A cultural–ecological perspective on early childhood among the Luo of Kisumu, Kenya

Jonathan Tudge and Dolphine Odero-Wanga

Introduction

One way of thinking about the global–local distinction is the difference between the epistemic child (what all children, or all humans, hold in common) and the more anthropological approach of focusing on what is different between groups, particularly the impact of culture. To understand both the extent to which children are the same the world over and the differences between children, a good deal of research has been conducted on child-rearing practices in many different cultural groups. In order to show just how varied children’s experiences are, cross-cultural psychologists have largely been interested in “maximizing the differences” between the groups studied, often comparing White middle-class practices in some part of the industrialized world (typically North America) with practices from rural and/or poor areas of the “majority” world (Kagitcibi, 1996; Rogoff, 2003; Whiting & Edwards, 1988).

One problem in this approach is that some particular types of majority-world experiences are brought to the fore, and treated as though they are the norm in the society or cultural group being studied. Typically these experiences are those that most clearly serve to distinguish between experiences in the researcher’s home society or cultural group. Cultural differences, in other words, are reduced to being something exotic. An alternative approach is to take seriously the heterogeneity that exists within any cultural group and to identify cultural variations even among groups that are not maximally different.

Kenya provides a good case in point. Child-rearing in Nyansongo featured as one of the Whitings’ original Six Cultures studies, and data from several Kenyan tribes were included in the follow-up book (Whiting & Edwards, 1988). Nonetheless, only Weisner (1979) studied the impact of city life on young children’s experiences, contrasting the lives of Abaluyia children living in Nairobi with those in rural areas. For the most part scholars have left the impression that Kenya is populated with non- or semi-educated parents who raise their children in rural areas. Kenya, clearly, has large and complex
cities—Nairobi, Kisumu, etc.—which include families that are very well-off by
the standards of the society, many who live in large slums and struggle to find
work and bring in enough money, and children who are living on the streets,
either having been orphaned by the growing AIDS crisis or because their
parents cannot afford to feed them (Swadener, 2000). Are ways of raising
children in the city similar or different to rural ways in Kenya? Weisner’s
data suggest that there might be some important differences. One also has
to recognize the impact of the passage of time—ideas about raising children
have changed since the days of the Six Cultures study, although this may not
have been adequately accounted for (see, for example, Weisner, Bradley, &
Kilbride, 1997; Whiting, 1996).

Our goal has therefore been to do research in societies different from both
the industrialized and majority worlds, while holding certain factors constant
(all families come from cities, medium-sized by the standards of the society,
that allow a range of occupational and educational possibilities). In addition,
we have deliberately chosen to study families drawn equally from two groups
that differ by the parents’ educational background and current occupation.
Although we are interested in comparing the experiences of children in these
different groups, the goal is not to judge on a single measuring stick (a way
of assessing which groups do better or worse), or to look at what is standard
across all children, but to study the ways in which culture and children’s
development are intertwined among groups that are not maximally different.
What this allows is an examination of both “global” factors (do parents who
are well educated and have professional jobs raise their children in ways
that are different from their working-class counterparts?) and those that are
more local (when holding constant city living, educational level, and type of
occupation, what are the differences among ways of raising children among
families of different societies?).

In this chapter we will focus on some of the everyday activities and
interactions in which young Kenyan children from Kisumu engage, comparing
them with the activities and interactions engaged in by children in cities in
the United States, Russia, Estonia, Korea, and Brazil. What we will show
is that social class, in a city such as Kisumu, is as important in helping to
explain the children’s experiences as is the broader society of which they are
a part, and that global considerations, as well as those that are local, play an
essential role.

How have young children in Kenya been portrayed, or, more specifically,
how have previous scholars described the way in which they spend their time?
By comparison with the children from the US and Western Europe, a good
deal more of their time is spent in work. As Martha Wenger pointed out,
the amount of time children in Kenya spend “contributing to the household
economy” is “one of the most striking differences” (1989, p. 92) between
them and American children. Authors writing about Kikuyu, Gusii, and
Giriama children from as young as two or three have shown them as often
engaging in little chores and helping their mothers in the fields, and girls,
by the age of five, looking after their younger siblings (LeVine & LeVine,
Jonathan Tudge and Dolphine Odero-Wanga

The amount of work that these children were involved in did not mean that they had no time for play, however. In part because the Giriama boys studied by Wenger (1989) had more unstructured time than did girls and also because their work generally occurred outside the household area, they had more opportunities for social play with their peers; girls, as might be expected, were more often found playing with infants or toddlers. Adults were conspicuous by their absence from the play of these children from different groups in Kenya. As LeVine and LeVine (1963) reported about Gusii families in Nyansongo: “Mothers do not play with their children, fondle them, or display affection for them openly” (p. 165). Although mother–child relationships were described as “relatively informal” mothers did not typically reward their children, even verbally, and were far more likely to use fear to control their children’s behavior. Giriama children also learned early not to expect their mothers or other adults to engage with them in play. In fact, children “are reluctant to attract adult attention, since this often incurs an undesirable consequence, such as the assignment of some task” (Wenger, 1989, p. 96).

