

# Exploring cultural differences and similarities

Students were introduced to the idea that they could act as informants on their own culture and compare it with the other student's culture. A series of experiments in "the Culture Lab" were thus carried out following this simple qualitative methodology.

The aim was to raise awareness of cultural differences

Demonstrate that one's own culture tends to be revealed or emerge on interaction with another person's culture;

And the fact that one's own cultural background may have an important influence on how one perceives socio-cultural phenomena and behaviour.

## Investigating co-sleeping

The students were presented with a series of findings based on an illuminating study by the American cultural psychologist Richard Shweder on child and adult co-sleeping in North America and Japan. Surprising as it may sound in Japan it is extremely common for children up to adolescence to sleep in the same room or bed as their parents (Sleeping by their parents). From a middle class Western point of course such practice is often and instinctively associated with child sexual abuse at worse or at best not seen to encourage self-reliance. Thus after visiting Japan and having discussed with Japanese colleagues, Dr Brazelton, the renowned American paediatrician, on realising that this custom apparently did not cause psychological damage in the Japanese context, had the intellectual honesty and courage to pose the following question:

Should children be allowed (encouraged, required) to routinely sleep in the same bed with their parent(s) ?

(Shweder et al, 2003) In similar way the students were challenged with the following information and then asked to share experience about the norms in their countries in relation to sleeping arrangements for children.

## Information on co-sleeping in Japan and America

**In Japan** children typically co-sleep with their parents and continue to do so until they are adolescents...

- According to Shweder et al. citing Caudil and Plath

- " Approximately 50% of urban Japanese children 11 to 15 years old sleep in the same bed with their mother or father or both, Japanese fathers are just as likely to sleep in the same bed with their daughters as with their sons..."

What is more "a typical person is likely to sleep alone at only two points: in late adolescence, if unmarried and living away from home; and in late adulthood, if widowed and living without children or grandchildren"

## In the USA

- In American middle class families it is rare. In one study in Cleveland Ohio it was found that only 3 % of children regularly slept in their parents bedroom after the age of 1 year

- Other studies find higher frequencies for instance "... Lozoff, Wolf and Davis (1984) report that 24 % of children in Cleveland between 6 months and 4 years of age co-sleep with their parents at least part of the night at least three or more nights a week."

- In other groups and working class families the practice is much more common.

- 55 % of African American children less than 1 year of age co-sleep with a parent every night and all night.

- In Appalachian Kentucky blue collar families the frequency is high also.

- 71 % of children between 2 months and 2 years of age
- 47 % of children between 2 years and 4 years
- Co- sleeping is very rare after the age of 9.

The students were divided up into groups of 5 to 6 and asked to compare their knowledge and experience about this matter. The range in cultural norms between different countries was considerable and opened an interesting debate on how to deal with such differences in cultural practice potentially important to public health .

This activity brings to the fore the necessity of:

- Understanding the meaning of human behaviour and customs before trying to implement public health strategies aimed at influencing or bringing about behavioural change.
- Understanding all cultural practices involve an interaction between resources and constraints on one hand and the other hand the meaning of the particular practice for those involved .
- Understanding how one's own culture can have an influence on how one perceives the unfamiliar and the Other.

## STUDENTS FINDINGS FROM THE CULTURE LAB

**These findings were compiled by the students (in their own words) in small groups. Although they are not comprehensive they do show that considerable variation exists between cultures, which was quite surprising to some of the students.**

### Group 1

We divided our discussion depending on age and socioeconomic variables so we agreed it would be nominal to share these space maybe until five years old and the special points in each country were **in Guadeloupe** children always sleep with mother if there is not father into the family structure in **Colombia** is not normal but as in **Nicaragua** people with poor incomes can't allowed to have a spare bed so they have to share in **India** and **China** is normal to encourage the emotional ties

Students' Recommendation: If we are going to judge a situation as sexual abuse we must know the cultural background of the actors to make a objective decision; not just basing the decision from our own culture.

### Other ideas

Age: Things are different if the father sleeps with 1 year old daughter or 10 year old girl. Emotional and psychological consequences can differ strongly

Sudden death syndrome increased risk if sleeping together

**African women:** children who sleep with their mother don't cry

Sleeping together is more or less socially acceptable in our countries except France

**India** the mother should sleep with the child (stigmatisation)

The problem of space obviously matters.

