Culture And Emotional Development In Children: An Overview of Fulah Children's Emotional Development in Cameroon

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Abstract— This paper discusses the interplay of culture as an important of factor of emotional development of *Fulah* children as well as its regulation. Children develop emotionally, express and regulate emotion with cultural contexts. Cultural models of self and other relations are transmitted through the processes of socialization which in some literature are called parenting beliefs or practices. These beliefs and parenting practices vary across cultures and as such they are likely to affect emotional understanding, expression and regulation in different ways. Within the African context in general and Cameroon in particular, the socialization of children is a collective enterprise and varies across ethnic groups. Cameroon is a multi-ethnic country where almost two hundred and fifty ethnic groups live together. This paper discusses cross-cultural studies on the function of parental support, control, and sensitivity for emotional development and regulation of children in the Far north region of Cameroon. Cultural differences shed light on the importance of taking the cultural context into account when studying emotion in general and specifically its expression and regulation in young children. Cultural views on the developing child and subsequent relations with others are the basis for children's self and emotional development that could either facilitate or hamper emotional expression and regulation which in turn may affect children's socio-emotional adjustment in the respective culture.

Index Terms— children, culture, emotions, development, expression and regulation, Fulah.

I. INTRODUCTION

Emotional development during infancy and childhood is of utmost importance as it facilitates children's acquisition of autonomous aptitudes and become able to interact intelligently and independently with others. The study of social and emotional development has long been acknowledged as being complex. It is complex because social and emotional development is the byproduct of multiple 'levels' that determine its complexity working in a combination. Emotional development requires three things on the part of the developing child: experience, expression and comprehension. The ability to control emotions in difficult situations allows children to continue to learn, the ability to communicate one's own feelings to others increases the ability to meet one's needs and the ability to understand what others are feeling, allows children to change their behaviour in order to maintain harmonious relationships with others (Halberstadt, Denham & Dunsmore, 2001; Saarni,

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1999). Although all children must acquire certain emotional skills such as emotional experience, expression and regulation, the culture in which the child develops can determine how these skills are acquired and expressed. Culture also shapes experiences and influences children's development. This topic aims to show how child development and culture are connected, how these influences manifest themselves in a specific ethnic group: the *Fulah*. This study focuses on *Fulani* children of the Far North Region of Cameroon mainly the *Fulani* children of Kongola and Kodek in particular which are villages located in the eastern outskirts of the city of Maroua and the area in which the University of Maroua is located.

To begin with, in this paper we define social and emotional development as the developing ability of young children (ages 0–5) to "form close and secure adult and peer relationships; experience, regulate, and express emotions in socially and culturally appropriate ways; and explore the environment and learn. This should happen in the contexts of family, community, and culture" (Yates, Ostrosky, Cheatham, Fettig, Shaffer, & Santos, 2008). There is a myriad of social and emotional skills and characteristics that researchers consistently include in their developmental work. These include amongst others emotional expression and management, perspective taking, empathy, inhibitory control, self-confidence, and the ability to develop and support relationships with others and all have been given high attention in research work (Denham, 2006; Yoder, 2014). In this paper, the following emotional characteristics of children development: emotional expression and regulation will be examined within the context of the *Fulani* community of Kongola and Kodek which are two villages outside Maroua as mentioned earlier.

II. AN OVERVIEW OF CHILDREN SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Since the pioneering work of John Bowlby (1969) followed by that of Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) which started in the 1960s, research activities on children's socio-emotional development have drawn great interests amongst developmental researchers. Unfortunately these research activities have been carried out in developed nations (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010) which were mainly conducted by western scientists. Social and emotional experiences with parents and interactions with other children and adults early in life mark the beginning of

