

## **Western Education, Psychologized Individualism and Home/School Tensions: An American Example**

Andrie Kusserow

This paper stems from anthropological field work in New York City that I conducted for my book *American Individualisms* (McMillan 2004). It is also based on my experiences with various refugee groups in Burlington, Vermont, from 1998-2008. During the past ten years, I have become aware of a degree of tension between the upper middle class pedagogies of psychologized individualism and the home cultures of refugee and immigrant children, which tend to have what cultural anthropologists refer to as a more sociocentric or collectivistic conception of self (a more group-family-ancestor oriented conception of self), and a greater emphasis on hierarchy and respect for elders. In Burlington, Vermont, students in preschool, elementary school and high school from immigrant or refugee backgrounds often experienced a clash of cultures between home and school cultures. For many of these children, this was the first time they encountered the psychologized individualism inherent in upper-middle class Western Educational teaching practices and texts. Insofar as Bhutan has adopted a certain degree of Western educational texts and teaching practices, this tension might also develop between Tibetan Buddhist home cultures and the more Western Psychologized Individualism that is so much a part of Western educational philosophies and pedagogy.

It should be stated at the beginning of this paper that these American upper-middle class schools and teachers also emphasized the importance of learning how to be a member of a group, getting

along with others, sharing and being polite. And yet compared to for example, preschools in Japan and China, this was not as strongly emphasized as the psychologized individualism found in preschools in America (Tobin, Davidson, Wu). Hence, one of Tobin's main points is that "... popular pedagogies based on self-expression need to be critically examined and modified for use with African-American, Hispanic-American, Native-American, and Asian-American students." (1995:247) Hence, despite the importance and use of these non-individualistic values in the lives of these refugees, public schools still emphasize American mainstream individualistic values. (Tyler, Boykin, Miller, et al, 2006)

### **Discovering and expressing the self in school**

American pop psychological conceptions of the true self depict the self as a layered entity, with more superficial or false layers on top of a core, unique, natural self. Rosaldo describes this Western conception of real vs. false self in her article "Toward and Anthropology of Self and Feeling" (1984). An analytic framework that equates "self/individual" with such things as spontaneity, genuine feeling, privacy, uniqueness, constancy, the "inner" life, and then opposes these to the "persons" or "personae" shaped by mask, social rules, hierarchies or social roles is a reflection of dichotomies that constitute the modern Western self.

Running throughout these popular ethnoconceptions of the self are strains of what Deborah Gordon and Margaret Locke, in "Tenacious Assumptions in Western Medicine," refer to as the two major Western traditions of naturalism and individualism. Gordon and Locke note that among other values and assumptions, the tradition of naturalism promotes the following assumptions about the individual: that the individual is prior to society and culture, that nature is separate from culture, that nature is autonomous from society, and that nature is universal, autonomous from time or space. They write "A conviction exists among some that underneath the cultural/social coating, a real, unique, 'deep' natural self exists, one that is 'given' to the individual. Society can sometimes pose a threat to this 'real self' in the sense that to be socially determined is

to be weak, trapped, limited.” The true self, real self, core self and true feelings are seen as the unique and individual bedrock that is natural, true and more real than the more epiphenomenal culture or social role, which can be wiped off the self like frosting on a cake. (See also Turner 1976, Shweder and Bourne, 1984; Curran, 1989; Moffat, 1989).

Inherent in much of Western education is the idea of using one’s education to discover one’s true self, to “learn about who you really are, establish oneself, discover oneself, what you really like, and hence to develop this special quality or uniqueness”. As Shils, states

There is a metaphysical dread of being encumbered by something alien to oneself. There is a belief, corresponding to a feeling, that within each human being there is an individuality lying in potentiality which seeks an occasion for realization, but is held in the toils of the rules, beliefs, and roles which society imposes. (Shils, qtd. in Gordon and Locke, 1988:10-11)

What are these practices of psychologized individualism and upper-middle class pedagogy? What is the conception of self that is implied and socialized in some Western pedagogical practices and texts?