Current Social changes in the social paradigm – the mother is becoming less conscious of her role as “mother”

In **France**, it is common to not let the children sleep in the same bed as the parents, maybe just the beginning months

In **China**, parents let children sleep in the same bed and also the same room for longer time. Family planning (1 child only policy) favours even greater care and attachment to the child. (Different in rural and urban areas)

In **India** it depends on the socio-economic status. Because if there is not enough room they might need to live in the same room and also in the same bed.

Recommendation: We agree that children should not stay in the same bed as their parents, if they have the option of other sleeping arrangements.

## **Group 2**

### **Vietnam**

In cities, rich families children sleep with their parents till age of 5/7

In rural poor areas till 17 years old. (mother with daughter) father with son)

### **Peru**

Upper and middle class never....

Lower class no more than 7 years

### **Pakistan**

Depends a lot on socio-economic status.

In upper and middle class the baby sleeps with the parents until < 1 year in cradle and then in separate rooms

Lower class children sleep with the parents in same bed

### **Spain**

Children sleep in another room no matter the social status

In one student's state **in India** its acceptable for children to sleep in the same room until they want

Upper and middle class children sleep in their own room

Lower middle class children sleep with parents till age of 12

After age of 12, till age of 17 years old, the boys sleep with father - the girls with mother

**One Student from India**, thinks that it could be good for the baby to sleep with the parents in the cradle till the age of 2+/- Increase bonding

**One Student from Pakistan**, thinks that children should sleep in the same room (in a cradle) not in same bed till 2+

**A Student from Vietnam**, until 7 years old... to take good care of the baby/children

**A Student from Spain** thinks it should depend on the parents and children's preferences. For small children what is safer for them.

### **Group 3**

**Nicaragua:** it depends on many social factors, the most important is the economic one. Most of the family live in extreme poverty so it is frequent to use the same bed and society accepts this as a normal thing.

**India:** I'm talking about **West Bengal** (a state of India) as India is a big country. In my place, children up to 8/10 years of age sleep with their parents (father on one side & mother on other side) The positive thing is that children feel protected (physically) from falling from bed & mentally secured from bad dreams) The negative point is that father may sexually abuse his daughter. The sharing of the bed also depends on economic status & area (rural /urban)

### **Pakistan**

In **Pakistan** keeping children together in bed is very common and widely accepted but at a certain age/

Age of male child usually 7-10 and female child 5-7

However the practice differs in rural and urban areas poor and rich and between male and female children.

By and large it is perceived that children should sleep together with parents until certain age because they feel secure and protected.

While (sleeping if children need anything at midnight e.g; water, want to go to the toilet parents can help them.

After certain age the detachment of the child depends on the situation may be separated from bed or may be to other room.

### **Group 4**

#### **Italy**

General recommendation: to make children sleep in another room as soon as possible, never let them sleep with parents otherwise they get spoiled and may develop the Oedipus complex

No difference between urban and rural context: poorest families will share the room, not the bed.

Respect of sexual life of parents

No difference regarding the sex of child, same treatment

#### **Nigeria**

**Not sleeping by** children. This is influenced by several factors in rural areas

- 1) Religious reasons: particularly among Muslims [Islamic sects] Boys are separated from mothers/sisters (women) from age 6 or less

**Not sleeping by** children

This is influenced by the following factors in urban areas)

Religious reasons

Economic status

(children's room / boys room and girls room from early age of 1 year

Psychological reasons varies as a result of experience or reports, children are separated from sleeping with their parents.

**Sleeping by** children Rural areas : traditional beliefs: for protection from evil spirits and for togetherness (moral goods)

2. Economic reasons: The family can only afford a small space maybe one room for a family of six persons or more. In parts of Nigeria, this can be seen in urban settings as well

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Comments from the lab technician (After Shweder R.A. *Whom sleeps by whom revisited* (with Lenne Balle-Jensen and William Goldstein) in *Why do men barbecue ? Recipes for cultural psychology* Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 2003)

Shweder stresses the importance of understanding the meaning of behaviour before coming to a judgement. As you suggest often summary judgements or born out of particular cultural stances informed by world views.

In the example quoted in the PowerPoint presentation the original question arose because Dr Brazelton was worried... about what advice he should give to parents. This was because he had to call into question his profound American Western vision of what was right and sensible in the matter of sleeping arrangements. This vision I was of course informed by theories of child development. His vision "taken for granted" world view was called into question because he met and talked with Japanese paediatricians and child development experts from Japan and had seen with his own eyes that apparently Japanese children did not suffer from sleeping with their parents and this had no obvious effect on adult life.