Siblings, as we know from the work of Weisner and Gallimore (1977), play a key role in the development of young children in all parts of the world, but do so particularly in communities in which play and conversation involving young children and adults are not considered appropriate. This has certainly been the case in many Kenyan communities, as documented by Edwards and Whiting (1993) in Ngema, the Embu children studied by Marion Sigman and her colleagues (1988), as well as Gusii (LeVine et al., 1994), Kipsigis (Harkness & Super, 1985), and Giriama children (Wenger, 1989).

**Heterogeneity**

The studies done in different parts of Kenya, featuring children from different tribes, reveal a good deal of similarity in the types of activities and typical social partners. This should not be taken to mean that there is homogeneity of experience. Much of what we have learned about children’s activities in the various parts of Kenya comes from studies in rural areas of the country. That is perhaps not surprising, given that at the end of the twentieth century only about 20 percent of the population was living in urban centers (Odero, 2004). The urban population is growing rapidly, however, with greatly increased pressure for housing, employment, and adequate food (Swadener, 2000). Some earlier data from Nairobi, the capital, reveal a pattern that is quite different from what has been reported from Kenyan villages, with children engaged in far less work than their counterparts in rural regions, and different types of interactions with adults, particularly their mothers (Weisner, 1979). Weisner found that few of the typical chores mentioned earlier, so helpful in a rural setting, were needed in the city, and the rural children that he also studied were observed doing twice as many chores as were those who lived
Early childhood among the Luo of Kisumu, Kenya

Weisner also found that the children in Nairobi, much like their counterparts in the United States or Western Europe, were more likely to seek interaction from their mother, and were more likely to want attention or praise from her.

The other major source of heterogeneity has to do with the passage of time. Most of what we know about young children’s lives in Kenya comes from the observational studies conducted as part of the *Six Cultures* research, started in the 1950s with additional research in different parts of Kenya in the 1970s (Whiting & Edwards, 1988). These data are somewhat misleading, however, because they have mostly failed to address the issue of the huge changes that have occurred in Kenya since independence in 1963. Jomo Kenyatta, in one of his first acts after independence, promised free and universal primary education, believing that education was going to be the means to modernize the society. A decade later all school fees for the first four years of school were abolished, and by the mid-1970s almost 80 percent of the children were enrolled in primary school. This is particularly impressive, when we know that it was not until the 1940s that it was considered appropriate for girls to go to school (Whiting, 1996). The number who move on to secondary school is currently far less, and is partially based on exam results in primary school (although girls are far less likely than boys to move on to secondary school regardless of exam scores). “The result is a highly expanded educational system that rivals those in the most industrialized countries in terms of its complexity and competitiveness” (Buchmann, 2000, p. 1350).

Participation in formal schooling, and preparation for formal schooling (in child-care centers), still coexists with children’s work, although it is increasingly clear that children have less time to work as they spend more of their time in school (Buchmann, 2000). By the turn of the century more than 80 percent of children, whether from rural or urban areas, were enrolled in school (Swadener, 2000). Girls are thus no longer as available to look after their younger siblings, although sometimes the latter accompany their older siblings to school (Swadener, 2000). As noted by Edwards and Whiting (1993), when the Ngecha study began in 1968 children (primarily girls) who were aged five to ten were the ones primarily responsible for looking after toddlers. A few years later, as children of this age were primarily attending school, the responsibility for looking after toddlers had fallen to children as young as four. The recognition of the impact of these types of historical changes was highlighted by Edwards and Whiting (2004) in the title of their most recent book, *Ngecha: A Kenyan village in a time of rapid social change*.

The role of fathers

We have hardly mentioned fathers so far, and in part this reflects the prevailing belief, as reported in the literature, that in Kenya the raising of children is primarily the work of females, whereas the male role is that of providing food, clothing, and (in more recent times) the money for school fees for the children. Kipsigis fathers’ roles with toddlers were restricted to verbally
disciplining them and occasionally teaching them chores (Harkness & Super, 1992). Among the Logoli, too, contact with the father occurred far less frequently than it did with the mother (Munroe & Munroe, 1992). The LeVines pointed out that: “The Nyansongo father is viewed by his child as an awesome and frightening person, and with some justification. Fathers do not play, fondle, or praise their children, and, unlike mothers, they do not feed them or comfort them when hurt” (1963, p. 178).

