

A CHILD'S JOURNEY: PREGNANCY TO ADULTHOOD IN FOUR COUNTRIES

by

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ABSTRACT

How a child is raised and the expectations put on them is dependent on their culture. Communities around the globe have different ideals, practices, ceremonies, beliefs, and more that impact their current and future generations (Keller, 2017). The current study examines and compares the culturally perceived aspects of childhood, from pregnancy to adulthood, of four different countries. The elements of childhood included in this research relate to different attitudes towards and aspects of childhood events (e.g., childbirth, education, puberty), childhood milestones, rites of passage, and reaching adulthood. The four focus countries include France, the United States of America, India, and Kenya. To obtain data, 4-5 participants from each country were interviewed via Zoom, in-person, or by email. Through these interviews, we (1) gain knowledge on how each country values children and childhood events, (2) step out of the expectations of the Western world to evaluate how children globally are raised, and (3) discover common themes amongst various cultures in child rearing.

Background

Culture

Culture is a complex, multi-level, and multi-layer concept (Dan, 2020). Every country, society, community, and even family has a distinct cultural environment that they foster and let lead their daily habits and beliefs. These cultures are individual and social constructs in which distinct and universal elements exist; all are learned, can affect, and interpret behavior, influence biology, and change over time (Spencer-Oatey, 2012). Children develop depending on their culture and environment; the values of a community ultimately impact how children are reared (Keller, 2017). Although each culture is unique, global communities do share common traits regarding childhood experiences and expectations. Exploring and understanding the similarities and differences in childhood experiences and expectations can help children in different communities receive the aid they need and help with future research on how children develop globally. For example, children raised in alloparenting communities may be more receptive to strangers than those from Western individual parenting societies (Keller, 2013). This fact can help nonprofits, educators, and government officials understand how the children in their communities may respond to their efforts and regulations. Understanding individual cultures is critical for understanding how children grow up in them.

Pregnancy

Pregnancy is an experience shared by women worldwide. However, the attitude towards and value of pregnancy varies by culture. In the Western world, pregnancy is seen as more of a medical condition in which women need extra care and attention; the health of an expectant mother and her unborn child is a top priority (Shapiro, 2018). In the United States, parents with access to health care make frequent medical appointments to check in on the child and mother.

The practices and attendance in antenatal care are evolving as scientific knowledge and medical policies change. For example, in France, attendance at prenatal appointments, hospital deliveries, and midwife consulting has significantly increased over the last two decades. However, practices with negative impacts on developing fetuses, such as smoking, continue to happen due to cultural norms (Blondel et al., 2017).

The habits that women form during pregnancy also vary by group and individual. In some communities, there are cultural beliefs that certain foods can make a woman ill, increase her health risks during labor, and harm the unborn child. These are known as food taboos, and expectant mothers do what they can to avoid them. In the West, attending Lamaze and pregnancy yoga classes is very popular. Although these practices are cultural, they are also accessible depending on the economic status of the expectant mother. Both methods are used to increase a mother's confidence and well-being and give her tools to use while in labor (Williams, 2018). Every woman has different approaches to her pregnancy journey depending on her culture, community, and lifestyle.

The celebration and admiration of pregnancy is another variable aspect of this phenomenon. In the United States, baby showers are a common practice. This party usually takes place during a woman's third trimester. Usually, a friend or family member hosts the party with games, food, gifts, and more surrounding the central theme of the coming child. In Hindu cultures, there are several ceremonies and rituals that a pregnant woman goes through. First, there are sixteen rituals or Samskarars that a person is to experience in their lifetime, and the first one is before their conception. This ritual is known as Garbhadhana, and a couple who wish to conceive must pray and offer chants before intercourse. Different gestational milestones signal more rituals. For example, at three months, there is a protection ritual, Punsavana, and at four

months, a ceremony where the expectant father shows his devotion and encouragement to his wife. During the seventh month, Simantonnyana takes place. This is a ceremony in which the couple's community offers prayers for the mental and physical health of the mother and baby. All these rituals are meant to support, care for, and celebrate the expectant mother (Williams, 2018). Every pregnancy experience is unique as well as the child's and parent's journey following birth.

Birth Process

Every person comes into this world one way or another. These birth processes can vary by region, country, tradition, family, and individual. When delivering a baby, there are many factors to consider: where to deliver the baby, who will deliver the baby, who else will be present, and what to do after the delivery (Withers et al., 2018). In the West, hospital births in which a professional doctor, the baby's father, and medications are present are common. Another common practice in the West is water births. This childbirth method allows mothers to be submerged in a tub of water while giving birth in a facility or at home. Around two thirds of birthing centers and hospitals contain birthing pools to cater to expectant mothers who wish to deliver using this method (Williams, 2018). Traditional childbirth in Asia can be vastly different.

In Asia, traditional beliefs and practices concerning pregnancy and childbirth tend to be shared intergenerationally amongst women, specifically from mothers to their daughters and daughters-in-law. In India, these ideas surrounding pregnancy and childbirth are steeped with superstitions, and women try their best to avoid complications and bad omens. In general, home births are more common in communities in Asia widely due to traditional customs and stigmas around hospital births. Many people believe that hospitals are only suitable for treating diseases and complications. This kind of environment can seem impersonal, and women feel they have less control over the birth process and decisions regarding their health as well as their child's.

