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## The challenges of transmitting family values in multi-cultural contexts

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Wychowanie w Rodzinie 9, 149-158

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2014

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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„Wychowanie w Rodzinie” t. IX (1/2014)

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## **The challenges of transmitting family values in multi-cultural contexts**

Wyzwania związane z przekazywaniem wartości rodzinnych  
w kontekstach wielokulturowych

### **Streszczenie**

Rodzinie udało się przetrwać zmiany historyczne i kulturowe. I mimo że jest ona tylko jednym z komponentów złożonego systemu społecznego wciąż jest miejscem, gdzie odbywa się podstawowa socjalizacja dzieci. Jednakże rodzina mieści się w społeczno-kulturowym środowisku, gdzie wiele czynników socjalizacyjnych uzupełnia się, jak również stara się wyrzec jak największy wpływ na te wartości, które następnemu pokoleniu obywateli powinno przyjąć za swoje. W niniejszym artykule koncepcyjnym podkreślono rywalizujące elementy w systemie społecznym, które konkurują w spełnianiu roli socjalizacyjnej. Istotność tych czynników wspierających albo podważających przekazywanie przez rodziców ich wartości rodzinnych następnemu pokoleniu należy ocenić w kolejnych badaniach naukowych. Wsparcie stanowiąc może model systemowy będący lupą, która może być użyta przez naukowców, by zrozumieć procesy zachodzące w kontekstach wielokulturowych i która może być przydatna w historycznych analizach przekazywania wartości rodzinnych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** socjalizacja, wartości rodzinne, Model Systemu Społecznego.

### **Abstract**

Across time and cultures, the institution of the family remains resilient. Although the family is but one component of a complex social system, it remains the setting in which a child's first social development occurs. Yet the family is situated in a socio-cultural environment with numerous socialization agents complementing and vying for

influence as to the values that the next generation of citizens should adopt. This conceptual paper will articulate competing elements within the social system that contend for the socialization role. Ongoing scholarly inquiry will need to gauge the relative importance of these factors for supporting or challenging the parents' transmittal of their family values to the next generation. To aid in this endeavour, a systems model provides a lens that can be employed by scholars to understand family processes in multi-cultural contexts and is useful in historical analyses of the transmission of family values.

**Keywords:** socialization, family values, social system model.

## Introduction

Despite the changing roles of families across the centuries, the institution of the family remains resilient. One function persists within most cultures: the family is where primary socialization occurs. And though the family is but one component of a complex social system, it remains the location wherein children are socialized into an understanding of what is expected of them in sustaining a civil society. The foundation of what behaviour is considered acceptable in maintaining social order, how to care for the needs of others and to adapt to changing contexts is first introduced in the family context and nurtured through generations.

But certainly families do not exist in isolation and parents and other family members are not the only or even the most influential socialization agents. The State, religious leaders or the ever invasive internet and social media technologies may proscribe or encourage behaviours not espoused by the kinship network. Even in a seemingly homogeneous culture, parents in different families may promote divergent worldviews or differing fundamental convictions about what is true, how individuals who disagree with one's core beliefs should be treated, and how life is valued. Given the increasing heterogeneity and multi-cultural complexity of many communities, parents striving to instil the values they deem essential may encounter little support or even outright antagonism from other parents or social institutions. As scholars continue to seek understanding of family upbringing across time and cultural contexts there are core principles of socialization that can guide our inquiry.

