Cross-Cultural Research in Psychological Development in Rural Communities

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INTRODUCTION

The last decade has witnessed an increased interest in investigating the effects of various environmental factors on cognitive development. Many of these studies measure developmental differences between rural and urban groups, either within one culture or across cultures. The findings frequently demonstrate that urban children acquire some cognitive and memory skills earlier than rural children. Instead of attempting to analyze the factors that may be responsible for the rural groups' lower performance, investigators usually resort to explanations in terms of a "lack" in the rural environment and assume that they are dealing with a "deprivation."

More recent interpretations, however, indicate that the apparent developmental lag of the rural children may be due to a biased definition of the rural environment by experimenters who have little understanding of the cognitive demands posed by that environment. This bias results in tasks being presented to rural groups that have little relevance to the skills developed in those settings. A related problem is that of the experimental situation and the presentation of the test materials: Do urban

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A. W. Childs et al. (eds.), Rural Psychology
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and rural groups interpret them similarly? Does a testing situation pose a different problem to city children than to village children?

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate some of the cross-cultural research on rural-urban differences in cognitive development and to suggest alternate strategies for future research. The first part presents a brief survey of the findings. The review will be limited to studies comparing developmental differences of rural and urban groups within the same culture. It does not pretend to be exhaustive. Rather, it intends to elucidate the pattern of differences that have been found between these groups.

The second part will present comparative studies done by the author which will demonstrate the advantages of combining ethnographic field research with psychological testing in promoting a more complete understanding of the effects of different environmental factors on child development.

CROSS-CULTURAL FINDINGS ON RURAL-URBAN DIFFERENCES IN COGNITIVE GROWTH

Rural and urban differences in the rate and style of cognitive development have been investigated in a wide variety of cultures, using different kinds of cognitive tasks. The studies include Piagetian developmental measures, classification and sorting tasks, memory tasks, and tests of verbal skills. This survey will review studies comparing developmental differences on these tasks in urban and rural groups within the same culture in several different parts of the world. Although it is recognized that making generalizations ranging across a wide variety of cultures in which rural and urban may have entirely different meanings is difficult, such an attempt might be justified if it elucidates a pattern of differences that have been found between these groups.

Piagetian Research

Peluffo (1962, 1967) compared 8- and 11-year-old Italian boys from various backgrounds on Piagetian tests of physical causality, conservation, and "combinations" and "permutations" (formal operations). Samples studied included: sons of Sardinian peasants newly moved to Genoa, sons of Sardinian immigrants who moved three years earlier, sons of native Genoans and rural Sardinians, as well as a sample of illiterate Sardinian peasants. On the test of physical causality he found that by age 11, 60% of the sons of Genoan workers and 50% of the sons of long-settled immigrants gave mechanistic (Stage 5) responses when