

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 382 341

PS 023 159

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 TITLE Children, Norms and Values in Three Countries on Three Continents. Reprints and Miniprints, No. 823.  
 INSTITUTION Lund Univ., Malmo (Sweden). Dept. of Educational and Psychological Research.  
 REPORT NO ISSN-1100-3391  
 PUB DATE Dec 94  
 NOTE 19p.  
 PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
 DESCRIPTORS \*Child Development; \*Childhood Attitudes; \*Child Rearing; Comparative Analysis; Cross Cultural Studies; Cultural Background; \*Cultural Influences; Elementary Education; Elementary School Students; Emotional Development; Foreign Countries; Norms; \*Parent Child Relationship; Social Development  
 IDENTIFIERS Cross Cultural Testing; Cultural Dependency; India; Kenya; Sweden

ABSTRACT

This study examined children's perceptions of child-rearing norms and values of the culture where the child is raised and provides a cross-cultural comparison of child development in India, Kenya, and Sweden. Children ages 8 through 13 in Kenya were asked questions regarding good and bad behavior and parents' sanctions, the results of which were compared with the previous surveys of India and Sweden. The findings came under four themes: (1) relations to society, parents, teachers, and friends; (2) obedience, adherence to rules or the making of one's own decisions; (3) children's duties, work and school; and (4) personality. The comparison showed that children in India and Kenya have strong relations to their families, while Swedish children are dependent on the social welfare system. Children in India and Kenya consider obeying adults to be good behavior, whereas few Swedish parents tell of teaching their children to obey. In India, school is the child's primary duty; in Kenya the necessary chores at home must be carried out; but in Sweden, no demands are placed upon the child. The results show that cultures support the development of certain character traits in individuals. (AP)

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# CHILDREN, NORMS AND VALUES IN THREE COUNTRIES ON THREE CONTINENTS

Gudrun Ekstrand

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December 1994

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# CHILDREN, NORMS AND VALUES IN THREE COUNTRIES ON THREE CONTINENTS

Gudrun Ekstrand

Ekstrand, G. Children, norms and values in three countries on three continents. *Reprints and Miniprints* (Malmö, School of Education, Lund University), No. 823, 1994.

The present study is concerned with children's perceptions of child rearing norms. The report is based on data from three countries: India, Kenya and Sweden. Children in the age bracket 8-13 years have answered questions regarding what constitutes good and bad behaviour, and the parents' sanctions.

The report summarises data from a previous study in India and Sweden, and compares them to new data from Kenya. A thematic analysis is performed on data from the three countries.

Keywords: child development, child rearing, cross-cultural research, cultural values, cultural transmission, emotional development, norms parental behaviour, social development, social learning.

# **Children, norms and values in three countries on three continents**

by

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## **1. Introduction**

By the age of 9, a child has become a cultural being with norms and values specific to the culture in which he/she is raised. The child is aware of what is good and what is not, what his/her parents' expectations are with regard to chores etc., and what sanctions are exercised if rules or norms are infringed.

This paper builds in part upon previous studies of how children in India and Sweden, aged from 8 to 13 years, answered four simple questions. For a full account, see "How children perceive parental norms and sanctions in two different cultures" (Ekstrand & Ekstrand, 1986 a,b). This paper will report on how Kenyan children answered the same four questions. Methodological and epistemological issues in cross-cultural research will also be treated. Finally, a thematic analysis is carried out of a number of areas of interest in all three cultures: India, Sweden and Kenya, norms and values in child-rearing.

### **Questions**

The overriding problems are: Which are the specific norms and values in different cultures? Are small children able to perceive abstract and contradictory norms? Do children understand what is expected from them by their parents, teachers and culture? Is culture imprinted on children in such a way that it is possible to note differences between children from different cultures in their attitudes and their understanding of themselves and society? To find out, four simple questions were put to groups of children in three cultures, India, Sweden and Kenya.

1. What is good behavior in children?
2. What is bad behavior in children?
3. What do your parents do when you do something good?
4. What do your parents do when you do something bad?