The Cultural Ecology of Young Children project

The information that we have about young Kenyan children’s everyday experiences provides some clear contrasts with what we know about children’s lives in much of the industrialized world. However, what we know has been heavily influenced by the types of studies that have been done, and the overwhelming focus on children living in rural parts of the country. Our feeling was that this focus has not done justice to the changes that have taken place in Kenyan society, with increasing numbers of Kenyans living in urban areas and schooling having taken on a good deal of importance. In fact, scholars need to take seriously the profound impact of the growth of schooling and urbanization in many parts of the majority world, and be careful not to confuse the “Kenyan” experience with the lives of Kenyan children growing up in rural areas at a time when schooling was not so important.

We therefore decided to collect our data in Kisumu as part of the Cultural Ecology of Young Children project, a cross-cultural and longitudinal study conducted in seven different societies, the United States, Russia, Estonia, Finland, Korea, Kenya, and Brazil (Tudge, 2008). In each of these societies we selected a single city, medium sized with at least one institution of higher education and a wide range of occupations. The children in the study were drawn from middle- and working-class families, with the parents’ educational background and occupation being the criteria for social-class membership. When the children were three years of age, each child was observed for 20 hours, in such a way as to cover the equivalent of one complete day. Our focus was on the activities and interactions going on around the children, those they became involved in, their manner of involvement, their partners in those activities, and so on.

Cultural–ecological theory

The theory on which the first author bases his work is named cultural–ecological theory, at least in part because it draws heavily on the theories of both Lev Vygotsky and Urie Bronfenbrenner. Central to the theory is the idea that development occurs in large part through the typically occurring everyday activities and interactions involving developing individuals and their social partners. It is in the course of engaging in these regularly occurring activities and interactions that children come to fit into their cultural world. They learn what is expected of them, the types of activities considered
appropriate or inappropriate for them, how they are expected to engage in these activities, the ways other people will deal with them, and the ways in which they are expected to deal with others. Children often initiate activities themselves, and try to draw others into those activities, and it is in the course of these activities that they try out different roles and observe the roles of others, both with regard to themselves and with others.

The culture within which these activities and interactions take place clearly plays a central role in influencing the types of activities and interactions that are available to the young of that culture, and influences which of them the children are encouraged to participate in (or discouraged from). The group’s values and beliefs about raising children, the practices they consider normative or appropriate, the resources and settings available to them, and so on, are clearly implicated in the children’s typically occurring activities and interactions. As Tom Weisner (1996) wrote, if you want to know how a child will develop, the most important single thing to know about that child is the cultural group of which he or she is a part.

But so too are the children’s own characteristics. In any cultural group there are children who are differentially inclined or motivated to learn some skills, ideas, practices than are others. Children themselves change the nature of the activities and interactions in which they engage simply because of their own unique natures. The same is true, of course, of the other people (children and adults) with whom they are interacting.

The young of the cultural group thus do not simply imitate or internalize the practices of those who are more competent in the ways of the culture but recreate those practices in the course of engaging in them. There is thus always the possibility that those practices will change over time. The same is true for values and beliefs about raising children. Although the older generation may try hard to transmit those same values and beliefs to their young it is not always the case that the younger generation accepts their parents’ ideas. In cultures in which tradition is considered highly important there is greater pressure on children to accept their parents’ ways; in other cultures, however, in which creativity and independence are more valued, one should expect to find faster change. Cultural groups are thus themselves developing under the influence of the new generation while at the same time they are helping that new generation become competent in the ways of the group.

In other words, cultural–ecological theory treats development as a complex interplay among cultural context, individual variability, and change over time, with the key aspect being activities and interactions, where context and individual variability intersect. We want to use this theory to make sense of child rearing among the Luo of Kenya, or at least those who were living in Kisumu during the late 1990s.

To this point we have written about individuals being members of specific cultural groups, but have not so far provided a definition of culture. The definition that we use stipulates that cultures consist of groups that share a general set of values, beliefs, practices, institutions, and access to resources. The group may have a sense of shared identity, or the recognition that people
are in some way connected and feel themselves to be part of the group, and
the adults of the group should attempt to pass on to the young of the group
the same values, beliefs, practices, and so on.

By this definition of culture, members of different countries or societies
constitute different cultural groups. Or rather, if we are able to show that
members of different countries or societies have sets of values, beliefs, practices,
institutions, etc., that they feel themselves to be part of the same group as
other people of the same country or society, and share a commitment to
pass on those values, etc. to the next generation, we should feel comfortable
saying that these different groups constitute different cultures. However,
precisely the same point should be made about different groups within any
given society or country. Any group for whom the above definition holds may
in this case be considered a cultural group. Within a given society’s politically
defined borders may be found many different cultural groups, and people
thus have to be considered members of more than a single cultural group.
Different ethnic groups, different socio-economic groups, regional groups,
and groups that are more locally constituted may all constitute cultural
groups, so long as they conform to the above definition.

