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Exploring Cultural Contexts of Early Childhood Development: Insights from “Babies”

The fascinating documentary of “Babies” exhibits the infancy and early childhood of four distinct babies from different backgrounds. The documentary portrays the experiences of the four babies through visual and auditory demonstrations to demonstrate the environment and parenting aspects that contribute to a child’s early development. The documentary includes the four babies of Ponijao, from Namibia, Bayar, from Mongolia, Mari, from Japan, and Hattie, from the United States. The documentary brings attention to their different cultural practices and diverse environments that contribute to their periods of infancy and childhood while also exploring the correlation between genetic and cultural influences the children’s development as well. Altogether, by presenting the first year of the babies’ lives, the audience can understand the impact that environment, families, and communities have on the experiences in infancy and early childhood.

The documentary itself serves the purpose of educating the audience on the significance of both cultural and environmental contexts in shaping early development for babies. The film reflects ideals from Bronfenbrenner’s Social Ecological Theory as it demonstrates how each system is experienced differently within each baby’s development. The microsystem is heavily shown throughout the film as there are various scenes with direct interactions between the babies and their caregivers. For instance, Ponijao is shown to have the most interactions with her mother and siblings as it is key to her development such as through breastfeeding and baby wearing. The mesosystems in the film show the babies experiencing the outside world with their caregivers such as going on stroller rides and partaking with their families in the community. The exosystems are portrayed as the film depicts the social networks and indirect environment that contribute to the babies’ developmental stages. For example, Bayar is indirectly influenced by his parents’ herding lifestyle as his family’s dependence on livestock indirectly affect his life stages and experiences.

Furthermore, macrosystems demonstrate the cultural values and customs that shape the children’s environment. Hattie is shown to have exposure to various educational toys and activities which show an emphasis on individualistic values in Western culture. Lastly, the chronosystems reflect the changes in the child’s environment over time such as Bayar’s family having to shift their daily routines due to changes in season and their dependence on livestock, which then changes his environment as well. Altogether, the director wanted to ensure the idea that despite differences in each ecological system, the developmental process across cultures is universally similar. While the babies’ processes differ in cultural and environmental contexts, the journey of infancy is a shared experience. Overall, this film allows us to gain insight into the lives of the featured infants but also obtain an appreciation for different cultural practices and beliefs that contribute to raising a child.

Physical, cognitive, and sociocultural aspects of development were most evident throughout this film. Each infant was shown to have progressed in gross motor skills of rolling over, crawling, and eventually walking to show their physical development. Also, the babies were shown to engage in more sensory parts of their lives such as touching, tasting, and learning about the different objects in their environment. The babies also exhibit their fine motor skills in grasping objects such as toys or objects in their environment as well. Cognitive development is portrayed in reference to object permanence and language development within the babies’ lives as well. The infants demonstrate an increasing curiosity in their environment and begin to understand that objects exist even when they cannot see them. The language development can be heard continuously in the film and the infants engage in constant babbling, make different sounds, and create gestures to communicate with their caregivers as well. Finally, the film highlights the sociocultural aspects of development of attachment and social bonds. The film shows the strong emotional connections between the infants and their caregivers to show the importance of attachment in early development. Moreover, the film shows the diverse cultural contexts of the infants and their caregivers to emphasize the influence of cultural practices on developmental as well.

Throughout the documentary, several consistencies were noticeable with the readings and discussions about development in infancy. For instance, the idea of subjective self-awareness, or the understanding that the babies are distinct from the world around them, can be seen. The babies demonstrate this in showing that they are awareness of their bodies through recognizing their hands and touching everything around them. The concepts of language development of prelinguistic speech and crying are also prevalent in this film as well. The audience was able to hear the utterance of sounds that the babies made such as cooing, squealing, gurgling, and laughing within the first six to twelve weeks of infancy. Later in the film, or around six to ten months of infancy, the babbling of the babies can be heard as well. In addition, the distinction between the types of crying that the babies produce can be heard throughout the documentary. The basic cry can be heard in situations where to babies were hungry or tired, as it was soft and then gradually more intense. The mad cry could be heard when the babies were in an upset situation such as the caregiver not being in sight as it is more intense than a basic cry.

Cultural practices affect several aspects of development that contribute to a child’s overall lifestyle and behaviors. The film presents four distinct cultures and there childbearing practices to show how different and similar the process of development is within each unique background. One similarity that can be seen is the milestone of the babies crawling and walking as each of the four infants were able to demonstrate this gross motor development regardless of their environment. Another similarity is the interactions the babies have with their caregivers as each infant engaged in significant interaction with their parents and family members. This shows that across cultures it is understood how crucial these social interactions are for the babies’ and it its impact can be seen in that the babies’ have close connections with these people. Lastly, all four infants demonstrated themselves using play as a form of learning as they were playing with toys or simply exploring their environment.

While each infant is learning differently from playing, it is understood that play time is essential to their development and its significance is seen as the babies’ look to play in their environment. On the other hand, there were differences that can be seen across the four cultures in the context of development. One major difference was the physical environments that each infant grew up in as Mari and Hattie were in more urban settings and Ponijao and Bayar were in more rural settings. These environmental differences influence their daily activities, experiences, and learning in their development. Another difference is the different early exposures and interactions each infant has that contributes to their development. For instance, Bayar has frequent interactions with livestock which increases his understanding of animal behavior and makes his learning environment unique. In contrast, Mari has exposure to structured activities of playgroups and educational activities which increases her understanding of how these interactions work as well. Altogether, the similarities and differences from “Babies” highlight how cultural practices significantly influence overall development in infancy and childhood.

Overall, I believed this documentary to be insightful into the lives of infants as it provided me with a different perspective on the development of babies. The documentary allowed me to explore the beauty of early childhood development across four different cultures and understand the importance of each background. One of the greatest strengths of the film was its visual representation of the natural behaviors and interactions of the infants without the use of narration as it allows for a more in-depth exploration of their lives. The film has the strength of effectively demonstrating the impact of cultural practices on development as it provides the unique aspects of growing up in distinct environments. However, the main limitation of this film would be that it does consider the various developmental challenges that occur in infancy, such as disabilities or delays. It simply explores the lives of four healthy babies which does not encompass all babies of early childhood development.

One of the most memorable moments for me in “Babies” was watching the curiosity of the babies in their own environment. The film showed Ponijao playing in a puddle, Bayar looking at the livestock and landscapes, Mari mesmerized by the fast life of Tokyo, and Hattie seeing the sights and listening to the sounds of her environment as well. These scenes showed me how instinctual curiosity truly is, especially in infancy and how it is common across each infant despite their cultural background. I found myself more drawn to the similar cultures of my own and felt I had to pay more attention to the others to better understand and appreciate the value of their experience. Altogether, this film offers a fascinating exploration of early childhood development as it shows the joys, challenges, and wonders of infancy within the cultural practices and environments that shape the development of each child.