Modern medicine is also a concern for many new mothers; medicinal herbs, often in teas, are used to heal, protect, and aid mothers in their postnatal symptoms instead. Many cultures regard childbirth and pregnancy as a valuable and natural rite of passage for women; therefore, medicalizing this process can prohibit this tradition from reaching its true meaning. However, adherence to these customs depends on a family's generation and economic and educational accomplishments. For example, there are several studies that show women in urban areas with husbands who are highly educated are less likely to practice traditional beliefs and focus on more modern methods (Withers et al., 2018). The values and environment surrounding a child's birth have significant impacts on the delivery process.

Childhood Milestones and Achievements

Every country is filled with various unique cultures and that have specific morals, ethics, standards, values, and more. These community expectations ultimately determine what they want to accomplish as a people and what they hope for future generations. Therefore, parents and other adults encourage the children in their community to reach milestones and achievements, both developmental and academic, that support their cultural beliefs; the older generation attempts to mold the younger. No two cultural groups are identical in what they expect from their children's overall development.

The infancy and childhood stages contain the most developmental changes (Berk, 2013). In general, there are four categories of developmental milestones that parents, doctors, and educators track: cognitive, physical, social, and emotional. These domains are interconnected and contain many similar aspects with each other. Every skill in these categories is held to different standards within societies, influencing how quickly and strongly their children develop it. In the Western world, many parents look forward to and encourage their children to regulate

their emotions at an early age (Martin et al., 2015). Similarly, Indian mothers and fathers express immense joy when their child becomes self-reliant and autonomous in their daily routines and habits (Tuli, 2012). These cognitive and socioemotional milestones in India and Western societies express the practiced value of independence in these nations; parents actively want their children to be self-reliant, so they encourage and celebrate this accomplishment.

Academic achievements are another prominent aspect of the childhood stage. The value of and access to education varies by region and community. In France, education is highly valued and easily accessible; the early childhood education system, both in school and childcare facilities, is held to extremely high standards by the Ministry of Education. Success in these programs is heavily celebrated (Neuman et al., 2010). In Africa, the esteem and respect given to education are similar to France; however, attending these programs is far more challenging. The main barriers that prohibit access to education include cost and the child's role in family sustenance in rural areas. Many families wish their children could attend school and recognize that knowledge is power, but external circumstances prevent them. When a child can go to school, it is a grand occasion in which the whole community gleams with pride. Unfortunately, it is common for children to drop out of school in these communities, but any level of education is appreciated (Moran & Stansbery, 2017). The levels of education completed vary around the globe, but its power and worth remain a common theme throughout nations.

Rites of Passage and Coming of Age

Transitions are a natural part of life; however, every culture has a unique way of marking these moments with one-of-a-kind traditions. These traditions are often called rites of passage: ceremonies and events that aid a person in advancing from one life stage to another (Karianjahi, 2015). The concept of rites of passage is ancient, but they often result from three roots:

psychological, sociological, and religious development (Ahovi & Moro, 2010). The most common time for a rite of passage is the transition from adolescence to adulthood or coming of age. For example, for the Kikuyu tribe in Kenya, the tradition of male and female circumcision plays an important role in a child's journey to maturity and responsibility. For boys, the ritual begins with their physical circumcision and is followed by a social separation from their family and village to spend time with elders who will teach them the ways of being a leader and a man. For girls, circumcision is a quick endeavor and there is no celebration, separation, or communal aspect to the event. This process tends to be more celebrated and significant for males than for the females (Ginsberg et al., 2014). In the West, coming of age events are becoming increasingly secular and less ceremonial, but they do exist. For example, in the United States, a person's twenty-first birthday is a marker for ultimate adulthood and responsibility. This is the age where many people are seen as more autonomous and begin providing for themselves. In general, birthdays are a sign of coming of age in many countries and communities (Williams, 2018). These practices begin the child's ascendance within their community and in developing identity.

Despite their long-established existence, rites of passage are susceptible to change due to social media and mobility, urbanization, modernization, government adaptations, and education. Because of technology, the world is shrinking, and more Western ideals have infiltrated foreign countries. This dispersal of principles and norms has led to the questioning of traditional practices in developing countries under human rights. For example, currently, female genital mutilation (FGM) is considered an inhumane act, and nations around the globe are fighting to eradicate it (Ginsberg et al., 2014). The politicization and criminalization of traditional rites of passage often forces communities to abandon their traditional ways or find new methods of celebrating milestones. However, Lotte Hughes claims that several non-profit organizations,

international donors, and others are now searching for Alternative Rites of Passage (ARP) in Kenya to support local communities. These are often in partnership with local churches and schools (2018). However, these changes are frequently met with resistance from older generations and strong proponents of customs based on the preservation of tradition and the sake of future generations (Ginsberg et al., 2014). When tradition meets modernity, the transmission of values and cultural identity through rites of passage can be lost. The risk of abandoning these cherished experiences and the lessons learned completely threatens the ancient ways of their communities. Children are the future of their people; the preparation for the next step of life is crucial to their success and the continuation of their community and its mores.