### **Method**

The following should first be stated with regard to methodological and epistemological issues. All of the children interviewed attended school. The answers given by the children in India and Kenya may be influenced by the fact that the samples were drawn from school children. As drop-out rates are high in India and Kenya, it is possible that different answers would be obtained if school drop-outs were included in the study. In Sweden, all children are required to attend school by law. Children failing to attend may be collected by the police.

The questions were put to the children verbally by their teachers. The teachers were instructed not to provide the children with examples of good or bad behavior. Instead, if the children were unable to understand, their teachers provided synonymous explanations of the concepts involved so that the children could understand. For example, they might ask, "What is a good child?", "What would make your parents happy? - or angry?"

The children were asked to respond in whatever way occurred to them and in their mother tongue. The translation of their answers into English was performed mainly by their teachers.

### **The problems of cross-cultural research**

It is difficult, almost impossible to find natural categories and to categorise the answers in a consistent manner. The answers are often complex and difficult to interpret. There are problems of translation and behaviour described with similar words may actually be valued totally differently in the three cultures. In Sweden, running, laughing and screaming children are considered to be healthy, happy and joyful. Parents often encourage such behaviour by pretending to chase their children or by tickling them. In India, on the other hand, a running, a screaming child is considered to be badly raised and guardians would seek to prevent such behaviour. Words or concepts such as "harmonious child" or "obedient child" have different semantic contents and are thus loaded with different cultural values. A category system would easily become so detailed that all clarity would be lost or so broad and ambiguous as to be useless.

I have chosen to discuss the results from the point of view of four themes:

1. Relations to society, parents, teachers and friends
2. Obedience, adherence to rules or the making own decisions
3. Children's duties, work and school
4. Personality

### The samples

The samples in India, Sweden and Kenya are described in Tables 1, 2 and 3.

From table 1, we can see that several children did not give their actual age but gave only their grade in school. Five children gave neither their age nor their grade.

**Table 1.** Children in the Indian sample by Age/Grade and Sex

	Age 9	10	11	12	13	Grade 5	6	7	Unknown	Sum
Boys	7	9	18	12	5	6	9	4	20	90
Girls	1	17	17	9	1	7	12	8	33	105
Unknown									5	5
Sum	8	26	35	21	6	13	21	12	58	200

**Table 2.** Children in the Swedish sample by Age and Sex

	Age 8	9	10	11	12	13	Sum
Boys	8	21	27	33	25	8	122
Girls	9	23	25	38	24	6	125
Sum	17	44	52	71	49	14	247

**Table 3.** Children in the Kenyan sample by Age and Sex

	Age 7	8	9	10	11	12	Sum
Boys	1	6	7	5	-	1	20
Girls	2	8	5	-	1	1	17
Sum	3	14	12	5	1	2	37

The Indian children are all from Cuttack in the state of Orissa. They come from all castes with all SES groups represented. However, relatively few of the children come from the lower castes rendering the sample somewhat middle-class biased which is fairly representative of the school-going population in Cuttack.

In Sweden, the children come from three different areas:

- 1) the city of Malmö, 2) rural parts of south-eastern Sweden, and
- 3) the town of Övertorneå in the north of the country.

The Kenyan sample consisted of two classes in the school connected to the teachers' training college in Mombassa.

## 2. How children in Kenya answered

The Kenyan children have provided very short and simple answers. Many have given more than one example of good or bad behaviour in the same category. 37 children gave 54 responses indicating work, such as helping parents with chores, as good behaviour. The following list indicates the number of alternative answers and not the number of children who responded in a certain way.

### 2.1 What is good behaviour in children?

#### **Work (n=54)**

Helping parents in the home, helping others, helping to dig, fetching water, cleaning the house, cleaning the classroom, washing clothes, washing smaller children, sweeping up, scrubbing floors, doing good work, shopping, cooking for mother, baby-sitting, tending goats and sheep, helping father in the garden, doing as you are told, running errands when you are sent.

#### **Respect 48**

Respecting parents, mother, teacher, others, elders, visitors, people.

#### **School 24**

Reading at school, writing at school, learning at school, enjoying reading at school, learning well at school, enjoying going to school, always knowing the name of the school, being bright at school, doing well in class, enjoying reading books, being educated, reading when told to by parents or teachers.

