

# THE CULTURAL TRANSITION

*Human Experience and Social  
Transformation in the  
Third World and Japan*

EDITED BY

*Merry I. White and Susan Pollak*

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Our colleagues on the Project have, through their constant encouragement and contributions, made this volume a reality. Prof. Robert A. LeVine, as director of cross-cultural research for the Project, provided us with a framework, as well as with enthusiastic intellectual stimulus. Gerald Lesser, Howard Gardner, and Israel Scheffler, in our many Project discussions, probed and queried and acted as most sympathetic gadflies. Professors Paul Ylvisaker and Francis Keppel helped oversee our efforts over the term of the Project. Leonie Gordon helped organize meetings and prepared many reports on our cross-cultural workshops: her syntheses were very useful in preparing an overview for this book. Our friends and staff members who have seen the book through from draft to draft are the very backbone of the operation. We'd like to thank especially Dorothy Appel, Margaret Herzig, Laura Stephens-Swannie, Damaris Chapin and Nan Kortz.

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MERRY I. WHITE

SUSAN POLLAK

*Cambridge, Mass., October 1984*

# NOTE ON THE PROJECT ON HUMAN POTENTIAL

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The Bernard van Leer Foundation of The Hague, Netherlands is an international non profit-making institution dedicated to the cause of disadvantaged children and youth. It supports innovative projects that develop community approaches to early childhood education and child care, in order to help disadvantaged children to realize their potential.

In 1979, the Foundation asked the Harvard Graduate School of Education to assess the state of scientific knowledge concerning human potential and its realization. Proceeding from this general directive, a group of scholars at Harvard has over the past several years been engaged in research exploring the nature and realization of human potential. Activities sponsored by the Project on Human Potential have included reviews of relevant literature in history, philosophy, and the natural and social sciences, a series of international workshops on conceptions of human development in diverse cultural traditions, and the commissioning of papers and books.

The principal investigators of the Project represent a variety of fields and interests. Gerald S. Lesser, who chaired the Project's steering committee, is an educator and developmental psychologist, a principal architect in the creation of educational television programs for children. Howard Gardner is a psychologist who has studied the development of symbolic skills in normal and gifted children, and the impairment of such skills in brain-damaged adults. Israel Scheffler is a philosopher who has worked in the areas of philosophy of education, philosophy of science, and philosophy of

### *Note on the Project on Human Potential*

language. Robert LeVine, a social anthropologist, has worked in sub-saharan Africa and Mexico, studying family life, child care and psychological development. Merry White is a sociologist and Japan specialist who has studied education, formal organizations and the roles of women in the Third World and Japan. This wide range of interests and disciplines enabled the Project to take a multi-faceted approach to issues of human potential.

The first volume published under the aegis of the Project was Howard Gardner's *Frames of Mind* (Basic Books, 1983), a study of human intellectual potentials which drew not only on psychological research but also on the biological sciences and on findings about the development and use of knowledge in different cultures.

Israel Scheffler's *Of Human Potential* (RKP, 1985) was the second book of the Project to appear, and it offers a treatment of philosophical aspects of the concept of potential. Sketching the background of the concept and placing it in the context of a general theory of human nature, this treatment then proposes three analytical reconstructions of the concept and offers systematic reflections on policy and the education of policy makers.

*Human Conditions: The Cultural Basis of Educational Development*, by Robert A. LeVine and Merry I. White, will be published in 1986 by Routledge & Kegan Paul. Emphasizing the crucial role of cultural factors in the progress of human development, the book offers new models for development based on the social anthropology of the life span and the social history of family and school.

To provide background for the study of diversity in development, the Project established teams of consultants in Egypt, India, Japan, Mexico, the People's Republic of China, and West Africa. The present volume, *The Cultural Transition*, edited by Merry I. White and Susan Pollak, presents papers by these consultants and associates. Representatives of international development agencies were also engaged as consultants and advisors over the five-year period of the Project. Through such international dialogue and research, the Project has sought to create a new multidisciplinary environment for understanding human potential.

*The Hague, Netherlands, August 1985*

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# INTRODUCTION

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Transitions imply movement from one state or condition to another state or condition, but also imply an intermediate waystation. In considering what has variously been called modernization, development, or in less deterministic language, social transformation, in the context of human lives, the 'transition,' in our view, never ends, and yet there are many possible visions of the *termini*. There are, of course, more universal goals for development planners, targets for those who hope to raise the level of literacy, health and production while improving general social welfare. And the political and economic environments in which these planners operate have very often imbued these goals with the urgency of their ideologies or cost/benefit analyses. What has been left out of the planning and the goal-setting is the factor which, paradoxically, must be considered before planning can be effective and yet which, if taken seriously, ultimately prevents the success of the more universalistic goals and targets, which keeps social transformation in permanent transition: that is, *culture*. While developers categorize nations as 'poor' or 'advanced,' while they develop paradigms and seize upon models which will improve the potential for success in less developed societies, attention is seldom given to the whole range of less easily categorized and less translatable human conditions and the local explanations and belief system organizing them into cultural experiences which might enrich and complicate policymakers' perceptions.