Puberty and Adolescence

Every human around the world experiences puberty. Scientifically speaking, puberty is a time of increased biological changes. These changes can include “shifts in the shape of the body, increases in gonadal hormones, emergence of cyclical patterns of gonadal and related hormonal systems in females, onset of fertility, and changes in brain architecture and the receptivity of neurons to a variety of chemicals” (Karianjahi, 2015). These physical changes are often the gateway into the adolescent experience: girls and boys are becoming men and women. This developmental stage begins with puberty and ends with the acquisition of adulthood or complete maturity. However, definitions of adolescence are continually changing (Ginsberg et al., 2014). In the Western world, puberty, self-exploration, self-consciousness, divergence and individuality, and problem behavior are all associated with adolescence (Johnson et al., 2011; Karianjahi, 2015). But in other parts of the world, adolescence signals adulthood and increased responsibility to the community (Karianjahi, 2015). Different expectations are held on teenagers depending on their culture and environment.

Although adolescence and puberty are experienced universally, the attitudes surrounding these events can diverge. For example, how puberty and reproductive health are received and discussed by a community varies greatly. In specific parts of India, menstruation is a taboo discussion topic; many myths revolve around it, leading older women to shy away from sharing their knowledge and experience with adolescence (Garg & Anand, 2015). But in other Hindu communities, specifically in the Tamil Nadu region, different ceremonies and feasts revolve around a girl's first menstruation. Once a girl starts her first period, she is encouraged to go into ritual seclusion and prioritize rest. At the end of this isolation, women in the community host a purification ritual called Puniya-Thanam and a communal feast called Manjal Neeratu Vizha to celebrate her coming of age. Even within the same country, discussions about and celebrations of puberty vary.

Child Marriage

Most countries, including Kenya, India, France, and the United States, agreed upon and have signed treaties protecting the human rights of children, specifically young girls, from early (child) marriage (Archambault, 2011; Equality Now, 2021; United Nations Treaty Collection, 2022). However, despite being illegal, child marriage is still present today. Archambault claims that “the term early marriage is powerfully constituted as it simultaneously signifies an inappropriate age to marry ... as well as an inappropriate time to marry, implying that one ought to be doing something else during this period of childhood.” Many people view child marriage as an outdated tradition resulting from power-hungry patriarchies; however, deeper roots exist behind this phenomenon. Commonly, uneducated young girls are married off to give them a chance of survival. Families who experience poverty and economic crisis, primarily those who practice agricultural and pastoral livelihoods, tend to want the best for their children, even if it

means giving them away to someone else (Archambault, 2011). Other catalysts for marrying off a child include poverty, social insecurity, ancestral property rights issues, and single-parent households (Lal, 2015). Young children and teenagers do not have a say in this arrangement.

There are several negative impacts of child marriage. First, child brides can be forced to end their education in pursuit of developing a family. Second, if a child falls pregnant before she is physically prepared, serious health complications can arise for both the mother and baby. Third, unstable family planning and family management are typical in families with a child-wife and older husband. The wife herself is only a child now raising other children. Other issues include vulnerability to disease, verbal, and physical abuse, and more (Lal, 2015). There is no simple solution to officially eradicating this issue, but many are trying to rescue children who are not developmentally ready for this stage of life.

Research Question

The purpose of this study is to describe and compare the culturally perceived aspects of childhood, from pregnancy to adulthood, of four different countries. The elements of childhood included in this research relate to different attitudes towards childhood events, childhood milestones, rites of passage, and parental involvement. The four focus countries include France, the United States of America, India, and Kenya. The objective of the research is to explore how childhood experiences vary in different communities and uncover common themes that appear in this period of life through thematic analysis. Through interviews, the study (1) gains knowledge on how each country values children and childhood events, (2) steps out of the expectations of the Western world to evaluate how children globally are raised, and (3) discovers common themes amongst various cultures in child rearing.

Methods

Participants

The participants in this study came from various regions in four countries: the United States of America, France, Kenya, and India. Five participants with a mean age of 34.6 years represented the United States. Four participants lived in France and had a mean age of 31.5 years. Four participants with a mean age of 40 years were from Kenya. Four participants represented India with a mean age of 31.8 years. In total there were seventeen participants with a mean age of 34.5 years. Six of the participants were male and eleven were female. To contribute participants had to be 18 years of age or older, fluent in English, and both born and currently living in the country they were representing. All participants were recruited through email and completed a participant consent form. The consent form collected information including name, age, country of origin, email address, consent to be interviewed, consent to be recorded, consent to be contacted in the future, and preference of interview method: e-mail, in person, or Zoom.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data was collected through a 10-question interview either in-person or electronically via email or Zoom. The questions covered topics that ranged from pregnancy to the commencement of adulthood. The questions asked about birth processes, childhood milestones, puberty, rites of passage, and marriage. Participants who chose to complete the interview via email were given the research questions and asked to return them in two weeks' time. Those who chose an in-person or Zoom meeting were interviewed by a researcher at the time of their choosing. The in-person and Zoom meetings were recorded and then transcribed by research assistants. After the data was collected, recorded, and transcribed, the information was analyzed qualitatively through ATLAS.ti, a software that allows written documents to be highlighted,

coded, and grouped according to themes such as gender/sex, positive/negative emotional responses, religion, and current/past trend. These codes were chosen depending on the event and circumstances of each interview question and the deeper roots of those topics. After conducting one round of thematic analysis, a second coder analyzed and coded the data as a reliability measure. The two coders came to consensus on the analysis after extracting similar themes.