#### **Manners 17**

Good manners, having table manners, asking for permission, welcoming visitors, standing when the teacher enters the classroom, praying before eating, going to church, responding when called.

**Obeying/heeding 15**

Obey/heed parents, mother, teachers, brothers and sisters, the priest.

**Personality 15**

Being clever, being good, being good to others, being kind, not being mean, being peaceful, being responsible, persevering, loving one's brothers and sisters, loving people, loving teacher, lending things to others, sharing.

**Not misbehaving 14**

Should not: fight others, abuse, insult, steal, smoke, be mean

**Cleanliness 4**

Washing one's body, brushing one's teeth, be clean, wear good clothes.

**Other answers 13**

Keeping quiet, staying quiet when the teacher is out of the classroom, Play well, play with others, being organised in playing, not fighting back if beaten, or arguing with parents.

**2.2 What is bad behaviour in children?****Fighting 41**

Pinching others, biting others, hurting others, hitting others on the head, kicking people, being rough with others, fighting back when beaten, ride bicycle and knock others in the head, killing.

**Stealing 24**

Stealing books, pens, money, snatching things, stealing others' property.

**Abuse 21**

Abusing parents, others, using abusive language.

**Lack of respect 12**

Not respecting others, mother, elders.

**Not working 12**

Refusing to be sent on errands, refusing to do as told, refusing to go into the garden, not carrying the baby to help mother, not doing the dishes

**Giving insults 11****Destruction, vandalism 10**

Breaking cups, plates, glasses, spoons, TV, ripping books.

**Not behaving in school 8**

Not studying at home but playing instead, playing in class, talking when the teacher is trying to teach, running from school, not enjoying reading, playing the fool in school.

**Not listening/ disobedience 7**

Not listening to parents, teachers, being stubborn.



### Misbehaving 22

Smoking, drinking alcohol, playing in church when priest is preaching, doing bad things, arguing with parents, enjoying singing and going to discos, not loving teachers or parents, denying things, refusing things, having bad manners, being mean, playing tricks on people, not praying before eating, losing things, laughing at father, laughing at visitors, laughing at grandparents.

#### 2.3 What do parents do when children have done something good?

They buy presents  
 They buy shoes, dresses, socks  
 They buy soda  
 They love me  
 They buy playthings  
 They buy books, pens mangoes, oranges, meat, a watch, bags  
 They make nice food, take me for a walk, take photographs

*"If you are good you are treated good you will go with the parents. If you are bad you are left behind. You have to stay at home" (nine-year-old boy).*

#### 2.4 What do parents do when children have done something bad?

Parents beat children, mothers beat children  
 Mother doesn't love me  
 Child is ignored, parents do not give child presents, parents punish child

All the children could give examples of things that their parents do when they are good. Less than 50% of the children could provide an answer concerning what parents do when children are bad. In Kenya, punishment usually involves being beaten and that may be difficult to talk about or admit to.

### 3. Thematic analyses; three cultures

In cross-cultural research, there is a conflict between reporting data and finding a theoretical structure of meaning. On the one hand, cultural analysis is the primary objective of cultural research, but on the other hand, every cultural event consists of details which the

researcher must make visible. Usually this problem is solved by packing research reports full of statistics and details in the hope that the readers will be able to discern any cultural meaning by themselves.

As a cross-cultural scientist, one gains a special knowledge of the cultures under study and is able to understand situations and statements in their specific contexts. In my opinion, researchers have an obligation to not only report data but also to establish a framework in which this data can be seen as culturally meaningful.

### 3.1 Relations to society, parents, teachers and friends

Children in India and Kenya have different relations to the people around them than do Swedish children. Common to all children throughout the world is the dependence on others for survival. In India and Kenya, the family is an institution to which the individual can look for succour. This is one of the reasons why the family unit in these cultures is so strong. In Sweden, society has taken over many of those duties which earlier belonged to the family. In Sweden, the individual, even a small child, is now dependent on the social welfare system. As an institution, the family is very weak with its members bound to one another more by emotional ties than economic ones. Children in India and Kenya illustrate their relations to their parents, grandparents and teachers by responding that good behaviour in children involves showing respect to their elders.