It is important to remember, however, that these types of cultural
differences do not determine the activities and interactions in which
individuals engage. Actions and interactions are a complex amalgam of
individual characteristics, the particularities of the setting, and the culture as
it is currently constituted.

**Kisumu and our participants**

Kisumu obtained the status of a city in 2001, is the third largest urban area
in Kenya (with a municipal population of a little over 200,000, with more
than twice that number in the broader Kisumu area), and is situated about
300 miles (500 km) from Nairobi on the shores of Lake Victoria. The town
was founded in 1901, originally with the name Port Florence, and achieved
the status of Municipal Council in 1960. It is the major administrative,
commercial, and industrial center for Western Kenya. Agriculture is the
primary industry, with textiles, sugar and molasses production, and fishing
also found in the region. Tourist attractions in the area include the wild life
(hippos, leopards, hyenas, and impalas can all be found), and Lake Victoria
is also a draw for tourists (Odero, 1998). The town is also home to Maseno
University, one of six State universities in Kenya. Close to Lake Victoria, the
city has asphalt roads and six- or eight-story buildings, with a bustle of cars
and bicycles, but in other areas the roads are gravel or dirt, and one of the
main modes of transport is the bicycle taxi.

A number of different ethnic groups live in Kisumu, but the large majority
(85 percent) is Luo, the second largest ethnic group (of a total of almost
50) in Kenya. They are descended from pastoralists who had originally
moved from Sudan, several centuries ago, and who settled primarily in the
area of Lake Victoria. The Luo, traditionally, worshipped their ancestors,
and although many were converted to Christianity their religious beliefs still combine both traditional and Christian practices. There is a similar duality of marriage arrangements, with “statutory” (monogamous) marriage going hand-in-hand with “customary” (polygamous) marriage, with both being recognized by the Kenyan government (Odero, 1998).

Kisumu is divided into “estates,” approximately one square kilometer in size. The estates are differentiated by social class, with some estates having larger and better-appointed houses or apartments and being home primarily to families with college education and professional occupations, whereas other estates feature smaller and simpler residences and are occupied by working-class or poor families. In addition, many families now live in large slum areas, with very small structures occupied by many individuals, and increasingly children and families have no fixed home, but live on the streets of Kisumu (Swadener, 2000).

The families in this study were recruited in the mid-1990s primarily through the local office of birth records. We initially tried to contact the parents of all 30 children who had been born two to three years earlier in five different estates (three middle-class estates and two working-class estates). In the middle-class community seven of 16 families had relocated; of the remaining nine families six agreed to participate (67 percent acceptance). In the working-class community nine of the 14 families who had had a child three years earlier had already left the area, but the remaining five families agreed to participate (100 percent acceptance). Eleven other families (four middle class and seven working class) were contacted by “snowball” methods, with information on the presence of these families being provided by families who had already agreed to participate. Two of the working-class families who were approached in this manner declined to participate, but the remainder were happy to do so. A total of 20 families, equally divided by social class, were thus included in the study.

In the middle-class group, all mothers and fathers had had at least some college education, and some had a graduate degree. Fathers’ occupations included university lecturer, sales manager, public administrator, and owner of a travel agency. All of the middle-class mothers worked outside the home, with occupations such as high school teacher, registered nurse, and nutritionist. The houses in which they lived were much larger than those of the working-class families, having between three and five bedrooms, two or more bathrooms, in addition to a living room and kitchen. The rooms had a mixture of carpets and tiles on the floors, and paintings on the walls. Each house was on its own lot of between ¼ acre and 1 acre, typically behind a fence. The children thus had a lot of room to play, but it was not easy for them to interact with children from neighboring houses because of the fences between them. Mostly, then, the children played with their siblings or with friends who had been invited over to play. Of the 10 middle-class families, five rented their homes and five had bought the land and built the houses.

The working-class fathers were primarily skilled and semi-skilled manual laborers, and had jobs such as plumber, pipe fitter, store clerk, and messenger.
None of the mothers worked outside the home, with the exception of one who had a job as clerk, but all of them engaged in some type of subsistence selling (vegetables, fruit, bread, etc.) to supplement the family income. One of the fathers had had some college education, but in the remainder of cases the level of education ranged from primary education to the completion of high school. The working-class families who participated in our study mostly lived in houses that had one or two bedrooms, a living room, and bathroom. Larger families in these estates often have the older children sleeping in the living room (or sometimes in the kitchen), whereas the younger ones sleep with their parents in the bedroom. The floors tended to be of cement, with no covering, and the walls featured family pictures, calendars, and sometimes cuttings from the newspapers (Odero, 1998). Eight of the 10 working-class families shared bathrooms that were built outside the houses, and they also had to fetch water from a well in the center of the estate. Three of the families did not have electricity, and relied on lanterns. These families shared compounds with their neighbors, and only in two cases did houses have any type of fence. This meant that the children were free to mingle with the other children in the compound, playing one minute in and around their own home, and the next in another child’s home.