Results

Pregnancy

Concerning the subject of pregnancy, four major themes emerged in this study. First, pregnancy is celebrated and discussed everywhere but to different extremes. In Kenya and France, pregnancy is a private family matter and discussions about this event remain in these ingroups. Participants in France reported that it is unusual for the expectant parents to share details outside their close relatives. However, social media is changing this idea and encouraging parents to be more open with their personal lives. In Kenya, participants claimed that pregnancy should not be openly discussed as it can bring harm to the expectant mother and her child. One Kenyan participant reported the following: “[pregnancy] should not be publicly admitted since it is believed that will bring a bad omen. In the past, cases of new born [*sic*] mortality was so high that there were a lot of superstitions around it among them exposing the pregnancy to the public.” For France and Kenya, pregnancy is to be celebrated privately.

In India and the United States however, pregnancy is meant to be celebrated publicly and there are certain rituals conducted during this time. Participants from India reported that certain pregnancy milestones are worthy of celebration. For example, one participant from India claimed, “there is a ceremony called ‘SHADH’ it is a remarkable [*sic*] bengali [*sic*] ceremony which is performed when a pregnant women [*sic*] has completed 7th Months of Pregnancy [*sic*].”

During this ceremony, an expectant mother is surrounded by friends and family while she eats all her favorite foods. The United States celebrates publicly *sic*] women do pregnancy photos, cast of their tummy's [*sic*], blessing ceremonies, naming ceremonies, baby showers, gender reveal parties, do yoga, birthing classes etc." In addition, this country uses social media to announce this part of life frequently. Celebration is an essential part of pregnancy for these nations.

The second theme this study found is that the situation surrounding pregnancy changes the mood and reception of the pregnancy in two of the focus countries. In the United States, participants reported that often teen and single women who are pregnant are not well received by the community. In Kenya, couples who become pregnant before marriage are looked down upon. The previous celebratory feelings about pregnancy are negated in these scenarios.

Third, the type of maternal care reported varies in these countries. Participants from the United States mentioned more medicinal care than the other focus countries. Pregnant women in this country often have multiple medical appointments leading up to the birth of the baby. Doctors are very involved during this season. In France, maternal care is often provided by the government. One participant claimed the following: "we have rights linked to pregnancy... and [the rights] are pretty well protected in France...you have rights, you have maternally [*sic*] leave so you're paid, you have insurance that covers a lot of things, so I would say that France is...giving you the rights to have a safe and pretty stressfree [*sic*] pregnancy." In contrast, Indian and Kenyan participants revealed more daily care from friends and family occurs during pregnancy. A participant from India remarked that a pregnant woman "is celebrated as a God equally during that period. Everybody pampers her, gives her what she needs so she keeps the baby happy and, we give the lady some positive environment, like listening to good music, soothing music during that period." Similarly, Kenyan participants reported the fragility of an

expecting mother and how the women she is close to aid with different daily life stressors during this time. Every pregnant woman is cared for differently depending on the country they reside in.

Lastly, this research found the social importance of pregnancy differs between nations. In India and Kenya, participants shared that pregnancy is heavily expected for women. One participant in Kenya shared that “all woman who get married are expected to get pregnant within a year or two as a true sign to be accepted in that family. They believe they are going to raise their own blood for the future generation.” According to other participants, women in India are also anticipated to bear a child shortly after marriage. However, evidence from the United States interviews suggest that women are now able to have careers and other ambitions, so raising a family can be secondary. Pregnancy is only the beginning of the long journey of childhood.

Birth Process

Childbirth and the birth process are an infant's first experiences; there are various ways this event could transpire. The results of this study showed that hospital births are common globally. In the United States, India, and France, giving birth in a hospital was the most common occurrence. A French participant stated, “The birth process is pretty much globally [*sic*] done at the hospital or a maternity. It is pretty rare to have a home birth, or an alternative birth process.” In fact, if expectant parents wish to give birth in a different location, they must ask for permission from a doctor. In Kenya, hospital births are becoming more frequent. One Kenyan participant reported the following: “In the past births used to be done at homes with the help of traditional birth attendants, parents and friends... Today most children are born at the hospitals and less at home.”

According to this study, the individuals present at birth also vary across countries. In India, the United States, and France, participants said that doctors and nurses are heavily

involved in the birth process. The baby's father can also be present during the birth of their child in these nations. However, in Kenya, only women are allowed in the delivery room. The results showed that women give birth surrounded by female family members and midwives. In fact, Kenyan participants reported "men are never present at birth."