children's personal growth outcomes. Equally, they undergird other domains of development such as the cognitive aspect of development (Denham, 2006; Denham & Brown, 2010; Konold & Pianta, 2005). As children develop social and emotional skills, they gain the confidence and competence needed to build relationships, problem-solve, and cope with emotions, in other words, they become apt at understanding their own emotions and those of others (Parlakian, 2003). However, dispositional characteristics, such as how they react to challenging situations and their ability to regulate behavioral and emotional reactions could be built up by the culture in which they live. Socio-emotional development is likely to be affected by cultural contexts. Developmental theorists and researchers have acknowledged the important role of culture in children's social development in the early years (Hinde, 1987). In some cultures, there are specific rituals that young children and adolescents should undergo in order to reach some status in their community. According to Chen and French (2008), culture may promote or constrain the exhibition of specific aspects of socio-emotional functioning through facilitation or suppression processes. This aspect of emotional suppression is shown in *Fulani* culture where children are not supposed to display their emotions. This tendency is found in a *Fulani* concept of *Semteende* which will be explained later in greater detail in subsequent lines. Through socialization, children develop *Semteende* early in their life. Moreover, cultural norms and values may provide guidance for the interpretation and evaluation of social behaviors and thus impart meanings to the behaviours of children.

Culture has an impact on the development of emotion in infancy and subsequently influences the outcomes in young children. To begin with, we argue that parents' socialization activities are embedded within cultural values, and beliefs. Emotion socialization begins within the family setting and extends to outside environment while children spheres of activities extend to other environmental contexts such as the neighborhood, the school and the larger community. This developmental approach spouses Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). From the very early years of life, children participate in their socialization, as such the interactional influences between parents and children are reciprocal in nature. For this reason this paper sets out to examine the interactions between parents and children so as to understand emotion socialization of *Fulani* people and how it affects children's emotional development.

In each culture, the experience, expression and regulation of emotions of children and parents are part of the physical and social structures in which they live, as well as beliefs, values and practices of culture.

Cameroon houses almost two hundred and fifty ethnic groups each with its own cultural norms and beliefs (Goheen, 1992; Nsamenang, 1992), but this particular study focuses on one ethnic group called the *Fulah* tribe. Cultural considerations are receiving increasing attention in the field of developmental studies. Consequently, little is known about how children behave and perform in social situations in other societies like those in Africa. Our understanding of social behaviours, relationships and psychological adjustment is limited to European and American cultures and what is known from African societies is the result of research conducted again by non-African researchers.

III. GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF FULAH PEOPLE

The *Fulah* people also called *Fulani* or *Fulɓe (*singular *Pullo)* are approximately around twenty five (25) million people in total and they constitute one of the largest ethnic groups in the Sahel and West Africa *(*Levinson, 1996*)*. They are widely dispersed across the region *(*Juang, 2008*)*. People of this ethnic group, are bound together by the *Fula* language and most of them have Islamic religious affiliation with varied cultural traditions. They are known to be nomads but nowadays many of them have settled in towns and villages throughout Cameroon. A significant proportion of *Fulah* almost a third, or an estimated seven to eight million are pastoralists, making them the ethnic group with the largest nomadic pastoral community in the world (Appiah & Gates, 2010; Levinson, 1996). The majority of the *Fulah* ethnic group consisted of semi-sedentary people *(*Levinson, 1996*)* as well as sedentary settled farmers, artisans, merchants and nobility as many traditional rulers being of *Fulah origin* (DeCorse, 2001). *Fulah* people inhabit many countries, but they live mainly in West Africa and northern parts of Central Africa. They are also found in Chad, Sudan and regions near the Red Sea (Appiah & Gates, 2010*)*.

Geographically, the *Fulah* people are widely distributed, across the Sahel from the Atlantic coast to the Red Sea, particularly in West Africa. The countries where they are present include Mauritania, Ghana, Senegal, Guinea, the Gambia, Mali, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea Bissau, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Niger, Chad, Togo, South Sudan the Central African Republic, Liberia, and parts of Sudan and Egypt. In Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger the Fulah make up the largest ethnic group, and they are either a significant or a minority ethnic group in nearly all other countries they live in. Alongside, many also speak other languages of the countries they inhabit, making many Fulani bilingual or even trilingual in nature.