### **Case Study: Parkside preschool in Manhattan, New York**

Upper-middle class soft individualism as I refer to it, emphasized the delicacy of the child’s self, the extreme care, resources, wide canvas and gentle touch needed in helping this unique self “flower” and open up into its full potential. This individualism was characterized by highly psychologized discourses around the self. Parents and teachers of Parkside preschoolers brought to child rearing and education what Tipton (1982) refers to as “psychologized individualism” which stresses the importance of the child’s cultivation of emotions and the development of a good sense or knowledge of the feeling self as crucial foundations for being successful. Talk of autonomy, uniqueness, individuality, privacy, good self esteem and self confidence were intertwined with talk of how important it was for the rights of the psychological self

(emotions, feelings, desires, tastes, personality traits) to emerge and be the best it can be. For most Parkside parents, raising an individualistic child was akin to assisting the child gently in emerging, unfolding, flowering, and self-actualizing his or her own unique qualities, thoughts and feelings. Thus the self of the child was not to be too tight, vigilant, and guarded but be willing to pour itself into the world. It was thought to be a delicate process insofar as too many restrictions, direct commands, rules, conformity, physical discipline might stunt the unfolding of the unique self. One of the most common metaphors used to describe this unfolding process was that of the child as a "flower" in which images of growing blooming and blossoming were invoked.

The teacher and parent were supposed to help the child actualize their own unique qualities, thoughts and feelings through receptivity, listening, warmth, responsiveness and giving the child a wide array of choices of activities. Threats, physical punishment, insults, shaming or negative direct commands were not used.

Perhaps one of the best examples of how children learned that feelings were important, legitimate, and to be listened to was when one preschool had all of the children's "Feeling Books" hanging on clotheslines around the room. On the cover in bold letters it had the name of the child and then in dark bold letters, "MY FEELING BOOK." Inside, each page had a sentence written by the teacher that said, "I feel happy when . . ." and then a blank space where the child could tell the teacher the answer and the teacher could fill this in. On the following pages it said, "I feel sad when . . ." "I feel angry when . . ." Exercises such as these were an attempt to get the children comfortable with naming and identifying their feelings. The lesson was that feelings arise and must not be repressed. They must unfold and speak. Listen to your own feelings; name and articulate them. The other kind of book that was hanging up in the room was a "WHY I'M SPECIAL" book, in which children told the teacher one thing that made them special and different from other children in the class. An art project might involve painting a child's family for a book called, "WHAT MAKES MY FAMILY SPECIAL," or drawings of different self-

portraits, which showed different things that the child liked about himself. In one book called, "WHY I LIKE MYSELF," children drew pictures of all the things they did well and why that made them special. In this way, often artwork was piggybacked with lessons on self-confidence and pride in the special quality of the child's self or family.

### **Other practices and beliefs of psychologized individualism practiced at Parkside**

#### ***Saving Face***

Part of the unfolding process in Parkside preschools involved helping the child open up through pleasant facial expressions, comments, voice content or body language on the part of the teachers. Efforts were made to present a very kind, gentle, accepting tone of voice and a loving expression on the face. Given the constraints of the classroom (hectic, busy, high noise level), this could not be achieved all of the time, and yet the "lowest" verbal response ever reached was one of disappointment or inattentive flatness in which the teacher was busily engrossed in something else. Emotions such as anger, frustration, disgust or hatred were not supposed to be shown to the children.

#### ***The importance of not stifling creativity/imagination***

Books in which children filled in already drawn pictures were discouraged. Teachers wanted students to feel that they could draw anything they wanted, and it didn't have to look like the real thing.

#### ***A sense of egalitarianism and an attempt to reducing the power differential between teacher and child***

Children were often allowed to call teachers by their first name and teachers often bent down and squatted in order to speak to the child at the same level. Children were always allowed to go to the bathroom whenever they needed to. Unless one of the children was in real physical danger, discipline was almost never in the form of a direct command. Rather, a somewhat hesitantly phrased, polite question was used in its place, giving the appearance of giving power

to the child to decide what he wanted to do. Use of a question also created a situation in which the adult was seemingly following the command of the child, a command given in answer to the teacher's question. Asking a question gave a sort of superficial power and authority to the child. "Do you think it was right for you to do that?" "SIT DOWN!" became, "Would you like to sit down now, Jenny?" In getting the children to greet each other, Ellen instead asked them, "What do we say to each other in the morning?" Addressing the group with a question was also common. "You know what I am noticing? Has anyone noticed it, that people are talking without raising hands and interrupting?" The teacher was then "forced" to wait for the child's answer. She could never rush this time, and in this way the child was given a more active role in the discipline process, a period of time when he controlled the situation in silence. Until the child had formulated an answer, the teacher respected this space.

***Not censoring a story, letting the imagination go***

Children were asked to tell stories about their lives, and when they were obviously fabricated, no effort was made to correct the child. The creation of these stories was an important part of building imagination. Periods during the day when the children could choose whatever they wanted to do was also very important in developing the self. Pieces of art in clear view was a way of instilling pride in the children, teaching them to be proud of their own projects.