Not to see folk healing as an obstacle to the dissemination of western medical care, or the modern school as the only means for

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socializing children to appropriate lives requires a major departure from conventional development thinking. Culture might be 'controlled' through typologies, or placated through superficial attention in the visitation of alien programs on the less developed. More frequently, however, the poor or non-modern are seen as a 'treatment category.' But poverty is not a culture and 'less developed' characterizes no people on earth in a useful way.

The project which produced this collection, as well as several other volumes, was established in part to consider what role culture has to play in successful human development planning. The Bernard van Leer Foundation in the Hague came to Harvard University in 1978 to establish a study of human potential which would provide background in the social and behavioral sciences for the work of international agencies in child development and education. The Project on Human Potential, based at the Harvard Graduate School of Education from September 1979 to September 1984, brought together scholars from the fields of anthropology, sociology, developmental psychology, and philosophy as principal investigators in a broad survey of learning and human development. The project also established teams of counterpart scholars and practitioners in several countries and regions: Japan, India, West Africa, Egypt, Mexico, and the People's Republic of China.

Out of meetings and workshops held in these places and elsewhere came the essays contained in this volume, which represent the wide range of topics considered but which unfortunately, because of lack of space, do not include the full wealth of detail and analysis which was provided by all participants. Many of the other papers written for the Project are available through ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center - Department of Education Washington) and a full list of these may be found in an Appendix.

These papers and the conversations and formal discussions which both contributed to and benefited from their creation also provide a kind of text resource for the conceptualization of the cultural perspective on educational development which informs another volume in the Project's series, *Human Conditions: The Cultural Basis of Educational Development*, co-authored by Robert A. LeVine and Merry I. White (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986). This book treats human development from an anthropological perspective, as the product of cultural influences and motivations, and establishes a model for considering the meaning of learning over the

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life course in traditional agrarian societies as well as modern industrialized nations. The papers in *The Cultural Transition* provide exemplary material which supports the premises of our *cultural* perspective on development.

The essays in this volume fall into three categories: those dealing with indigenous psychologies of the person and contexts, such as religious conversion, influencing personal change; those treating the social organization and local interpretation of learning; and those focused on cultural definitions of the meaning of life strategies and stages, the goals of familial relationships and personal achievement. As in the Project which provided the frame for these essays, there is little of the human experience that is not relevant to the question of cultural contexts for considering human potential, and the breadth and depth of these works conveys a slice of the concerns which may be addressed in a culturally-sensitive approach to human development.

The first group of essays, under the heading 'Psychologies of the person and cultural contexts for personal change,' includes several different perspectives on culture and transformations in healing and religious contexts. These essays make the point, explicitly and implicitly, that health and illness are subject to a broad range of definition as well as a variety of interpretations, attributions, and treatments. The setting within which a personal change is effected is highly culture-specific, and ranges from a totally internal process in the individual with very little reference to other people or settings, to a community-wide environment where every aspect of the society and its cosmology is involved. Kakar's paper stresses the relationship between the human and the natural world, rather than the process of healing as an individual passage. Katz's paper continues this theme, but stresses the fact that, among the !Kung and the Fijians, health is connectedness in a synergistic community. Ramanujam uses clinical case material to demonstrate that healing in Indian society is brought about through the concrete familial nexus. The broader questions of personal meaning and transformation, this time in an African context, are treated in Sanneh's discussion of local and borrowed religious traditions.

The second group of essays, titled 'Social organization and environments for learning,' includes selected descriptions of cultural definitions and settings for the educational process. As in the first section of the book, these papers consider indigenous meanings



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of a significant aspect of personal development. Spratt and Wagner's treatment of the modern Islamic school and the relationship between teacher and student traces the continuing significance of the Qu'ran in the cognitive and moral development of the child in modern times. Taniuchi's description of Suzuki violin training in Japan emphasizes the cultural and psychological environment for the early inculcation of highly complex skills in children, and notes that mothers' and teachers' goals and methods focus on understanding and engagement, on process rather than product. Vasco's study of math learning in Colombia concludes that the teaching and learning of mathematics is culturally determined and that children have their own mathematical conceptual systems as well which need to be understood by teachers.

The three papers in the last section, 'Cultural perspectives on the life course,' treat conceptions of the person within cultural models for the life course and for the fulfillment of personal and social potentials. Shiang's paper on intergenerational relationships in Chinese families notes the reciprocities involved in the expression of affection and commitment and analyzes the Chinese term 'heart' which characterizes such relationships. Das describes death and mourning in the Punjab, and treats the question as to whether grief represents integration or separation in the families suffering bereavement. Iwao's paper looks at the lives of Japanese women who have been successful in the contemporary business world, and notes their use of affiliative skills in gaining their goals. She concludes that personal success need not, as in American culture, be associated with an individual's separation from ongoing personal relationships but, on the contrary, that in Japan, interpersonal continuity is the goal of personal achievement.

Attention to cultural interpretations in the context of improving human living conditions and educational goals focuses on two very different perspectives on culture. For those concerned with the search for appropriate 'universals' by which to mobilize services and institutions (and paradigms and theories) for the improvement of people's welfare, the examples of diversity in meaning of such basic aspects of life as the definition of childhood itself, the proper relationship of parent and child, the organization of learning and its relevance to stages in a person's life, the understanding of the relationship between the supernatural and the person, all cannot help but bring greater sensitivity to the search for meanings which