So it is necessary to do research to get at the meaning of the behaviour. Obviously in such questions it is difficult to observe behaviour directly. So one has to devise indirect methods of gaining knowledge.

Shweder devised a task in which he presented 19 American (9 women and ten men) & Indian informants (19 Oriya adults 11 women eight men)) with a family made up of seven members:

Father (F)/ mother (M) /son 15 yrs (s15) / son 11 yrs (s11) /son 8 yrs (s8)/daughter 14 yrs (d14) and daughter 3 yrs (d3)

And asked them to arrange and rearrange them in different separate sleeping spaces ranging from 1 to seven rooms. Informants could declare that “no sorting was possible or desirable” Informants were also asked in an ideal situation how many sleeping rooms would be optimum.

Step 1 was simply a logical task of looking at all the different theoretical arrangements possible. “Of course there is only one method of sorting 7 people in one room (even if some space division within that room can be devised differently) and only one way to sort seven people into seven rooms” There are 63 methods of sorting seven people into two rooms... 301 ways for 3 rooms 350 ways for 4 rooms 140 for 5 rooms 21 for 6 rooms. 877 logical solutions. As you would expect only a few of these logical solutions were chosen by the informants. “Indeed , perhaps 95 % of possible solutions were ruled out as immoral, unacceptable, or otherwise ungrammatical by informants in both cultures.

Table 1.1 Distribution of logically Possible and selected solutions under the 3 room constraint

Persons per space	1/1/5	1/2/4	1/3/3	2/2/3
N° of possible solutions (n=301)	21	105	70	105
Frequency of selection				
Oriya	0	0	2	17
American	0	0	1	17

Most favoured 2/2/3 splits	Oriyas	Americans
F m/d14 d3/s15 s11 s8	8	15
Fm d3/d14 s8/s15 s11	4	0
F s8/s15 s11/ m d14 d3 s8	4	0
Fm/ s15 s11/d14 d3 s8	1	1
S11 s8/s15 d14/fm d3	0	1

In the two room constraint: “16 out 19 Oriya informants offered a solution. Despite the fact that there were 63 possible ways to sort the family into two rooms, 75 percent of those Oriya informants selected one of two solutions: f s15 s11 s8 / m d14 d3; or f s15 s11 / m d14 d3 s8. In stark contrast, only seven of 19 American informants offered a solution under the two room constraint. Almost all them converged on a sleeping arrangement that no Oriya would choose – namely, fm d14 d3/ s15 s11 s8

What is underlying these preferences?

**Shweder maintains in such cases it is vital to make a distinction between resource constraints (space in this case) and cultural preferences.**

The same sleeping arrangements in the 3 room constraint were favoured by both Oriya and American informants. But for different reasons regulated by different moral

principles. Fm/d14 d3/s15 s11 s8. The meaning behind the choice was different. So in this case" **mere observation is insufficient as a method for determining true cultural differences"**

So it is important to "look across a variety of resource constraints" to get an idea of the true picture of what is going on.

What do believe are these reasons? What are the moral goods involved for each culture. ?

Shweder also did interviews and enquiries in both cultures with parents and children. He also devised a conflict test based on the conflicting moral goods (see below)

I have the intuition that the methodological principles in this study have great relevance for public health where there are frequently conflicts between cultural preferences and officially sanctioned views and treatments within different resource constraints.

**Mere identification and observation of behaviour may very well be insufficient to understand that behaviour. And thus if the meaning of behaviours is not taken into account in the design of public health interventions and programmes there is a real danger that public health (and social work) interventions especially in the direction of minority groups in multicultural societies will likely to be inappropriate and/or ineffective.**

## SHWEDER'S ANSWERS

Moral goods for Americans (in order of importance)

- ❖ Incest avoidance (sexual temptation suspicions of sexual contact)
- ❖ "sacred couple" (intimacy, sexual privacy)
- ❖ ideal of autonomy

Moral goods for Oriyas (in order of importance)

- ❖ Incest avoidance
- ❖ Protection of the vulnerable
- ❖ Female chastity anxiety
- ❖ respect for hierarchy (social superiority between males is expressed through deference and distance incompatible with intimacy)