Moral code is central to the Fulani people's lifestyle which is a code of behaviour known as *pulaaku* or *Laawol Fulɓe* in Fulfulde, which literally means the "Fulani pathways" which are passed on by each generation as high moral values of the Fulbe, which enable them to maintain their identity across boundaries and changes of lifestyle. Essentially viewed as what makes a Fulani person, or "Fulaniness", *pulaaku* consists of four basic tenets which will be described below in subsequent paragraphs and constitute the foundations of children social and emotional development.

IV.   THE FULANI CULTURAL INFLUENCE ON CHILDREN SOCIO-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In *Fulani* cultures, children grow up with many social interaction partners. This is usually the case in extended families where children live in addition to their biological parents, with grandparents, uncles, cousins and aunties in majority of cases.

The Fulani ethnic group has a strong moral cultural value known as *"pulaaku"* a social capital that refers to the social relationships within a community that include trust, norms, and social networks (Green & Haines, 2011). *Pulaaku* is defined as a 'moral code of conduct' or a 'way of proper being' of Fulani ethnic group (Riesman, 1998). The concept of *pulaaku* is also understood as a set of behaviours that occurs in many areas of human relationships, through actions, behaviors or attitudes in which it is expected that a person shows decent behavior, good manner and restraint.

The dominant traits of Laawol Pulaaku or the Fulani way are *munyal, hakkiilo, semteende, sagata* and an intimate understanding of both the Fulfulde language and people (Burnham, 1996). These fulah concepts will be explained below as they represent the core foundations of emotional development of Fulah children.

Munyal is a cross between strength and courage in adversity and a stoic acceptance or endurance of the supposedly pre-ordained vicissitudes of life. It is often translated as patience. According to Fulah cultural tradition, *Munyal* has to be shown in the face of adversity and even if it is harmful to the individual. For instance *Hardo* Djaligué a patriarch in *Kongola Said* village told us that "a Fulah person despises humiliation and values a sense of dignity. In order to avoid humiliation, he is ready to undergo hardship and will resist it without showing any weakness and to him this is Munyal." He added: "our children too, are raised with the sense of *Munyal* so that they can face any life tribulations, they can show *ngornkaku* that is manhood." Her we can infer that Fulah children are raised up with the feeling of stoicism and emotions should not be expressed in public mostly emotions that are related to ill-feeling such as anger, sadness and the like.

Semteende (shame) is best described both as a lacking of restraint (*gacce/yaage*) and self-control in daily social interactions. It is most often translated as shame but it also connotes shyness. When someone acts shamefully, *Fulɓe* say "*o semti"* which means the person has done something of shameful nature, or alternatively, "*o walaa semteende"*, here it means the person has no shame. In other words, a *pullo* must know of the social constraints on behaviour and be able to avoid contravening them in all situations, especially in front of others. A true Fulani is in total control of his emotions and impulses. Developmentally a *Fulani* child is groomed not to express his or her emotions in public. How do parents help him/her develop *semteende*? It is done by helping children manage their emotions which involves creating and maintaining children's feelings of safety, calm and optimism. To achieve it, their needs have to be met by a caring adult which is equally similar to the stand of theoretical developmental psychology as stated through emotion reflections which according to Berg (1999) when an adult recognizes the emotions a child may be experiencing and reflects this back to the child using words to name the emotion, matching voice tone and body language. This can provide great emotional learning.