All families were ethnic Luo, and all but two were monogamous. The two children who were from polygamous families were both working class, and lived in different sections of town with their mothers. Fathers in polygamous families divided their time between the wives’ households, although one of these fathers spent the majority of his time with the family that included the child who was being observed, as this child was the only male child that he had with either wife. The middle-class families tended to be smaller (1–4 children) than those of working-class background (2–7 children). The experiences of the two groups of children were also quite different, in that the middle-class children all attended some type of private preschool, which were well equipped with commercially made learning and play equipment. These children spent their weekends going to the lake, a museum, shopping with parents, or taking swimming lessons (seven of them did that). Many of the working-class children did not attend any preschool, which fits with the fact that, at the start of the 21st century, fewer than 30 percent of Kenyan 3- to 6-year-olds attended preschool (Swadener, 2000). Working-class children who attended went to community schools in which the playthings were made from locally available materials (for example, a doll made from banana leaves, a car made from cans of juice with bottle tops for wheels). These children also went shopping but they, unlike their middle-class peers, went alone or with other children, to buy something for the family.

Methods

In the CEYC project we were interested in the typical everyday experiences of children. Our approach to observations is that we simply followed the children, putting no restrictions on where the child went or on the people...
who interacted with the child. We followed each of the children in our study (who were all between 28 and 48 months of age when the study begins) for 20 hours over the course of a week. We did this in such a way that we covered the equivalent of a complete day in their lives, observing on one day when the child woke up and for the few hours following, another day the hours before he or she went to sleep for the night, and on other days during the hours in between. Using this technique, we hoped to have a good sense of the types of activities in which the child was typically involved, the partners in those activities, the roles taken, and so on.

Although each observer observed for a total of 20 hours, data were only gathered systematically during a 30-second period every six minutes. The remainder of the time was spent coding and writing field notes, while continually tracking what the participants were doing. Time was signalled in such a way that the participants were unaware of when their behaviors were being coded, and the child who was the focus of attention wore a wireless mike so that the observer could hear what was being said while staying at a distance from the activity.

Our approach captures children’s activities in an ethnographically appropriate way. For example, children were not separated from their context and we tried to change nothing except the change that necessarily occurred because an observer was present. Our aim was thus to get a sense of what the child’s experiences typically were. We observed for enough time, we believe, to give a reasonable sense of the types of activities that typically occur in these children’s lives. The approach also allows us to examine the types of activities that are going on in which the children do not participate, or those in which they would like to participate but are discouraged from so doing.

The major activities in which we are interested are displayed in Table 8.1, and are divided into five major groups (each of which is subdivided into numerous subgroups), comprising lessons, work, play, conversation, and “other” (sleeping, idleness, eating, bathing, etc.). For more details about the coding scheme, see Tudge (2008).

\section*{Results}

\subsection*{Engagement in activities.} One of the questions in which we were interested was the extent to which the children in these various cities engaged in similar or different types of activities. At first glance, just focusing on the broadest categories, the Luo children in Kisumu did not look different from children in any of the other cities. They were observed in play, for example, in a little less than 60 percent of our observations, almost exactly as often as were their counterparts in Greensboro (United States), Tartu (Estonia), and Porto Alegre (Brazil). They played less than did children in Suwon (Korea) and Oulu (Finland), but were more likely to be observed in play than were children in Obninsk (Russia).

There was a good deal more variability across cities in the extent to which the children were observed in lessons, but those in Greensboro and Kisumu
Jonathan Tudge and Dolphine Odhro-Wanga

were observed in this type of activity in about 6 percent of the observations—less than children in Obninsk and Tartu (approximately 10 percent), but more than children in Oulu, Suwon, and Porto Alegre (between 2 percent and 4 percent) of their observations.

Children in Kisumu were involved in conversation in about 7 percent of their observations, but children in Greensboro, Obninsk, Tartu, and Porto Alegre were similarly involved; their counterparts in Suwon were observed conversing a little less, but children in Oulu were the ones who stood out—they were about twice as likely to be involved in conversation.

The one type of activity in which Kisumu children led the way was in terms of the extent to which they were involved in work—about 15 percent of their total observations, which was three times the amount of their counterparts in Porto Alegre. However, the children in the remaining cities were observed being involved in work in between 8 percent and 13 percent of the observations. Even in this case, therefore, it is difficult to argue that children’s lives in Kisumu are as different from those in other parts of the world as scholars have traditionally portrayed.