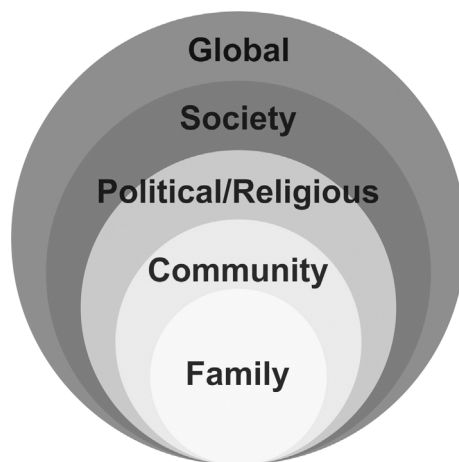
## Social systems model

Drawing upon Urie Bronfenbrenner's<sup>1</sup> seminal work introducing what has commonly come to be known as the Social Ecological Model, Illustration 1 rep-

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<sup>1</sup> U. Bronfenbrenner, *Toward an experimental ecology of human development*, "American Psychologist" 1977, Vol. 32 (7), pp. 513–531.

resents a simplified nested systems model. Bronfenbrenner was interested in how individual behaviour and development is influenced by broader social contexts. Thus, he introduced a conceptual model of how the individual develops within a nested system of the micro, meso and more macro environments with hopes of expanding researchers' thinking and research activity focusing on these various contexts. Hence this model has become widely adapted as a conceptual model in sociological, psychological, health and community studies.



**Illustration 1.** Social Systems Model. Source: Developed by the author.

**Ilustracja 1.** Model Systemów Społecznych. Źródło: Opracowanie własne.

As depicted in Illustration 1, the core of the system at the micro level is the individual's core environment, the Family that is embedded in their Community and encompasses their friend network. The meso level is represented by the Political/Religious context that includes educational institutions in addition to religious and political organizations. The outer two circles represent the macro environment of the Society including government and broader societal expectations. The outer ring of the system is the broader Global context that with the pervasiveness of media has increased the impact of world-wide events, values and cultures to the more micro levels of the social system.

## **Socialization**

So how does this social systems model relate to the socialization process?

As noted above, socialization within the family context is the process through which children are nurtured into an understanding of what is expected of

them as they mature and assume adult roles<sup>2</sup>. The foundation of what behaviour is acceptable to maintain social order, how to care for the needs of others and to adapt to changing contexts is first introduced in the family context and nurtured throughout generations.

At the micro family level, parents set the standards for their children's actions and beliefs by teaching what they deem are proper behaviours and attitudes based upon their worldview. With a desire that their progeny will carry on the family's reputation with dignity, mothers and fathers hope their children absorb those values that will enable them to be successful in life.

As children mature and move beyond the family environment into the meso level of the educational system and the broader community, new socialization agents enter into the development process. School and classroom rituals, led by teachers serving as role models, regularly reinforce knowledge and skills necessary to function in the current societal context. The instructional content or activities may reinforce family values or may introduce divergent or opposing stances that parents must weigh in light of their children's best interests.

Another key socializing agent may be the family's religious participation. For some people, important ceremonies related to family structure such as marriage, birth and death are connected to religious celebrations. Proscriptions for moral behaviour as well as the dependence on a higher power as a source of values, meaning, and strength may underpin the parents' desire to have their children participate in communal religious activities whether or not they are endorsed or permitted by the broader societal context.

At the macro level of Society many of the rites of passage are based on age norms established by the government. What rights, privileges and obligations come with the status of "adult"? The age of majority, conscription into military service, legal alcohol consumption, marriage, driving or voting all impact the transition into adulthood, soon to become the next generation of parents. Policies set by the government may also restrict educational opportunities. Examination results and/or political or religious affiliations may close or open doors to higher education or particular career paths based upon what is viewed as the "ideal adult". Government policies can also define the "ideal family", regulating such decisions as who can marry, the number of children, legality of abortion, maternal/paternal leave, subsidies for childrearing, housing availability and financing, women's education and labour force participation<sup>3</sup>.

