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*Our Babies, Ourselves*. Meredith F. Small

In Meredith Smalls book *Our Babies, Ourselves*, she details how culture influences child rearing and how this can sometimes conflict with biological processes of both infants and mothers. She argues that culture begins to influence child rearing even before birth but that biology, despite cultural influences, has priority in shaping our development, at least until a certain point. This is where the argument becomes more complex. The timing of the influence of culture also depends on the culture in question. To exemplify this, she repeatedly uses the example of Western parenting styles, focusing specifically on American child rearing practices. Despite copious evidence suggesting nutritional, neurological, and even social benefits of breast feeding, American parents typically begin weaning children well under one year of age. Indeed, Western parents, as a result of the influence of religion, modernization, technology, and a host of other factors take steps to avoid dependency and emphasize independence from an early age. Newborn infants are, in Western societies, given their own room and sleep alone and in, ideally at least, complete silence. Small contrasts this view by stating and supporting with evidence that in most cultures around the world, and indeed throughout all of human history, infants sleep in close proximity to their mothers if not several adults.

Small employs the EEA, or the “Environmental Evolutionary Adaptedness” to explain the pervasive and unchangeable biological needs of infants and mothers. The EEA, as Small uses it, represents an ideal relationship and set of conditions existing between mother and infant that promote bonding and attachment in a positive feedback loop. The baby communicates with its mother and expects in return a corresponding action. As examples, Small explains that a smile or giggle from a baby suggests content and mumbles are an attempt to mimic the mothers’ speech. Conversely, a cry or fret is an indication to the mother that something is out of balance. A cry primarily indicates that the baby is tired, hungry, wet, uncomfortable, or, mostly importantly, in need of contact and affection. She compares various cultures to support this notion. For instance, she states that Japanese mothers foster dependent relationships with infants and thus, infants spend only about 8% of the day alone. She contrasts this statistic with the fact that American babies spend roughly 67% of the day alone and are often not in physical contact with either parent but are instead placed in a crib, stroller, or other carrying device so as to distance the baby from its caretakers.

Despite the incredibly different child rearing practices, certain core elements which are present in all cultures are considered essential to the human condition. Small also notes that babies require physical contact beyond that of simple feeding and changing of diapers in order to develop into socially appropriate human beings. The concept of the critical period arises more strongly in relation to the senses. For instance, vision must be present within the first 6 months of life in order for the baby to ever process the visual world. Similarly, if babies are not spoken to and consequentially do not learn and use language, they will never develop the ability to speak. That these abilities are lost after a critical period provides proof that certain key elements relating to the EEA must be incorporated in a timely fashion to assure successful physical development and socialization.

Understanding the core elements of child rearing that relate to the EEA is the first step in advancing Ethnopediatrics. Yet, Small also indicates that infants from Western societies do develop into normal, successfully social adults despite the comparative lack of affection and emphasis on independence. Though differences such as the precocious linguistic abilities of !Kung babies as a result of parents using formalized speech with infants clearly differentiate infants of various cultural backgrounds, Small notes that babies and children are extremely adaptable and enduring. In other words, she argues that the differences in child rearing may account for immediate and sometimes even enduring changes in cognition, physical development, and social behavior, but that babies and children compensate for these so-called differences later in life. Despite being separated from their mothers for physical examinations shortly after birth, Western babies do still form strong attachments to their mothers and still grow up to be social adults. Small essentially argues that there are core elements to the EEA which, if considered, would greatly aid in the child rearing process, particularly for Western societies. Culture, she argues, does not have to be at odds with the EEA, as it is also malleable. I agree with Small’s notion that parenting practices can be greatly improved by adhering more closely to the biological nature of the EEA, but that the EEA itself, except for the core elements (i.e., (physical contact, nutrition, language, sight) in the “critical window”, is also malleable.