**Table 4.** What is good behavior in children?

	India	Sweden	Kenya
Respect for elders	19%	3%	73%

In Sweden, there is currently some debate concerning respect for others. Those groups in society which were previously seen as weak, oppressed or neglected are now demanding respect. The debate surrounding these issues also concerns children. Many organisations have been established whose sole purpose it is to protect the rights of children, preventing their misuse, abuse and neglect. All children in Sweden are aware that parents, teachers and others are prevented by law from using physical punishment. In some instances, this has caused problems by, for example, depriving teachers of methods for correcting extreme troublemakers at school. Today, there is more discussion about respect for children than the other way around.

The goal in Sweden has been to raise children as independent

individuals who appreciate their democratic rights.

In India and Kenya, children are raised to be part of a hierarchic family structure for their entire lives. In India, the extended family is the ideal even though the number of nuclear families is growing. Children are able to observe how their future lives will develop by watching their parents and grandparents. Laughing at your grandparents may mean that you will be laughed at later in life. If parents provide poor role models by treating grandparents with disrespect, then they too can expect to be treated in that way when they are old. When interviewing parents in different cultures, I have often been told that it is extremely important to be respectful of the elderly to set a good example for your children.

**Table 5.** What is good behavior in children?

	India	Sweden	Kenya
Group oriented behavior	-	9%	-

Only the Swedish children have answered that good behaviour involves being able to be together with and co-operate with other children of the same age. In interviews with parents and day-care centre staff it has emerged that requirements that children be able to adapt to having other children of the same age around are rated very highly. It is of course important for adults in a society where almost everybody works outside the home that their children enjoy being in a group and are able to keep themselves occupied. Swedish children are consciously trained to be loyal to their peer group. In their teenage years, the group becomes even more important to these children and his/her own family must accept a secondary role. The Swedish family is weak in many ways. In part, the most important bonds between its members are of an emotional nature. Divorce is on the increase. Women no longer need men to be able to cope financially. Society assists families in taking care of children and the elderly. For a long time, it was said to be very important to have pedagogically trained staff taking care of the children. The parents lost faith in their own abilities and often sought expert pedagogical and medical advice as to how they could best fulfil their role as parents. However, there are signs that the importance of parents is once again being recognised. Disrespectful children and youths, fights and mobbing in schools and the increasing levels of street violence have contributed to questions again being raised concerning parents' efforts. But it will be difficult to make young people accept the authority of parents and teachers.

when they have been taught to question authoritarian systems.

### 3.2 Obedience, adherence to rules or making of own decisions

The raising of children can be process oriented or product oriented. By a process oriented upbringing, I mean one wherein the process itself is the goal while a product oriented upbringing is one which strives toward a previously determined end result. It is easy to see the differences between the two models if one analyses themes such as: obedience, adherence to rules or the making of one's own decisions among children in different cultures.

Children in India and Kenya consider obeying adults and listening to those who are older to be good behaviour. Parents in India and Kenya want their children to listen to them, to be obedient, to follow established rules and to fulfil the demands that are set for them. Parents are considered to have succeeded with their children's upbringing if the children are obedient and considerate. The product, the obedient child, has been formed by the method of upbringing.

Few Swedish parents tell of teaching their children to obey. Instead they want their children to learn the processes which will result in their being able to think for themselves, to question established truths and to resist external pressures. Parents in Sweden are not unused to being questioned themselves by their own children. Considering this, it was surprising to see that as many as 24% of the Swedish children still said that good behaviour involved obedience.

**Table 6.** What is good behavior in children?

	India	Sweden	Kenya
To obey/ heed	35%	25%	40%

This represents a change in the goals of child-rearing in Sweden which is no more than one generation old. The older generation were taught to be obedient and to follow the advice and instructions of their elders. The school reform and the new syllabuses which were introduced in the early 60s involved redirecting the goals of child-rearing. One no longer talked of "fostering" children. The democratic human being became the ideal goal and children are being trained in the processes of democracy. Swedish children are taught at an early age to gather together in

order to practise decision making. They learn to listen to arguments, evaluate them, to argue for their own case, question information, express an opinion, to be able to compromise, and finally to be able to adapt to the decisions which are made.