Through mass media such as magazines, books, radio, television, movies and the Internet children can learn what they cannot experience firsthand. These

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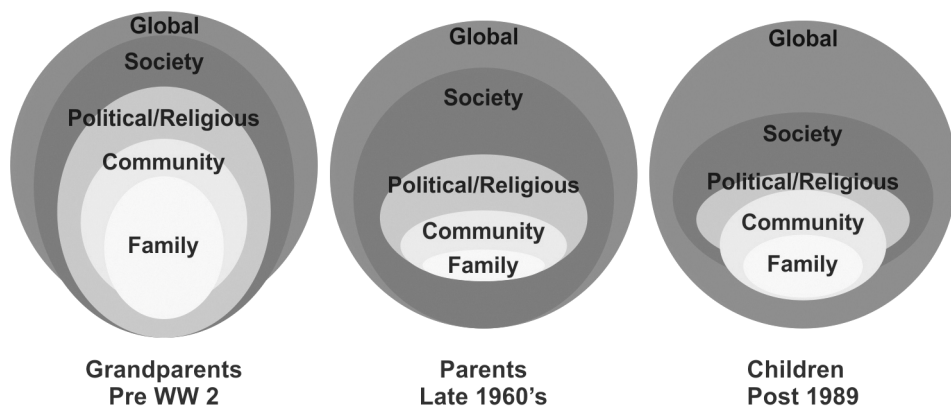
<sup>2</sup> G. Lee, *Socialization*, [in:] M. Sussman, E. Steinmetz (ed.), *Handbook of marriage and the family*, Plenum, New York 1987.

<sup>3</sup> B. Fux, *Which models of the family are encouraged or discouraged by different family policies?* [w:] F. Kaufmann, A. Kuijsten, H. Schulze, K. Strohmeier (ed.), *Family life and family policies in Europe* Volume 2: *Problems and issues in comparative perspective*, Oxford Press, London 2002.

agents of socialization reveal aspects of society in a much broader and an ever increasingly invasive manner than in previous generations<sup>4</sup>. The Media cultivates children's understanding of the world beyond what their families or teachers have introduced exposing these young people to people who may interact differently, face different life choices, come from divergent ethnic or cultural backgrounds, and/or espouse antagonistic political or religious attitudes. Children with access to technology are now enabled to take a more active role in their socialization away from adult mediation. Social media has increased the influence of the global context by providing a means for almost instantaneous worldwide communication. "Pen pals" of yesteryear have been replaced with real time "Facebook friends" and the ability to Skype a face-to-face conversation with a complete stranger on the other side of the world.

### Generational comparisons

As the prior discussion points out, socialization is influenced by a dynamic social system. Hence it is not surprising that generational comparisons of this changing contextual environment can provide insights into challenges faced by multi-generational families and provide a rich field of research for scholars of the family. If we examine the socio-ecological context of families there have been significant changes that make the experiences of contemporary childhood quite different from those of children several generations ago<sup>5</sup>.



**Illustration 2.** Generational Comparisons of Social Systems Model. Source: Developed by the author.

**Ilustracja 2.** Model Pokoleniowego Porównania Systemów Społecznych. Źródło: Opracowanie własne

<sup>4</sup> Kaiser Family Foundation, *Generation M<sup>2</sup>: Media in the lives of 8 to 18 year olds*, Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, Menlo Park, CA 2010.

<sup>5</sup> W. Goode, *The theoretical importance of the family*, [in:] A. Skolnick, J. Skolnick (red.), *Family in transition* (17<sup>th</sup> Edition), Pearson Education, Inc. 2014.

To explain this point, let us compare variations in the social system in which three generations of Central European families were embedded. By considering the salience (or the relative importance) of the nested levels of the social system model we can gain a glimpse of the variations across generations (see Illustration 2). This broad brush of analysis is provided to encourage historians and family scholars to fill in the details of these portraits through further research and analyses.

The *Grandparents* generation born before WW2, grew up during a time when the role and character of family life was greatly impacted by changing political conditions. In Poland, particularly in regions under Prussian and Russian occupation, in the absence of a national education system, the family took over some of the functions that would have been assumed by other social institutions<sup>6</sup>. In other regions the State gained a powerful controlling function over the family. For example, in Czechoslovakia the Communist party viewed the institution of the family with disfavour, considering it an opponent for the loyalty of the populace and sought ways to replace the role of family with state-run institutions<sup>7</sup>. There was an intrusiveness in the provision of basic needs and family functions such as housing, reproductive behaviours and parenting.