One might be tempted, therefore, to make the argument that local variations are not particularly important, at least when considering children who are around three years of age. They all spend the majority of their time in play, and are involved in the other activities much less, and not to a greatly different extent. However, there are two ways in which these preliminary conclusions may be misleading. First, even if children around the world spend a majority of their time playing, it is worth considering what they are playing with, and with whom. Second, as we argued earlier, even within a single city, with families from a single ethnic group, it may be possible to see differences in activities because of the families’ social-class background. It is by looking in more detail at children’s activities and interactions that it becomes very easy to see the impact of local forces.

For example, in terms of the objects with which they were playing, the Kisumu children (from both social-class groups) look very different from all other children. They were the only children who played pretty much evenly with toys, objects from the natural world, with no object at all, and, most common of all, objects from the adult world. Children were observed playing with Vaseline containers, bottle tops, an old oil bottle, a tube of toothpaste, old cassette tapes, a spice container, a box of cookies (without eating any of them!), a walking stick, climbing on the fence, and with innumerable other objects from the adult world.

The children in Kisumu were also far more likely to be observed playing either with objects from the natural world (leaves, branches, clay) or with no objects at all than were the children in the other cities. Children in Kisumu were much less likely to have been observed watching television than children in the other cities, although this finding cannot be explained simply by the relative absence of television sets in the working-class Kenyan families we observed, as the middle-class children in Kisumu also watched very little television, despite the fact that their families owned televisions.
The same type of point can be raised about the type of lessons in which the Kisumu children were involved. Middle-class Luo children were actually involved in more than twice as many academic (school-relevant) lessons (over 4 percent of their total observations) as were any other group of children (including their working-class counterparts in Kisumu) in the entire study. White middle-class children in the United States are usually portrayed as being often engaged in rather didactic lessons (see, for example, Rogoff, 1990, 2003; Tudge, 2008). It is therefore noteworthy that they were involved in only half as many academic lessons as were the Luo middle-class children. The working-class children in Kisumu were also involved in twice as many academic lessons as were their White counterparts in Greensboro.

Similarly, although the Kisumu children did not look so different from the children in the other cities in terms of the amount of conversation in which they were involved, child–child conversation occupied a far higher proportion (about one-third) of their total conversations than was true in any other group. As other scholars have found, children in Kisumu were much less likely to be involved in conversation with adults. This was because in Kisumu children spent a lot of their time in the company of other children.

As noted earlier, these Luo children were more involved in work than were children in any other city. However, when looking separately by the social-class background of their families, it was clear that it was only the working-class children who were quite heavily involved in work. We actually have two measures of this involvement. First, we considered the extent to which the children were either doing some work themselves or were watching someone else at work but not involved in a more active way. The working-class children were involved in this looser sense in approximately 20 percent of their total observations, far higher than any other group. By contrast, their middle-class counterparts were only involved in work in less than 10 percent of their observations, a percentage that was less than that of the children in Obninsk (Russia), Tartu (Estonia), or Oulu (Finland), and similar to that of the African American children in Greensboro.

When we looked at actual participation in work (doing chores, going to fetch something from a local shop, etc.) we found that the working-class Luo children from Kisumu did indeed participate more in work (8 percent of their observations) than did children from any other group, but not greatly more so than did children from Obninsk and Tartu (around 6 to 7.5 percent of their observations). In other words, these Luo children did work, but not to a much greater extent than children from parts of northeast Europe. More interestingly, their middle-class counterparts in Kisumu participated in work only a quarter as often, in just 2 percent of their observations, a proportion that was lower than that of the children in Greensboro and Suwon!

The impact of child care. To this point we have focused simply on the activities in which the children were observed, but we can understand better why it was that the Kisumu children engaged in the activities in which they did by looking at where they spent their time and with whom. Across the entire set of cities where we gathered data, children spent between 60 percent
and 80 percent of their time in and around the home. Children in Kisumu and Tartu (Estonia) were most likely to be observed there, children in Greensboro and Porto Alegre (Brazil) the least likely. One of the reasons was that the Luo children were relatively unlikely to spend much time in some type of formal child-care setting—less than 10 percent of our observations. It is worth noting, however, that the children in Tartu and Suwon (Korea) were less often observed in child care, although children in Porto Alegre were observed almost 30 percent of their time in child care.

However, as we have already pointed out, there were some clear class differences. Six of the ten children from middle-class backgrounds spent more than 20 percent of their time in a formal child-care setting, whereas only one of the working-class children did so. It is clearly worth looking at the types of activities in which the children engaged when they were within child care or outside. Although the children obviously spent far more time away from child care than within, all of the Luo children who went to child care spent a much smaller proportion of their time engaged in play when in child care than when in other settings. In this they were similar to the African American children in Greensboro, but quite different from the children in the White communities of Greensboro and children in Oulu and Porto Alegre, all of whom actually spent a greater proportion of their time playing within child care than elsewhere.