In pace with these new ideas gaining a foothold in schools and homes, new problems arose. Parents and teachers checked themselves in order not to behave in an authoritarian manner towards children. Children with inadequate life experience could not always cope with the freedom provided by a democratic system and in such cases, adults came into conflict because they did not dare to establish limits. A small number of young people abused this boundless freedom and, in worst cases, could become role models for gang oriented friends of the same age. Parents and teachers, who had only learned to use conversation and verbal rebukes to correct wrongful behaviour in children, often felt powerless and watched over. Far too many parents learned to simply put up with children's misdemeanours if not screaming and arguing with children who behaved inappropriately.

**Table 7.** What do the parents do when children have done something bad?

	India	Sweden	Kenya
They punish/beat us	36%	9%	(11/15 73%)
They scold us	18%	34%	-
They talk, explain	4%	26%	-
No answer	23%	4%	59%

The nine percent of Swedish children who gave answers in the "They punish/beat us" category gave examples involving less violence, "...they grab me by the arm" or "they shake me". None of the Swedish children answered that their parent spanked or beat them. Despite this and despite laws forbidding spanking, there are parents who physically mistreat their children although this is of course hidden in the home. In Sweden, even cases of mild physical punishment of children can result in parents or teachers being brought to trial.

Product oriented child-rearing evaluates a child's behaviour in each individual situation, relating this to the child's age and background. In India, I often heard parents cite the following: "*Treat your child like a prince until he is five, like a slave from five to fifteen and then as a friend*". There is a cultural pattern which the

child learns. At a certain age, which differs between cultures, the demands on children are tightened and wrongful behaviour on the part of the child is immediately corrected by those around him/her.

### 3.3 Children's duties, work and school

It is important to remember that all the children in this study are school children. When they talk about their duties, being a good student is one of them, at least in India and Kenya where school is a privilege and not a compulsion.

**Table 8 .** What is good behavior in children?

	India	Sweden	Kenya
To do well in school/read well/	50%	2%	43%

In India and Kenya, parents who send their children to school must pay for school uniforms, books and pens. Sometimes, they must also pay a school fee. Not all families can afford this. For the poorest families, keeping a child in school may involve making great sacrifices. Thus, the child's performance in school is important. The children are made aware of the fact that as long as they behave well, do their homework and generally succeed in school, this can outweigh disadvantages. Such may be the fact that they cannot, for example, help to work to provide for the family but are, instead, a burden on the family economy. Failure in school often means that children become drop-out cases. Dropping-out is a big problem both in India and Kenya.

Swedish children see school as a right and sometimes, in cases where individual students feel unmotivated in their studies, even as something they are forced into. In the debate on education in Sweden, methods of motivating children to do their best in school are frequently discussed. Most Swedish pupils are ambitious and want to do well but groups of student who do not feel that school is meaningful and who would prefer to be doing something else are, nonetheless, still to be found within the school system. Corresponding groups in India and Kenya are not to be found within the school system.

The alternative to school is work. By work, we mean various things. When young people in Sweden want to work, they want paid work. In India and Kenya where many families are extended joint families and where the family is the only social safety net, only a few family members have paid work, while the others contribute with unpaid work.

**Table 9.** What is good behavior in children?

	India	Sweden	Kenya
To work	-	-	57%
To be helpful	11%	22%	33%

To illustrate how the Kenyan children describe work and helpfulness, I cite three of their answers:

*"What a good child should do, Help parents, do the wash, help others, scrubbing the house, help parents to dig, sweep the house..."*  
Boy 8 years

*"A good child should go whenever she is sent, help mother to wash utensils, should scrub the house, should help to wash clothes. A bad child refuse to be sent, doesn't carry baby, doesn't wash plates"*  
Girl 9 years

*"Good child goes to the shop, goes to the garden to dig, milk cows, looks after goats and sheep, does good i class, be bright"*  
Girl 9 years

For a western researcher, it is difficult to understand how a little girl of nine can fulfil all the demands placed upon her and still be good in class.

When Swedish children talk about being helpful, they say that the attitude of "being helpful" is good. The children understand that they should be available if someone should ask for help. At this age, it is usually a matter of fairly simple tasks such as laying the table or running a quick errand. Swedish children also learn to put things away and tidy up after themselves. At an early age, they are trained to keep their own rooms in order. No Swedish children have, at this age, any demands upon them of the magnitude of those on the Kenyan children.