The word *hakkiilo* (*hakkille*), meaning intelligence, foresight and common sense, conveys a blending of prudence and shrewdness in livelihood management and face-to-face encounters. Fulah people in general and children in particular are expected to show a behaviour that is based on *hakkiilo*. During our observation, we realized that most often mothers scold children for not showing *hakkiilo*. While carrying out his/her chores be it fetching water or bringing a chair to a visitor, the child is not supposed to make a single mistake and he/she does so, he she is reminded for not having foresight or not being prudent. More often you can hear a mother reprimanding a child saying "a wala hakkiilo" which means that the child has no foresight. One can equate the concept of *hakkiilo* with emotional understanding as it requires shrewdness and being prudent in dealing with others especially with the elders. Right from childhood, children in Fulani culture are expected to be careful in dealing with others so as to avoid affecting others' feelings and when they do so, the behavior is qualified as shrewdness.

The last concept in *Fulani* culture that deals with development strategies is *tidinaande* which refers to courage or hard work. Children are expected to be courageous in the face of challenges and be involved heavily in whatever they do. It is equivalent to self-regulation which is acquired through sensitive and comforting care from warm, supportive and trusted adults helps children develop self-regulation. Children can also learn how to regulate their feelings by watching their parents and caretakers manage their own feelings and behaviours.

V.   IMPLICATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH

Cultural research helps us understand the role of social and cultural conditions in the development of social and emotional competence and problems. The analysis of the concepts used in children socialization in the *Fulani* culture have implications for understanding families and children within the *Fulani* community in Cameroon. Moreover, the information on the influence of culture on children's socio-emotional characteristics and interaction styles are helpful for educators mostly teachers who interact with these children on daily basis in an effort to transmit knowledge to his/her various groups of learners with different backgrounds.

As the world becomes more and more multicultural, educators and developmental researchers should consider norms, values that influence children development in general and that of emotions in particular within the family. Since research on this topic is first of its kind, collaborations between researchers, educators and parents should take into consideration cultures that can be used in the areas of education, and social services and other policy areas. In the meantime, parents need to recognize, support and develop children's abilities within their family and culture and prepare them emotionally to live in the community especially in the present situations where government and policy makers are striving to promote living together despite cultural

differences among Cameroonians. In addition, when children do not succeed as expected in child care or at school, the experience, expression and understanding of the emotions of a family or culture should be looked into. In particular, the meanings of behavior, that of children and caregivers to children, should be considered within the cultural context.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that cultural factors or the way of life of a given community can have profound effects in virtually all aspects of children's socio-emotional functioning during their socialization. The *Fulani* cultural norms and values are shown to affect children's socio-emotional functioning with respect to emotional expression and regulation. The impact of cultural context on socio-emotional development is likely to occur through parental socialization practices. Future research should explore the processes in which cross-cultural comparisons can be made so as to develop standard norms of socialization despite ethnic variations. Despite the increasing number of cross-cultural research, more multiculturalism is required in research efforts in Cameroon though racially homogeneous (African race) but ethnically heterogeneous. The collectivist / individualist aspects that help organize cultures need to be further examined.

It is necessary to pay attention to specific emotions and different abilities related to emotions within different cultures. For example, it is useful to know that *Guiziga* and *Mudang* cultures (main ethnic groups of the Far North region) do not treat anger exactly the same way it is treated in *Fulani* culture. For example shame as emotion, varies whether it is positively or negatively perceived among these two tribes. It is known that the *Fulani* culture considers the exuberant expression of positive or negative emotions as lack of shame (*Semteende*).

The emotional development of children, especially their ability to experience, the expression and understanding and regulation of emotions, must take into account the goals and values of family culture within which children grow up and the culture outside of the child's niche which may quite differ from his/her own culture. More standards and the values of culture are well known, the easier it is to reinforce the emotional characteristics that this culture wants to convey. Moreover, to understand the emotional development of children according to cultural view point allows one to accept differences without assessing which culture has the best emotional life.

Finally we can rightly say that the four concepts: *munyal, hakkiilo, semteende* and *tidinaande* used in this paper to show the influence of culture in shaping *Fulani* children's behaviour in general and emotional expression and regulation in particular, are not to be neglected as they play important role in children's emotional development. Further studies need to look into cross-cultural comparisons among various within regional and between regional cultural groups that constitute different Cameroonian communities.

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