Follow this with the *Parents* generation born in the late 1960s. Over 40 years communism had a powerful impact not only at societal level, but at the family level as well<sup>8</sup>. The rise in industrialization and subsequent migration from rural to urban areas led to an increase in nuclear families, women in the workforce, and a family model of two employed spouses and children raised in state-run educational institutions. Housing shortages and high prices constrained young families from becoming independent from their family of origin. The State promoted atheism, forbade religious education and practices, destroyed churches and punished religious leaders and worshipers. Democracy brought back religious freedom that encouraged people to revisit their cultural roots and beliefs. As one Belarusian student shared with the author in 2008, “Now we can talk about what we could only think about before”.

So these *Children* born after the collapse of communism faced a world in geo-political reorganization. Changes in the socio-political system after 1989 necessitated that families rally to fill gaps in the transition due to higher unemployment and the fragility of the social network<sup>9</sup>. Inter-national and intra-country opportunity structures began to widen rapidly due in part to the differ-

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<sup>6</sup> H. Bojar, *Rodzina i życie rodzinne* (Family and family life), [in:] M. Marody (ed.), *Spoleczeństwo polskie u progu zmiany systemowej*, “ANEKS”, London 1991.

<sup>7</sup> I. Možný, T. Katrňák, *The Czech family*, [in:] B. Adams, J. Trost (ed.), *Handbook of world families*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, California 2005.

<sup>8</sup> M. Robila (ed.), *Families in Eastern Europe*, Elsevier, Boston 2004.

<sup>9</sup> A. Titkow, D. Duch, *The Polish family: Always an institution*, [in:] M. Robila (ed.), *Families in Eastern Europe...*, op. cit.

ences and inequalities in which market economies were developing<sup>10</sup>. Parents needed to adapt from focusing on child obedience and submission (a necessary survival skill set under totalitarian leadership) to using strategies designed to promote independence and self-reliance (necessary in a free market economy). Certainly we see the relative importance of the global context as this generation adapts to the “smaller” world created by Internet technologies.

So as we examine the juxtaposition of the three generational models in Illustration 2, we can surmise that if the social context in which children grow up differs from the context within which their parents were socialized, some differences in socialization values are likely. This process is called the cohort replacement model because it assumes that each successive birth cohort experiences a different social environment and retains distinctive opinions throughout adult life<sup>11</sup>. Values transmitted in childhood are shaped both by how the parents raised their child and by the social climate in which the birth cohort grew up. Indeed this can be a rich area of family research as the implications of social interaction in multi-generational households, the level of intergenerational solidarity (distance between generations), and dramatic transitions in the community (e.g. natural disasters), political/religious/educational context, societal factors such as migration and global awareness are examined through the lens of the Social Systems Model.

## Systems of cultural priorities

Throughout the previous discussion the premise was that both mother and father are products of a similar social system. Hence, the parents would have compatible beliefs and practices, share similar norms and expectations of their culture and thus would be engaged in perpetuating a “system of cultural priorities”<sup>12</sup>. Although the transmission of values from parents to their children is a universal practice, the content of the beliefs and practices varies greatly across cultures<sup>13</sup>. Perhaps the most influential framework for capturing these differences is the comparison of ‘collectivism’ and ‘individualism’<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> K. Roberts, S. Clark, C. Fagan, J. Tholen, *Surviving post-communism: Young people in the former Soviet Union*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, UK 2000.

<sup>11</sup> D. Alwin, *Cohort replacement and changes in parental socialization values*, “Journal of Marriage and Family” 1990, Vol. 52(2), pp. 347–360.

<sup>12</sup> C. Kagitcibasi, *Family and human development across cultures: A view from the other side*, Erlbaum, Mahwah, New Jersey 1996.

