INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we examine some aspects of children’s play in cultural context. Our assumption is that development occurs differently in different cultural contexts, and that these differences are at least as important as similarities that exist across cultural contexts. Our definition of “culture” is one that includes a set of values, beliefs, practices, institutions, and tools that differentiate one group from another, and which are passed on (or co-constructed anew) from generation to generation. Cross-cultural developmental psychologists and cultural anthropologists typically make this clear by focusing on groups that are maximally different, contrasting (for example) members of a schooled society with those where there is no formal schooling, or distinguish development in a technologically simple (non- or semi-industrialized) culture either implicitly or explicitly with development in their own culture of origin (Tudge, Putnam, & Sidden, 1993). As Bornstein recently pointed out, with reference to cross-cultural comparisons:
“Not unexpectedly, the modal comparison is with U.S. samples” (1991, p. 7).

The best example of a study of young children’s social ecologies—the activities in which they engage, the settings in which they are situated, and the company they keep is that of B. Whiting and her colleagues in the “Six Cultures” study (Whiting & Whiting, 1963) and its more recent incarnation (Whiting & Edwards, 1988). They and their colleagues used very similar observational methods to collect data on children in 13 different communities, from the United States (Orchard Town, New England), Mexico, Philippines, Okinawa, Liberia, India (3 communities) and Kenya (5 communities), and also gathered much less extensive spot observational data on children in four more communities in Kenya, Guatemala, Peru, and the United States (Claremont).

All but two of the communities are drawn from non- or semi-industrialized societies, with six different communities drawn from rural Kenya. By contrast, the United States features as the sole exemplar of a technologically complex society. Whiting and Edwards pay relatively little attention to the Claremont sample, not surprisingly given that only eight observations were collected on each of 17 children, which means that Orchard Town represents the primary example of children who are being reared in an industrialized, schooled society. To what extent is this sample representative of such societies? Rather poorly, we think, on at least two grounds.

First, there is no reason to believe that children’s activities or parent-child relationships in the United States are typical of those experienced by families with different cultural norms but similar levels of industrialization in Asia, for example (Befu, 1986; Choi, Kim & Choi, 1993; Hsu, 1985; Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989; Stevenson, Azuma, & Hakuta, 1986; Stevenson & Lee, 1989; Yi, 1993) or the former Soviet Union (Bronfenbrenner, 1970; Liegle, 1975; Mace & Mace, 1963; Tudge, 1973).

Second, there is little reason to believe that even within the United States there is homogeneity across all sub-cultural groups or within the same cultural group across time. Orchard Town, the primary representative of a community in an industrialized society, was homogeneous (as all the communities were supposed to be) and consisted of white families in which all had professional or self-employed fathers and mothers who did not work outside the home. The data were gathered in the mid-1950s, when the norm, at least for Anglo-American two-parent families, was for the mother to stay at home with her young children. Whiting and Edwards make no reference to the passage of time (for example, that currently in the United States it is far less likely for women to stay at home) or to the fact that a community from different socioeconomic, ethnic, or racial background (in the 1950s or currently) might have provided evidence for a quite different set of experiences between parents and children (Dunn, 1988; Dunn & Wooding, 1977; Heath, 1983; Kohn, 1977; Kohn & Schooler, 1983; Ogbu, 1980).

In this chapter we would like to take the argument one step further. We want to argue that differences in relation to the social stratification system (social class) are cultural differences, at least to the extent that members of different social classes have
distinctive sets of values and beliefs which are carried forward from generation to generation. To what extent is there good evidence for this position? Work on social class differences in childrearing practices goes back a good way (Bronfenbrenner, 1958; Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983; Lynd & Lynd, 1929; Miller & Swanson, 1958), but the most extensive work on parental values as a function of social class has been carried out by the sociologist Melvin Kohn, with his colleagues (Kohn, 1977, 1979; Kohn & Schooler, 1983; Kohn & Slomczynski, 1990). Kohn and his colleagues, after conducting extensive interviews with parents in this country and abroad (examples include Italy, Poland, Taiwan, and Japan), has concluded that while parents from many walks of life share certain values about their children and beliefs about childrearing, parents who work in the professional sphere (whose jobs are substantively complex, and who are likely to work with people rather than objects) are more likely to encourage self-direction and initiative in their children than are parents whose jobs are non-professional. The typical distinction that Kohn had in mind was between a manager and a line worker in a factory.