**Refugee children and home/school tension/discontinuity**

Many of the refugee children in Vermont (Somali Bantu, Sudanese, Vietnamese, Hmong) came from homes where respect for elders and subservience of the individual self to the needs of the family, spirits, religious festivals or God were more common than psychologized individualism. The inherent individualism based in Western teaching styles and texts was quite different from the more sociocentric emphases present in the homes of many of these refugees. Somali Bantu and Sudanese family structure is patriarchal, with the eldest male accorded the highest respect. Most cultural anthropologists would agree that the cultural values of Asians often

include collectivism, conformity to norms, emotional self-control, humility, filial piety and deference to authority. (B.S. K.Kim and Omizo, 2005) For many, the self promotion and developing of self confidence promoted by Western teaching methods were considered selfish or obnoxious by their parents. Nor were these refugee children, for example, used to talking about their personal feelings, drawing them and putting them up in the classroom for public display in FEELING BOOKS. Somali Bantu and Sudanese children were used to physical punishment as discipline and hence when a teacher asked them to quiet down by literally asking "Do you think you could quiet down for a little while Deng?" they looked baffled. This was also the first time these African refugee children had been exposed to Western folktales and stories. When teachers asked the students to bring in examples of books and stories from their own cultures, the students felt embarrassed that they had nothing to share. Because some of these students were coming from cultures with largely oral traditions, they could not share stories on a mass scale (by photocopying for classmates, etc.).

For many of the Sudanese, they had spent much of their life in refugee camps in which learning occurred through rote memorization. In class or textbooks, the individual self was not asked to be explored or celebrated. Furthermore, in American schools and textbooks, critical thinking skills are highly valued, in which a student is asked to take an issue and explore its many sides. In one instance, a teacher in elementary school asked the students to explore the issue of whether or not physical punishment is good for children. She then asked them to debate this with their parents, and to take on different stances and practice defending each stance. Hence, when texts ask the student to give their "personal take" or opinion on a particular issue and then defend it, this can be seen by parents as insulting and belittling, as challenging their own authority and knowledge.

Furthermore, the relationship between student and teacher was thought to be similar to that between parent and child, e.g. hierarchical, one of respect, in which the student acknowledged the

greater wisdom, experience of their teacher through obedience and silence and sometimes gaze aversion. When Sudanese students were asked to question their teacher, to promote their own unique opinions and talk about their personal feelings in the classroom, many of them remained silent, feeling that this was inappropriate and out of place given their status as youth. Furthermore, classrooms are quite lively and American teachers expect children to raise their hands frequently, exhibit excited, eager-to-learn behavior and even question the teacher's own statements. This went against what many Sudanese and Somali Bantu children saw as a quiet respect for the teacher and his/her knowledge and wisdom. Among Asian Americans, rather than placing an emphasis on self-expression and talking about one's feelings, emotional self-control is valued insofar as it suggests that holding emotions inside is preferable to expressing them, so that others will not be influenced by or burdened with them. Emotional expression then is not necessarily seen as strength. (B.S.K. Kim et al) Being indirect, silent is often seen as a sign of interpersonal sensitivity, humility and self-control. (Park and Kim, 2008) One of the teachers I worked with at a local elementary school came to me complaining that one of her Vietnamese refugee children seemed depressed and sullen, almost to the point of rudeness. She later learned that the boy was paying her the utmost respect in lowering his head and being very quiet in school.

One Hmong child, when asked to write a story about "who she is as a person" wanted to include the lives of her ancestors as well as where she hoped her soul would rest. She had great difficulty focusing just on herself in the present moment. For her, the boundaries of the self included ancestors, spirits and multiple souls, not just her own physical body.

Many refugee students were not used to the expectation of parental involvement in their child's education. Hence when textbooks ask the child to interview their parent, write a story together, have the parent proofread something or quiz them on math facts they are sometimes hesitant insofar as this might imply questioning the



teacher's authority and knowledge. Furthermore, the value of hard work and helping out with the household chores and home duties was considered by many parents as equally important as the homework the children were given. Many of these children were used to taking on roles (babysitter) and chores that American teachers would find only appropriate for an adult. When one Vietnamese girl said she had to take care of her younger sisters after school and then help with dinner, the teacher told her she should talk to her parents and tell them she needed more time for her schoolwork. When the girl did talk to her parents, they took this as an insult, that the child was no longer caring for the family. So much focus on one individual to the exclusion of fulfilling family duties was seen as wrong. In Vietnamese culture, a girl must learn that as a woman she must observe the 'three obediences' (*tam tong*): to her father as a child, to her husband as a wife and to her elder son as a widow. Boys and men strive to be worthy of *quantu*, a form of respect earned through the display of attitudes and actions which favor dignity over self-interest.