<sup>13</sup> R. Harwood, J. Miller, N. Irizarry, *Culture and attachment: Perceptions of the child in context*, Guilford Press, New York 1995.

<sup>14</sup> See: D. Oyserman, H. Coon, M. Kimmelmeier, *Rethinking individualism and collectivism: Evaluation of theoretical assumptions and meta-analyses*, “Psychological Bulletin” 2002, Vol. 128, № 1, pp. 3–72.



Social scientists<sup>15</sup> generally associate parents in ‘western’ cultures as embedded in ‘individualistic’ communities wherein they socialize their children to be autonomy-oriented or competitive. In these instances parents instil values of self-maximization, self-esteem, personal choice and intrinsic motivation. In contrast, parents in Asian, African, Latin or developing societies are viewed as living in ‘collectivistic’ communities and socialize their children to be relationship-oriented. These parents emphasize the connection to the family, orientation to the larger group, respect and obedience.

It is not hard to foresee the challenge if a family advocates individualism and their country is taken over by leaders who establish a societal order that demands collectivism. In the reverse, for children raised in a collectivistic environment (with the orientation to the larger group) that is suddenly transformed into a system wherein individuals who are competitive and fundamentally motivated are successful, parents are left to struggle to determine how to help their child adjust to the new context.

There is a growing awareness that this dichotomous approach is somewhat limited given that increased globalization, immigration, and technology expose parents and children to different values and behavioural systems in unprecedented ways. Indeed Catherine Tamis-LeMonda and her colleagues<sup>16</sup> have offered a typology for understanding the ways in which communities maintain their values of individualism and collectivism while helping families see relatedness as a pathway to autonomy as well as autonomy as a path to relatedness. This is becoming a particularly useful framework for understanding culturally-based differences in multi-cultural families.

## **Multi-cultural families**

If we stop and consider the rituals associated with the birth of a child in any particular culture, we will get a glimpse of the value of the child, their gender, and their expected role in the broader society. The transmission of culture through first lullabies, religious ceremonies, registering a birth and a passport application connects the child to the family, community and nation. What may seem as a given in some families is made much more complicated by the blending of norms and expectations in bi-cultural families. What songs are sung and

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<sup>15</sup> G. Hofstede, *Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values*, Sage, Beverly Hills, CA 1980.

<sup>16</sup> C. Tamis-LeMonda, N. Way, D. Hughes, H. Yoshikawa, R. Kalman, E. Niwa, *Parent's goals for children: The dynamic coexistence of individualism and collectivism in cultures and individuals*, [in:] M. Killen, R. Coplan (ed.), *Social development in childhood and adolescence: A contemporary reader*, Wiley Blackwell, New Jersey 2011.

in what language? Which religion is the child initiated into? In which country will the child have citizenship?

So what does our Social System Model look like for a bi-cultural family? Which 'community' is the child embedded in, the Christian central European family of the mother or the Muslim British family of the father? Each of their cultures holds to family values, beliefs about acceptable behaviour and ideas about what it means to be a member of society. Will the family adopt one cultural approach and reject other? How well a family navigates these familial ethnic socialization issues will be influenced by the broader social context, the skill sets of the parents and the support and encouragement they receive from significant others. How will this growing population of multi-cultural children compare to their parents' and grandparents' generations? Will the Social Systems Model remain an explanatory model of socialization influences for this and subsequent generations or will we need to develop new models for our increasingly globally interactive community?

## Conclusions

The Social Systems Model provides us with a broad contextual framework from which to examine the transmission of family values across generations, in particular cultural contexts and in instances of the meeting of cultures. There is great opportunity for family researchers to not only understand broader demographic trends but to gain insights into the ways in which parents negotiate blending cultural values. Issues of power, compromise and adaptability are topics of inquiry that will likely provide valuable information to professionals seeking to assist families in adjusting to new contexts, mediating conflicts and encouraging young couples as they embark on their parenting journey.

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