What is even more noteworthy is that virtually all of the children, in each group where some children spent at least 20 percent of their time in a formal child-care setting, spent somewhat more time playing with school-relevant objects (looking at books, playing with mathematically shaped blocks, etc.) inside child care than outside. In the case of the children in Kisumu, however, the differences were dramatic. The middle-class Luo children, for example, were observed engaging in some type of school-relevant play in 15 percent of their observations in child care, compared with just 5 percent when not in child care. One working-class Luo child was actually observed in this type of play in 25 percent of the observations in his child-care center, but virtually never outside of it. To put these findings into perspective, children in the other groups were typically observed playing with school-relevant objects in less than 5 percent of their observations within child care.

The findings were even more striking when looking at school-relevant lessons. In all other groups, the proportion of these types of lessons observed within child care was similar to the proportion observed when the children were in other settings. The range of observations of these lessons was from virtually none, among the working-class children in Porto Alegre, to around 5 percent in Greensboro. By contrast, the Luo children (middle class and working class alike) were engaged in school-relevant lessons in no fewer than 20 percent of their observations within child care, and 1–2 percent elsewhere. A further 10 percent of their observations within child care involved interpersonal lessons, or lessons on how to get along with others, tidying up after oneself, and so on. In terms of the other activities, Kisumu children were much less likely to be involved in conversations and work
within child care compared with elsewhere, as was true of virtually all other groups of children.

Clearly, the function of child-care centers in Kisumu is to give children experience with school-relevant objects and concepts—around half of the time that children spent in child care was devoted to explicit or implicit preparation for school. By contrast, in most of the other groups the function of child care seemed to be more related to allowing children to play. This is not to say that the child-care teachers were not interested in preparing children for school, but perhaps had the idea that children learn in the course of their play.

It is worth comparing the experiences of the children who did not attend child care with those who did; regardless of social-class background, those who did not attend were observed very rarely in any type of lesson, but those who attended child care were often involved, but only when they were in child care. In their observations outside of child care, those who attended were equally unlikely as those who did not attend to engage in lessons. In other words, it cannot be the case that only children who were particularly interested in learning were sent to child care.

Partners in activities. To this point we have simply written about the various activities in which the Kisumu children were involved. The literature uniformly states that Kenyan adults do not see play as something that they should get involved in, and Kenyan children are highly likely to play with other children. To some extent this was born out by our data. Adults (mother, father, grandparents or other extended family members, or teachers) were only observed as a partner in their children’s play in less than 10 percent of the observations, which was far less than for any other group (the next fewest was about 30 percent in Greensboro and Suwon, Korea). By contrast, about 50 percent of the Kisumu children’s observations of play featured one or more other child. This was not so different from the proportion in the other cities however, where the proportion ranged from a low of about 30 percent in Porto Alegre to 40–45 percent of the observations in each of the remaining cities. Somewhat surprising, certainly in comparison with the literature, is that in almost 40 percent of our observations of these Luo children playing, they were playing by themselves. (This does not mean that others, children or adults, were not around, simply that no one else was participating in their play.) These proportions did not differ greatly by social class in Kisumu, although the middle-class children were more likely to play with adults than were those from working-class families.

This does not mean, however, that adults were uninvolved with their children in other types of activities; they were involved with them in over 50 percent of the work and lessons in which the children were engaged. This was not so different from the situation in Greensboro (about 60 percent in each case), although of course the Luo children (or at least the working-class Luo children) spent a much greater proportion of their time involved in work than was the case in Greensboro and the other cities. The Kisumu children, as we mentioned earlier, were less involved in conversation than were the
children elsewhere, but when they were involved child–child conversation
only occurred in about 40 percent of the observations of conversation, with
adults being involved in the remaining 60 percent of cases. This was still less
than the proportion elsewhere (from a high of 80 percent in Porto Alegre,
Brazil, to 70 percent in Suwon, and about 75 percent elsewhere), but our
data certainly do not support the idea that adults are uninvolved in young
children’s activities in Kenya.

Although adults could include teachers in child care, extended family
members, or completely unrelated adults, we looked with particular interest
at the role of the child’s own mother and father. Our expectation was that
mothers would be more involved in all activities with their children than
would fathers. This expectation was based partly on prevailing beliefs in
many countries about the respective roles mothers and fathers should take
with their children, but also because mothers may simply be around their
young children more than are fathers. Because we always noted whether the
mother and father were present in the same setting as their child we are able
to assess not only the extent to which the parents were involved with their
children but also the proportion of the time that they were engaged, given
their availability to their children.