The difference between the three cultures could be described in the following manner. In India, school is the child's primary duty while other chores are secondary; in Kenya, the attitude is that the necessary chores about the home must be carried out and that this is where the child's primary duty lies, although he/she should also, preferably, do well in school. In Sweden, no demands are placed upon the child that he/she should do well in school at an early age. Such demands are usually articulated by the children themselves

when they enter the higher grades at school.

When interviewed, Swedish parents stated that the child's future is his/her own responsibility and a matter in which they as parents do not wish to influence or direct their children. Whether their children wish to concentrate on their studies or something else it is up to their own free will. Demands on independence and choosing one's own future, for example by making all decisions regarding which study programs to take, are among the heaviest demands made on young people in Sweden.

### **3.4 Personality**

Cultures support the development of certain character traits in individuals. This can be discerned from the surveys of children and is supported by the family interviews carried out in India and Sweden. Each culture has its own ideal personality type which serves as a goal in the raising of children. Swedish visitors to India are surprised to find the children so quiet and calm. Indian parents take their children with them to restaurants and cinemas without the children disturbing other customers at all. Indian visitors to Sweden think that Swedish children scream awfully and that Swedish parents do too little to control their children's behaviour in public places. The Kenyan sample is limited in this study but it is still possible to discern a difference in how the answers are formulated. No Swedish child would have answered like the Kenyan children do. The Kenyan children should be strong and resilient, living up to their responsibilities and able to resist temptations which distract them from their duties. In Sweden, children should be happy, safe and harmonious. A child can confirm this by showing him/herself to be happy, laughing, running and yelling out his/her joy for life. Swedish children must not be threatened by any dangers. Ponds are fenced off, protective barriers are put up and the child's environment is made as safe as money and technology can allow. The Lappish minority in Sweden often criticises Swedish parents on this point. They say that Swedish children do not learn to be aware of dangers. Instead, they learn to trust the authorities to prohibit everything which can endanger the individual, thus assuming that someone else always bears the responsibility. The Lappish parents feel that this dependency on others for security counteracts other goals which the Swedish parents have in raising their children, such as independence.

In the ancient Indian Veda scriptures, we can find an explanation as to the ideal which Indian parents have as their goal in raising their children. The old caste system lives on in the form of demands on people to fulfil certain duties. Although the character development of a Brahmin and a Kshatriya may have different



goals, wisdom and knowledge being the goal of the Brahmin, and courage, justice and nobility being the goal of the Kshatriya, the warrior, common to all castes are demands on self-control, discipline and duty.

The character ideals of individual cultures can be found in religious writings and the creeds to which people ascribe in each culture. Other decisive factors are the way in which people live and make their living; factors which differ between cultures. In India and Kenya where several branches of a family may live under the same roof, nobody can be allowed to lose their self-control. Indian children have written that they are thrown onto the street if they misbehave at home. They are not allowed to come back in until they have learned to control themselves. In Sweden, on the other hand, the ideal is to show one's emotions and express them openly. This is especially true regarding small children. Crying, screaming, angry or sad children are seldom prevented by their parents from displaying these emotions. In Sweden, western psychology has taken over the influence previously exerted by religious writings as a provider of norms, not least where the ideal personality is concerned. Parents and teachers, who often feel uncertain and do not dare rely on their own impulses, happily seek counsel in the psychological literature. The psychological welfare of the child is all important.

In the way in which each culture encourages its citizens towards different ideal personalities, we can note differences between cultures which can be described in terms of process or product orientation. The process oriented child-rearing methods found in Sweden place the greater emphasis on how the child feels. Reasons for wrongful behaviour in child are sought outside the child. A harmonious and secure child behaves well. Guilt is removed from the actual child. In India and Kenya, where the product is the goal, it is the behaviour of the child that is judged and sanctions are applied to correct behaviour which is seen as being wrongful. How the child feels, mentally and physically, is not attributed the same degree of importance. Instead, it is considered quite all right for the child to feel bad after being sanctioned; he/she has then learned not to repeat the behavior concerned.

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ISSN 1100-3391