

## 5 Cross-cultural comparisons

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### Comparison of infants across countries

In planning our research we have asked the question, ‘Do Australian children differ in their temperamental styles from children from other cultures?’ There have been a number of studies of temperament in children from different countries including the USA, Scandinavia, Taiwan, Africa, Canada, the UK, and Germany. Some of these studies are hard to compare with our own because they use different methods of measuring temperament, and children of differing ages. However, we were able to make some comparisons between Australian, American, Greek and Chinese infants where the same questionnaire (Revised Infant Temperament Questionnaire, Carey and McDevitt 1978) had been used, either in English, or in translation, with children in the first year of life.

We found considerable cross-cultural variation in temperament, confirming the belief that temperament should not be considered in isolation from cultural context. In this study the most alike groups were Australian and American infants, although the American infants were more active, rhythmic, and intense. The Greek infants showed a more negative temperament profile overall, especially on the dimensions of Mood, Approach-Withdrawal, Distractibility, and Adaptability. Chinese and Greek infants were rated as least active and did not differ from each other in Activity. Chinese infants were also more reactive and intense than all other groups and, like the Greek infants, they were rated as more negative in mood. The closer parallels between Australian and American infants may reflect similarities in cultures where sociability, extraversion and a positive outlook are valued and encouraged.

### Comparisons of project children born in Australia with families from different ethnic backgrounds

Approximately 25 per cent of the families in the study had one or both parents born in a country other than Australia. This is approximately the same proportion as is found across the whole Australian population. We compared the temperament and behavioural characteristics of the various ethnic sub-groups in our sample. These included a Mediterranean group (Italian, Greek, Yugoslavian and Lebanese, comprising 11 per cent of the sample); those of British origin (Britain, New Zealand and Ireland, 12 per cent of the sample); and smaller sub-groups from the US, Africa, Northern and Southern Europe, and the Asian sub-continent.

From infancy up until pre-school age, we found some significant differences between the various groups in the profiles of temperament of their children. For those families with parents originating from Britain and Northern Europe, temperament profiles did not differ from those for Australian-origin children. Children with one or both parents coming from a Mediterranean country (Italy, Greece, Yugoslavia, Lebanon) were more likely to be reported as having a difficult temperament, and a higher level of behavioural

difficulties. Infant welfare sisters and pre-school teachers also reported similar kinds of differences for this group.

There is evidence for a distinctive profile of Australian children as reported by their mothers. For example, they seem to be somewhat more 'easy-going' and less active and intense than North American children were 'easier' to manage and had fewer adjustment problems than a comparison sample of infants with Greek parents.

However, by the time the children reached primary school age, the group differences in temperament and behaviour that had been previously seen had mostly disappeared. It was also the case that some of the ethnic group families dropped out of the study relatively early, so group numbers became too small to allow us to make further comparisons.

## European and Australian infants and toddlers

Working with colleagues in psychology in Europe (Dr Giovanna Axia from the University of Padua, Italy; and Dr Andreas Demetriou, from the University of Thessaloniki in Greece), we have further studied the question of ethnic differences in temperament, through studies of infants and young children born and reared in Greece and in Italy. We compared these groups using the same measures and methods of analyses. Greek infants in Greece were rather like Greek-family infants in Australia despite their different environments. Generally they were rated as having more problems than were reported for Australian infants.

In the study of a group of toddlers from Italy, compared with toddlers from Italian families in Australia, and with toddlers with two Australian parents, we found that sociable, intense, reactive, and 'emotional' temperament characteristics were typical of Italian-born toddlers. They differed quite considerably from wholly-Australian-family toddlers. The Italian-Australian toddlers, that is, those with one or more parent born in Italy but living in Australia, were in between these two groups in their temperamental profiles. Hence this study suggested some interaction between environmental influences and biological dispositions in young children, and it also supported the cultural expectation of higher emotionality in Italian children.

There are many possible reasons for these ethnic differences within the Victorian population. One strong possibility is that different cultural backgrounds are associated with different values and expectations for child behaviours. What is 'difficult' behaviour for one culture may not be so for another. In one of our smaller studies for example, we found that Australian mothers are more likely to stress the importance of personality or temperament features in their judgement of a young child's manageability and likeableness. By contrast, parents born in Southern European countries placed more emphasis on 'biological' factors such as ease of feeding and sleeping routines. These comparative studies highlighted the interaction between 'nature' and 'nurture' factors in child development.

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### *Further reading*

See items 5, 13, 21, 22 and 34 in the list of Australian Temperament Project publications and Lusnats, 1988 in the References at the end of this book.