Celebration of childbirth also differs between cultures and communities. In France and Kenya, participants claimed that celebration is postponed until the mother heals and/or the baby reaches certain milestones. French participants in particular emphasized caring for the mother post-birth and giving her time to physically heal. Kenya allows gifts to be delivered after a certain number of weeks after the delivery. Alternatively, India and the United States celebrates the birth process immediately. For example, participants in the States allow family members to visit the mother and baby directly after birth. Similarly, India lets family and friends visit the new family member once they return home from the hospital. There are many factors that impact what occurs in the birth process of every country.

Child Milestones

The milestones that countries admire are unique to their cultural expectations. Milestones are physical, cognitive, emotional, and social accomplishments a human can achieve. Two major themes were extracted from the results of this study. First, talking was found to be a milestone in all focus places, but the type of first word itself varies. In Kenya, the United States, and France any first word is greatly celebrated. A French participant claimed, "the first word [that a baby says], whatever it is, the first word you can understand that comes out is a big milestone." However, in southern India, parents prefer their child's first word to be "athai": "In our culture, we keep a lot of importance for the child to call its aunt first. It's called in Tamil; we speak

Tamil in India. So, aunt is called athai.” This physical and cognitive milestone, while it seems simple, can be very diverse.

The second theme is that different individual achievements were reported in all countries. The United States participants listed lots of “firsts” throughout the childhood years. For example, one participant claimed, “common childhood milestones begin shortly after a baby is born as watchful parents anticipate each new step/milestone their baby makes (i.e., first smile, first time to sleep through night, rolling over, crawling, first tooth, walking, talking, eating, potty training, etc.)” Similarly, France emphasized infants’ physical accomplishments as crucial milestones. Indian participants reported a child’s happiness as being important. In addition, Kenya valued a child’s responsibility and resilience as a milestone. While Kenyan participants did report several individual accomplishments as milestones, they also mentioned communal milestones as well. More specifically, naming ceremonies and initiation rites into adulthood were considered worthy of celebration. There are a wide variety of milestones that a child can achieve.

Academic and Vocational Milestones

Childhood milestones can also be academic and vocational. This research project found three themes in this category. The first is that education was highly valued in all the focus countries. In the United States, moving from one level of education to the next was reported as worthy of celebration. In France, a participant reported the following: “We’re not pushed to work, we’re more encouraged to study...the government supports the students a lot with financial aid.” Kenyan participants expressed that education is perceived as a gateway to a new life chapter. Every country also believed that a college and university degree was important for children to have. Specifically, India mentioned that this stage of life is often the first time a child leaves their parents and embark on their own journey. Education is a shared value.

The second theme is that the United States participants focused on more individual accomplishments within academics and vocations than any other country. For example, one participant shared that “preschool, reading, writing, using lockers, changing clothes for gym class...learning to play an instrument for band, foreign language, getting good grades, driving, graduation from high school, [and] getting accepted into a good university” were all milestones that adults look forward to with children. In addition, completing every level and grade of the education system was noted. Other participants also reported getting a first job, receiving a job promotion, and more were worthy of attention. Lastly, in Kenya, India, and France, different values were assigned to different vocations. In each of these countries, careers in the science and medical fields were more esteemed compared to other vocations such as teaching. While all milestones are generally noted and celebrated, some are considered more valuable than others.

Biggest Achievement

The biggest achievement a child can have depends on the culture and society they grow up in, but there are similarities across cultures. Every country reported an individual’s personal accomplishment as the biggest achievement a child can have. In India, participants reported a child’s ability to navigate the world around them as the greatest accomplishment during the childhood years. Participants from France mentioned a child’s happiness alongside completion of skills such as getting a driver’s license. Similarly, one United States participant said, “I would say the biggest achievement a child can have before they are an adult would probably be receiving some sort of recognition for something they’ve done, like getting a big award for something in academics in front of your whole school or being recognized as a star on a sports team or something like that.” Kenyan participants reported an individual’s independence alongside how an individual impacts the community as a big accomplishment: “It is the joy of

any parent to see children grow up to be independent and productive in the community.” These behavioral accomplishments determine when a child is celebrated and appreciated.

Practicing cultural morals or receiving respect as a form of an accomplishment was prevalent in most of the focus countries. A French participant reported “it is ... important to inculcate fundamental values to [a child] such as respect, loyalty and honesty.” Participants in Kenya similarly shared that a child should be taught morals by their community and families. Representatives of the United States also shared that earning their own family’s respect was valued. Each nation regarded morals and values as important.

Independence and education were also considered one of the biggest achievements a child could have in every focus country. The concept of a child being independent, whether independence is financial or physically living on one’s own, was unanimous across cultures. One Indian participant reported they “have always wanted [their] children to be independent so [they] would prefer them to be wise, independent, and smart enough to handle the current scenario because it is ever changing nowadays.” The United States and France agreed that when children become fully supportive of themselves, parents greatly appreciate it. Kenyan participants believed that independence was also reflective of a child’s resilience and willingness to be responsible for their actions, which is worthy of praise. These children no longer need intense supervision, they can blossom on their own.

