies transform and develop within their cultural system. They are highly influenced by their surroundings and manipulated to become a part of that system. The *Developmental Niche* theory introduced by Charles M. Super, analyzes how culture highly shapes the development of children and how they choose to live in their environment.

 Ponijao, a girl born in Opuwo, Namibia was in the documentary film *Babies* as her daily life was filmed from infancy to about fifteen months. She was born in a tiny village within the Himba tribe where it is sunny, dry, and deserted from developed areas. Although babies develop certain abilities at certain times, their transformation and skills are very universal. Babies eat, sleep, walk, talk, sit, crawl, and stand even if they are raised in different geographical and cultural settings. It is our human nature and genetics to develop the cognitive ability to interact with your physical body. Although these tasks are simple to adults, baby’s brains are wildly active as they are thinking about how to use their physical body and strengthen their muscles and motor skills.

Born into a family of nine children, Ponijao was born in her own village home. There are no near hospitals or civilization in Opuwo. The people of the village live in huts and own goats for a source of milk. There is not much vegetation except for some trees and shrubs along with little water to hydrate the land. The families of the tribe mostly stayed home to care for the animals and the children. Ponijao herself spent her infancy alongside her mother with her older brothers and sisters also at home. Throughout the documentary, the filming only showed the mothers with their babies and other children.

Although Ponijao was the youngest baby in the family when the movie was filmed, Ponijao had older siblings of about the same size as her. Both the mothers and children had exposed chests and abdomens with a small cloth to cover the groin. Ponijao had older siblings who were breast feeding alongside her. The mother would breast feed two children at once and they would all take turns. Even as Ponijao grew older, eating time was more on a first come, first serve basis. All the children would gather around a bowl of porridge and help themselves. Ponijao learns a lot of cultural norms through observing and spending time with her siblings. In this part of the country they only have access to certain foods, more specifically milk and porridge. A child growing up in this culture only knows these foods. They would not know or expect that there is more food out there and will very slowly be exposed to those resources as they grow older. Until then, as a baby she knows when it is feeding time and is able to express when she is hungry to her mother who is always beside her.

Geographically, Ponijao is in a place with little development a very small range of activities. However, that does not mean she is not developing, as a baby should. “This quality of the developmental niche, which we have termed ‘contemporary redundancy’, is important for the acquisition of skills and competencies as it offers multiple opportunities for learning the same thing, whether that ‘thing’ is reading, sibling caretaking, or the communication of emotions.” (Super & Harkness, 1999) Ponijao has been introduced to a routine of life. These skills and activities are helping her discover her roots and how she will evolve within her environment and redundant lifestyle. She does not have to be taught how to use toys or learn what is acceptable to do in public like some babies learn while growing up in more developed areas. Instead, she just explores what is around her alongside her mother. She spends the majority of her time in the dirt, plays with sticks, and puts rocks in her mouth. At one point in the movie she lets a goat lick her tongue multiple times. Her mother does not react negatively so she continues to let it happen. Her mother, although always by her side, lets her explore and be free from many rules or restrictions. She does not stop Ponijao from doing anything or punish her. In place of having a teacher to tell her about the outside world, she is learning about it from her own experience through her own consideration.

The framework of the Developmental Niche theory introduces the subsystems of physical and social settings, customs and practices, and the psychology of the caregivers. As for Ponijao in her social settings, she observes her family and how they act in the physical world. With limited education and a simple lifestyle within the tribe, life is very simple. Her siblings show her how to touch and use her hands. They all remain physically close together when playing or sitting together. Ponijao’s mother is often socializing with another woman as they get their housework done and the children play nearby.

With the fact that her mother does not have a lot to offer her, she does not force any beliefs, expectations, or forms of discipline on Ponijao. There is no strict schedule or structured forms of education. There are no toys, books, or classes that a baby might have in a place of civilization. However, instead of being manipulated with a busy lifestyle and forms of entertainment, she gets lots of one on one time with her mother although she is not too attached. This gives Ponijao the ability to feel safe to explore and enjoy the company of her mother. There are few times that she cries or feels neglected because she is always in the company of her family and community. Her older siblings constantly interact with her and show her the physical world through dance and play as they simply entertain each other through each other’s company.

From a cultural perspective and using the niche theory, development of a child is completely different and individualistic for each baby. Each human being is unique, and therefore each baby is unique within their cultural context. When you look at Ponijao and the very small sphere she lives in, there are not many outsider’s perspectives influencing her life. From infancy, she is recognizing the faces of her community, interacting with her family, and is used to a certain lifestyle. She does not know about the outside world apart from her village and has not been exposed to any other cultures or societies. Ponijao will grow up very close to her family and community and will have the main role as the provider for the family as she grows to become an adult. Someday she might have her own family and be expected to feed her children. These cultural norms will be passed on as she works within her environment.

To people of more developed cultures who have received an education might think of this culture as simple, narrow, and impoverished. Yes, they are poor but do not function in a society where money is the value. Their own cultural outlook on life has been influenced by the close quarters of their family and the food that they provide for their children. They take the resources they have and develop it in their own way. As for Ponijao, from an outsider’s perspective, her life looks visually simple. It does not seem like much to take in for somebody who has lived in a city or has traveled to multiple countries. A girl from that environment would have a very difficult time knowing how to adjust to another environment; especially given she has not left her home village. Her own cultural habits, mannerisms, communication, and skills would contrast with other cultural norms and might not translate in the same way. Geographically, Opuwo is very rural and given their unprogressive way of life has much simpler forms of transportation and are limited to resources. Given that fact, their cultural roots will similarly remain the same, as they will not be often exposed to other cultures. Even if Ponijao is exposed to other cultures, it will most likely be within the confines of her own culture and hometown. An outsiders perspective, although educated might find it difficult to grasp this concept after being academically presented to the world and would instead inflict their own cultural ways of communication and mannerisms.

Through infancy and early development one of the most important skills learned is communication. At infancy, Ponijao uses non-verbals and picks up on social cues from her siblings. The universal communication skill of crying for babies is the very start of your characteristics as an individual. Ponijao’s mother tends to her as any mother would do to comfort their baby.  As she gets older and is able to stand and walk on her own, and communicate to some level, she is developing her unique being within her family. If Ponijao had a younger sibling after her, she would be watching and taking care of them even as an infant as her siblings did for her.

Based on different environments and the way people were raised, the psychosocial component of how people operate seems evident to their own culture, however it does not make sense when you apply it to other cultures. “To members of the culture, they seem obvious and natural solutions to everyday problems, developmental requirements, or social needs; their cultural nature becomes evident only when viewed from an outsider’s perspective or when challenged in practice.” (Mayes & Lewis, 2012) It is easy to mistake other cultures and inflict personal and cultural bias on another culture. If Ponijao were to meet somebody from another culture, she would be introduced to new ideas and new resources. She might approach this using her own cultural norms as she learns about new ones.

Development of a child is an essential component of how the child slowly evolves into their adult self. After observing Ponijao, her whole life is surrounded by her own culture and not influenced by others. She is developing an expectation for daily norms and acceptable social cues. Through the developmental niche theory, culture highly influences babies and their progression of understanding of their culture. Although it seems simple from the beginning, these experiences are becoming rooted in their brain to start creating their own bias and understanding. Ponijao might forever be free to explore the outdoors and spend her life among her family members. To her, that is the only thing she knows. As she develops, she will become more influenced by her mother and family as she learns her own way of living within her community. She will grow to become just like the family that raised her and pass that on to her own children.

References

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