In each city, mothers were far more involved with their children in
lessons than were fathers. However, when examined proportionally, in only
two cities were fathers as involved in lessons as were mothers—in Kisumu
and in Porto Alegre, and the Luo fathers were more likely to be involved
in their children’s lessons, once they were present in the same setting as
their children, than were fathers in any other city. The same was true of the
work in which their children were involved—Kisumu fathers, given their
presence in the same setting, were more likely to be involved with their
children in work than were fathers elsewhere (although in this case mothers
were still more involved, both actually and when considered relative to their
availability to their children). Only in Porto Alegre were fathers as involved
in work with their children as were mothers, once availability was taken into
account.

As mentioned earlier, neither mothers nor fathers in Kisumu were greatly
involved in their children’s play. Mothers, in fact were far less involved here
than were mothers in any other city. The Luo fathers were not much less
involved in their children’s play, however, than was the case in Greensboro
or Obninsk, and they were actually more involved in their children’s play
than were the fathers in Suwon (Korea). When expressed as a proportion
of availability, however, Kisumu fathers were actually more likely to be
involved with their children in play than were the mothers. (The same was
true in Suwon, and in Porto Alegre, again, fathers and mothers were equally
involved, given their availability to their children.) The situation was similar
in terms of conversation; again as noted earlier, Luo mothers and fathers were
not much involved in conversation with their children, and fathers in Kisumu
were both less involved in fact and proportionally than were mothers, as was
true in all cities except Suwon.
Discussion and conclusion

The everyday activities in which these children were involved appeared to be quite different from those reported in the literature (the children engaged in much less work, were far more involved in preparation for school, and there was more evidence of parent–child engagement). The Luo children we studied, in general, do not look so different from those in the other countries, which perhaps speaks to a global phenomenon, given historical trends, of children playing, and engaging to a much lesser extent in work, lessons, or conversations. However, a closer look reveals some striking differences in experiences as a function of social class, and by presence in child care.

One possible reason for the differences in data reported here and elsewhere is that we collected our data only from a single urban setting, and from middle-class and working-class families. If data collected in similar ways in rural regions revealed patterns more in line with the previous literature this would be clear evidence of the heterogeneity that exists across Kenya, and should serve as a challenge to those who refer simply to “Kenyan” child-rearing practices.

Another reason, one that seems at least as likely to explain some of these differences, is that the introduction of formal schooling, as opposed to more informal ways of learning what one needs to attain competence within one’s cultural community (see Rogoff, 1990), has had similar effects as have been seen in many parts of the world (Cole, 2005; LeVine, Miller, Richman, & LeVine, 1996; LeVine & White, 1986). This is surely part of a global trend that is reflected equally in the Kenyan government’s signing the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the 1990 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, and the 2000 Millennium Development goals. As others have argued (see Freitas, Shelton, & Sperb; Göncü, Özer, & Ahioğlu; and Elliott, this volume), it is easy to see the impact of globalization at this level.

However, as Freitas and her colleagues noted, global forces meet local possibilities. The pressure for children to spend more time than ever before in settings designed explicitly for them may be a global phenomenon, but how it is reflected varies greatly not only among different countries but also within the same country. Both Kenya and Brazil are considered part of the majority world, but children’s child-care experiences in Kisumu and Porto Alegre could not look much more different! In one case, children are being prepared for formal schooling and in the other they’re being given opportunities to play in a safe environment. We make no claims whether one approach is “better” than another—such a judgment surely depends on the society’s current values and beliefs.

Moreover, even within these two countries can be seen different approaches to child care. In Kenya when children of the poor spend time in a child-care center they are much more likely to be cared for rather than educated. As Swadener (2000) has documented, the major goal behind providing settings for young children in tea and coffee plantations and other agricultural areas is
Jonathan Tudge and Dolphine Odero-Wanga

to make it easier for mothers to work. Children of wealthy families, however, go to a child-care center in order to ensure that they will be able to enter one of the more prestigious schools. A very similar claim can be made for both the United States and Brazil (see Freitas et al., this volume), with two parallel systems of care and education being developed.

It thus seems clear that in order to understand children’s development, one cannot only consider the forces of globalization that, at this particular historical period, appear to be treating certain values and practices as “better” than those viewed as traditional. The impact of local forces can be seen in the different ways in which globalization has influenced different societies from the majority world—as we have shown in this chapter, although there is global pressure for schooling and preparation for schooling, children’s activities and interactions in child-care settings are quite different in Brazil and Kenya. Moreover, even within Kenya there are clear differences in children’s typical activities in rural versus urban areas, and even within a single Kenyan city parents have different ideas about the types of settings into which to place their children and the types of activities and interactions they view as appropriate for them. The majority world is far from homogeneous, and its enormous heterogeneity must be taken seriously when trying to understand the development of its children.

References


Early childhood among the Luo of Kisumu, Kenya