Educational success was also a marker of growth in these nations. In France, children receiving their academic diplomas for middle school, the brevet, and high school, the baccalaureate, is paramount and tends to be universal. However, in countries such as Kenya and India, education was reported as not easily accessible and therefore may have more significance and weight for underprivileged communities. For example, Indian participants mentioned that

education is even more valuable for those who come from poorer backgrounds. Similarly, participants from Kenya claimed that finishing early education is highly important and that continued education is beneficial as well. Big accomplishments are often the gateway to an individual's personal and communal development.

Rites of Passage

There are numerous rites of passage an individual can pass through as they grow and develop. Rites of passage are events or ceremonies that signal and celebrate a transition from one life stage to another (i.e., adolescence to adulthood). This study found two types of rites of passage, individual accomplishments and ceremonies. In France and the United States, participants reported rites of passage that were individual accomplishments. For example, events in the United States included “things like getting your license at 16, going to prom, graduating high school, buying your first lottery ticket on your 18th birthday, moving away to college, going out for a big night on your 21st birthday, losing your virginity, a marriage proposal, getting married, [and] having kids.” French participants mentioned personal achievements such as getting your first vehicle, purchasing your first fashion item, and completing higher education as rites of passage.

In Kenya, India, and the United States, ceremonies tend to be rites of passage. Participants in Kenya explained that boys go through circumcision at the age of twelve compared to girls who are ushered into adulthood through special teachings. In addition, adolescents may experience tattooing or scarring rituals, the removal of teeth, and ceremonies based on age. Indian participants also mentioned a special ceremony for boys. One participant reported “for the boys ... once [they are] at the age of 7, or 9, or 11, [they] conduct a tri ceremony. So basically [they] do a [*sic*] three threads joined together, [they make] knots. And then he has to wear it criss

cross on his body.” These threads then serve as a reminder for the boy to conduct his religious practices on a regular basis and to behave responsibly. In the United States, religious events such as bar mitzvahs and Catholic Confirmations are also considered important rituals. These ceremonies and events help usher individuals into their new life stages. As people grow and evolve, so do their values and practices.

Changing Rites of Passage

The world is ever changing; therefore, rites of passage change alongside it. Education is one of the main catalysts for change that appeared in this study. In France, academic documents and achievements have changed over time altering the weight of different educational levels and accomplishments. Participants from the United States reported the importance of education has increased in the last five decades changing individuals’ goals. In India, participants claimed that children are more frequently going abroad for education therefore missing ceremonial rites of passage. Kenyan participants also claimed education has affected their society.

Modernization and Westernization are also responsible for transitioning rites of passage in Kenya, the United States, and India. One Kenyan participant stated the following: “Almost all [rites of passage] have faded because of education, Christianity, advanced technology and others are being prohibited by the government.” For example, female genital mutilation (FGM) used to be a common rite of passage for females, but this practice was made illegal by the government, forcing young girls to find alternative methods of entering adulthood. In the United States, one participant claimed “in World War II times or World War I times like the big rite of passage was like being 18 and being drafted in the army or being able to join the army....Or if you were if you were like a woman, they could like you were eligible to be married or you were like you would get your first job.” In India, participants reported that technology is more heavily involved

in ceremonies and rituals than before. While a multitude of changes have already occurred, it is possible that more are to come as time passes on.

Puberty

The changes that adolescents go through in puberty are received and perceived differently across the world. The participants in the countries of France, the United States, and India reported more on the physical changes an individual goes through. For example, one French participant stated the following when questioned about puberty: “for men, usually you’re made of when your voice starts to change, and that’s the way its mentioned. You’re starting to get a stache [*sic*], facial hair, and so it’s kinda [*sic*] like people teasing you about it and then they move on.” Female body change such as developing breasts and menstruation were mentioned in this country as well. The United States reported the same bodily changes as France did. Indian participants also mentioned the physical changes a girl goes through, but they emphasized the importance of caring for a girl during this hard time. One participant mentioned that girls who have their first period need to prioritize rest, and family members need to rally around the individual in order to help her remain comfortable and nurtured.

While the other three of the countries focused on the physical aspects of puberty, Kenyan participants mentioned how an individual’s role in society changes during this period. Members of this community believed that once a child’s body starts changing, they are ready to be ushered into adulthood and the responsibilities that lie within this identity. One participant claimed “Initiation rites done at onset of puberty 12-13 years, are natural and necessary part of the community. These rights are critical to individual and community development. This marks the passing from one phase to the next. This has to do with transformation and has been a central

component of tradition african [*sic*] culture since time immemorial.” Puberty is not simply a phase for Kenya, it is the pathway to a great journey.

This research found that different emotions are associated with puberty around the globe. According to participants, India and Kenya experience more positive emotions when thinking about puberty and they celebrate this season frequently. In their interviews, words such as “excitement” and “sacred” were used. However, the Western countries of France and the United States associated more negative emotions with puberty and mentioned little to no celebration. In the United States, participants mentioned the themes of “awkwardness” and “humor” when discussing this topic. In addition, France verbalized the ideas of “shame” and “rebellion.” This physical transition out of childhood can be experienced in many ways.