### **Internet, television, parental role loss and the loss of family time among refugees**

For most American upper-middle class children, using educational programs on the internet is a part of being a good student. Learning how to type on a computer, use Google, create a blog and surf the internet is taught as early as first grade. Dictionaries and thesaurus' can now be found on-line and spelling games on the computer are encouraged. And yet many refugee elders or parents feel the children spend too much time on the computer, neglecting family duties and reducing family face to face interaction. Furthermore, many families experience the snowball effect, whereby children will log on to the computer with the intent of using an educational game and end up surfing the web and being lured in by other non-educational games, you tube, Facebook, MySpace. Once they are caught, it is extremely hard to get the child off of the computer, and refugee parents spoke of many computer fights where the child did not want to sit down for dinner, or do a chore, or engage in a

conversation with their parent or siblings. The computer (and television) gives some refugee children the kind of updated modern music and pop culture they are exposed to at school but cannot get at home. It creates a sense of separation from parents who do not live up to this MTV ideal. Studies show that 50% of American teens would rather text than talk. Many children will do an assignment that requires computer work, and while they are on-line, decide to check in with their email, facebook, blogs or chat rooms. These are also places where the parents and elders cannot enter with ease, given their limited English and limited computer skills. Popular images of Hollywood movie stars, wealth and materialism, tends to make their elders and parents appear even more outdated or limited. Another Sudanese child whose widowed father was a leader in the Sudan People's Liberation Army and was now working as a janitor in the local hospital, described his parents as "out of touch with reality" and yet this "reality" was based solely on what his children saw on the internet. Furthermore, after the father came home from work, he wanted to spend time with his children, but instead found them bickering over who could use the one computer instead. He felt insulted to say the least. The internet was not only taking away from family time, a time where he wanted to promote Sudanese values and ideals, but it was making him look "less cool, less modern, less American" than his children wanted him to be. He came to hate the computer, hate the internet and the teachers for all of their required homework on the computer, for the ways in which it "sucked his children away from him even in the home."

In the U.S. children are also encouraged to watch educational television only. And yet similar to the internet, once a child has turned the television on, she or he gets hooked into a whole host of other tv shows they find by "surfing" through the channels. Some refugee families spoke of the tv as becoming the center of their home life. They also spoke of the ways in which it was hard to "pull their children off" the television for dinner or chores or conversation. "When the tv is in the room, no one talks, we just all stare at the tv." What starts out as an attempt to show their child educational

programs often gives way to much time spent watching lower quality shows. It is extremely tempting to check out other channels and programs that are on once the television is turned on, and soon siblings and parents are also hooked into a program that has no educational content whatsoever.

### **Television and the brain**

Two or more hours of TV a day have been linked to fear, aggressive behavior and lower emotional sensitivity. Other research on tv has shown that there are 48 violent acts per hour on children's Saturday cartoons and that heavy t.v. viewers as adults are more insecure and buy more guns, locks, security devices. The American Academy of Pediatrics advises no screen time under ages 2-3.

Paul Foxman, author of *The Worried Child*, notes in his chapter on *The Media and Child Anxiety*, that

Television is a highly stimulating medium that overloads the brain with fast-moving images. In fact, the speed of imagery on television often exceeds the brain's ability to keep pace with it, a situation that leads to stimulus overload and mental shutdown. Unfortunately, viewers often misinterpret this as relaxation and believe that watching television is restful (163; 2004)

Foxman also notes that tv activates the brain's startle response. Frequent activation of this response causes the brain to emphasize basal ganglia development at the expense of prefrontal lobe development. The ability to reason, compute, analyze, think creatively, and regulate emotions can be compromised by excessive television. There is also evidence that excessive tv watching damages the brain development of young children. He writes

For example, there is evidence that television viewing before age seven deprives the brain of developing visual thinking and imagination. By presenting fully formed visual images with sound, television usurps the brain's practice at forming visual imagery to correspond with auditory input. Without these skills, children may become handicapped in learning other skills such as reading and using visualization for problem solving. They may also have less capacity for what has been called

“mindsight” the ability to imagine what others are thinking and feeling.  
(163; 2004)

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