Adulthood

The last stage of childhood is entering early adulthood and there are copious avenues to this new stage of life. Every focus country’s legal age of adulthood is eighteen years old. However, participants reported that adulthood depended more on maturity, responsibility, and behavior more than age. According to participants in the United States, children entered this life stage after completing all physical changes post puberty. In India, adulthood depended on “the behavior, and gratitude and the character of the person in the family.” Finally, French participants reported that a girl or woman is an adult when she is mature in every “domain” of life. There is not one path to adulthood around the globe.

In Kenya, participants shared more gender specific pathways to adulthood as well as rituals. In order for girls to become women, they need to be able to take care of younger children, complete household chores unsupervised, show great hospitality, give birth or more. For boys, getting circumcised, caring for cattle, and completing farm work are markers for becoming a

man. Adulthood rites are also performed for both genders as they mature and grow into productive individuals.

Every country included in this research also considered independence as a factor of entering adulthood. However, the level and type of independence varied between countries. Indian participants reported taking on more responsibilities as a marker of individuality. Kenyan participants claimed children who make their own decisions are closer to being adults. Participants from France also described a person being able to take care of themselves as important for this life marker. Finally, one participant in the United States said, “Typically, the child should move out of their parent’s home, be attending college or starting a career. They should be living independently of their parents physically, financially, and emotionally able to care for themselves.” In all these countries, adulthood seems to be the end of dependence and childlike behavior.

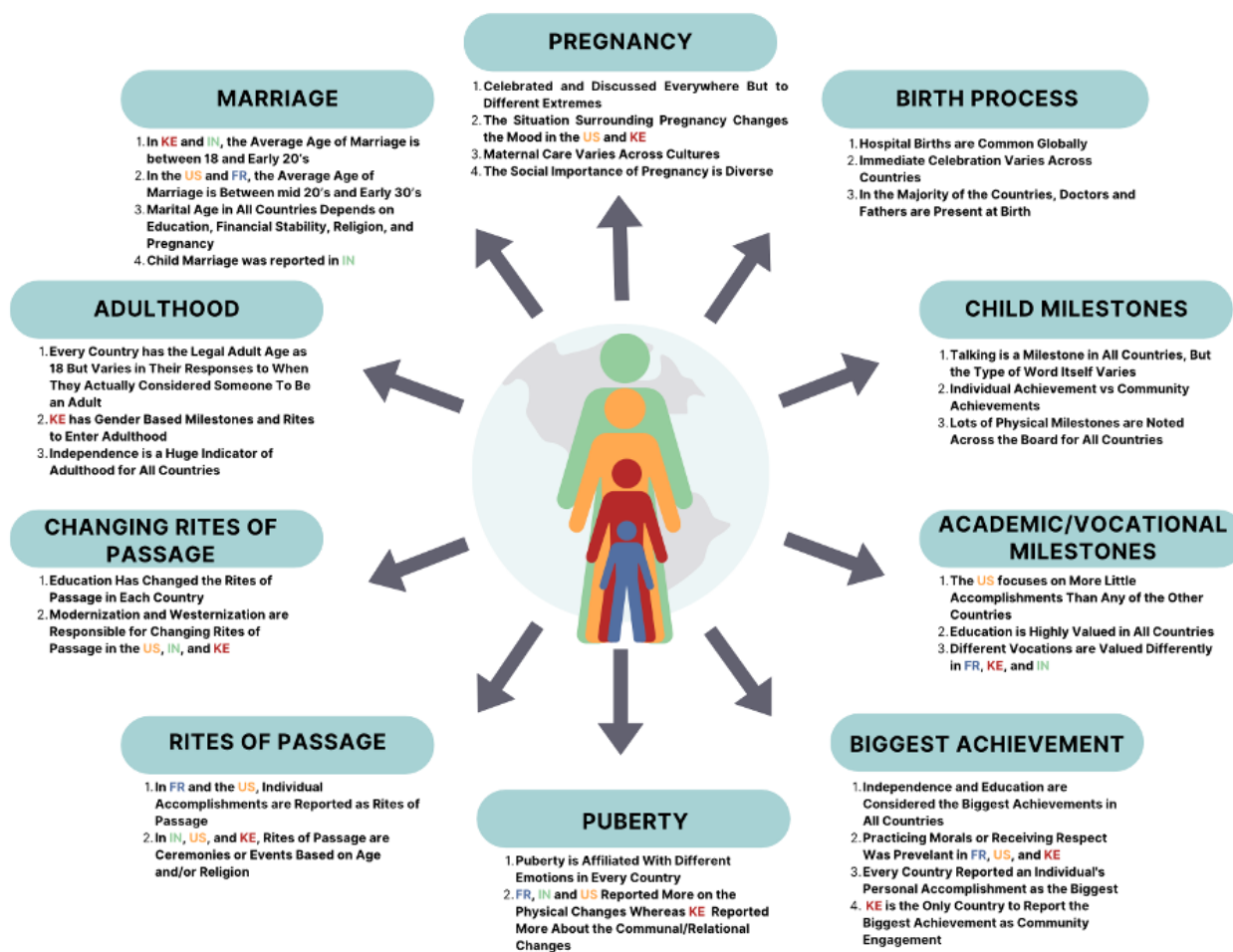
Marriage

In some countries, marriage is a part of a child’s journey. The only focus country that directly mentioned child marriage was India. One participant reported: “child marriage is the greatest issue that children are facing. Mainly girls.” The same participant also mentioned that the reason for this occurrence is a ceremony young girls go through during puberty; this ceremony signals to the community that this girl is now a woman. Because of this declaration, fathers often feel they must find a suitable husband quickly, it is their responsibility. Unfortunately, this reality was seen as the beginning of many young girls' struggles in childhood and adult life. While the womanhood ceremony is one reason for marriage in India, there are many other causes for marriage around the globe.

Different factors affecting marriage that were reported included education level, financial stability, religion, and pregnancy status among all four countries. In the United States, participants from the Christian faith reported that in their subculture, marriage tended to happen earlier compared to others. In France, it was more common for individuals to be financially stable before committing to matrimony. Indian participants included that higher education can also postpone marriages. Finally, Kenyan citizens claimed that if a couple becomes pregnant by accident, marriage is expected to follow. Overall, in India and Kenya, the reported average marital age was around eighteen years old to early twenties. In the Western countries of France and the United States, the average was approximately mid-twenties to early thirties. These average ages do vary somewhat between genders as girls were often reported to be married at younger ages than men. Marriage is a multifaceted concept in every nation.

Overall, these results demonstrate how diverse and complex every society is. There are many factors that influence how a child is raised to think, act, believe, dream, work, and more in every stage of their journey. Each event, milestone, and cultural expectation is unique. As can be seen in Figure 1, all these life events and the themes within them influence how a child is raised in addition to how society values and interacts with their children.

Figure 1
Extracted Themes Graphic



Discussion

Summary

The purpose of this study was to discover and compare the different aspects of child-rearing and childhood expectations from pregnancy to adulthood in four countries. Overall, the results of this study suggest that countries such as India and Kenya are more community-based compared to individualist countries like the United States and France. However, India did display more individualistic values than Kenya. In addition, these countries also perform more traditional rituals and ceremonies during their childhood years. The results also demonstrated

that Western ideals are changing collectivist cultures to value individuality, modernity, and education. These changes have led to a decrease in the frequency of traditional practices during childhood years. Every country in this study has experienced changes within their culture that ultimately affect their children's experiences.

In this study, several differences appeared in a child's journey cross-culturally. The social importance of pregnancy varied significantly across cultures; Indian and Kenyan women have more expectations placed on them from the community to have a child, whereas most French and American women focus more on their careers and other opportunities than starting a family. This study also showed the diverse emotions associated with puberty in these four countries. In the United States, awkwardness and humor are affiliated with puberty and France feels that this season is full of rebellion and shame. India and Kenya do not have the same negative emotions towards puberty as these Western nations; on the contrary, they view this milestone as sacred and a time for celebration. Both countries have rite of passage ceremonies designated for this developmental accomplishment, while France and the United States tend to lack intentional rituals to mark these events. Lastly, the reported average marital age in these countries varied. The results demonstrated that people in the Western world tend to enter marriage later than in Kenya and in India. No two countries are the same.

While there is a multitude of differences between these four countries, the results showed that there were also some similarities across cultures. First, every country reported that childbirth primarily occurred in hospitals with a doctor present. In addition, noting and celebrating infant physical milestones was a common theme amongst the participants. Independence and education are also highly valued in every culture, and parents believe these aspects bring about positive futures. While these nations are miles apart, they may not be as different as one might expect.

Limitations

There are some limitations to this study. Unfortunately, the participant sample size and makeup are narrow. To participate in this project, participants had to be fluent in English, have access to technology, be over 18 years old, and have been born in and currently residing in the country they were representing. Therefore, the group does not adequately represent the marginalized or minority communities in these countries. In addition, with only 4-5 participants from each country, it is unwise to assume these people accurately represent their communities and countries as a whole; the sample size is too small.

Future Research

Future research should focus on how childhood experiences and child-rearing vary within one country. There are numerous cultures represented within the border of one nation. This process would allow for a better representation of one geographical location and its children. Additional research could also focus on one of the ten subjects included in this project (i.e., pregnancy, rites of passage, puberty, etc.) exclusively, lending a more accurate understanding of a crucial childhood experience. Because Westernization is also a prominent theme in this research, researchers could explore the significant effects of Western ideals on the childhood experiences of others around the globe.

Application

With the knowledge gained from this research, future researchers, care providers, travelers, and more, can approach their goals with more cultural competence and understanding. If the inner workings of a society and its values are not understood by those trying to aid and appreciate them, ineffective solutions and ideas could form. Customized care and interactions are vital in working with an international population. In addition, children develop depending on

what the adults in their lives value and nurture, as well as their society. Understanding this concept is crucial when interacting with those from an outgroup; one cannot assume the other believes and behaves the same as they do. To better learn about, provide for, and interact with children from different cultures, further compassion and exploration are needed.

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