While Kohn and his colleagues were able to make a strong case for the connection between workplace experiences and childrearing values, they paid only minimal attention to childrearing practices themselves. Somewhat surprisingly, few studies have tried to establish the next link in the causal chain stretching from workplace experiences to parental values to parental childrearing beliefs to childrearing practices, although data gathered by Luster and his colleagues (Luster, Rhoades, & Haas, 1989) nicely support Kohn's thesis. (Some supporting evidence is also provided by Burns, Homel, & Goodnow, 1984; Goodnow & Collins, 1990.)

In this chapter we examine young children's naturally occurring play in four different cultural contexts, focusing primarily on the types of play in which they engage and their partners in play. Our position, in line with that taken by several scholars (Schwartzman, 1978, 1986; Slaughter & Dombrowski, 1989; Sutton-Smith, 1983), is that while young children's play may be universally found, its nature varies from culture to culture, in response to specific cultural constraints and differential degrees of encouragement.

Although many cross-cultural studies focus on societies or groups that are maximally different, we argue that potential confounds are best avoided by focusing on groups that are similar on many criteria (Bornstein, Tal, & Tamis-Lamonda, 1991). Our participants are drawn from four cultural communities (i.e., "groups of people having some common local organization and similarities in values and practices," Rogoff, Mistry, Göncü, & Mosier, 1991, p. 174), two of which are from a city in South Korea, and two from a city in North Carolina. The two cities are of medium size, with similar cultural and educational amenities, and lie on the same latitude. Clearly, however, they also differ greatly in terms of language, history, traditions, and values, for example, independence and interdependence (Triandis, 1993). Following Kohn, in both cities participants were drawn from two groups—one in which the par-
Families were asked to keep their daily routines unchanged as much as possible during the observation period. We used modified spot observations (Ellis, et al., 1981; Munroe & Munroe, 1971; Rogoff, 1978; Whiting & Edwards, 1988) to observe each child. Following a period of acclimatization, observations occurred over a period of six days, in blocks of two hours each on the first two days and the last day, and four hours each on the other days for a total of 18 hours over the course of one week, distributed so as to cover each child’s waking hours. This yielded approximately 180 observations on each child. The children were followed wherever they went during each block; they wore a wireless microphone (audible only to the data gatherer) to allow us to overhear conversations without being too intrusive. Observations were continuous (to provide information on the context of the events) but the spot observations focused on what occurred during a 30-second “window” every five and-a-half minutes. The timing of the window was signaled to the data gatherer, audible only to her, from an endless loop tape recording. We focused on:

1. the activities available to the child (i.e., those within easy ear- or eye-shot);
2. whether the child was involved in those activities;
3. if the child were involved, his or her role, who initiated the activity, who initiated the child’s involvement, and the partners (if any);
4. if there was one or more partner, their relationship to the child (related or not, age, gender) and their role in that activity;
5. the number and type of people potentially available to be partners, the presence of parents, and the location of the action.

On the final day of observation, the child’s activities were videotaped for two additional hours, to allow for assessment of reliability and for more detailed analyses of processes of interaction, but data derived from the videotapes were not included in this chapter.

The activities of interest were of four main types, each of which were subdivided further, and comprised lessons (four categories), work (five categories), conversation (three categories), and play, the focus of this presentation. We had 10 categories of play, but for the purposes of this chapter they have been grouped into four—pretend (including emulation of adult roles), play with academic objects (playing with or looking at objects such as books, numbers, and so on, but without being asked for or given information about them, which would constitute an academic lesson), watching a performance (which was almost always watching TV), and other play (which included play with toys and other objects designed primarily for children, play with objects designed for adults, play with objects from the natural world, and play with no objects, such as rough and tumble play, chasing, etc.).
PARTICIPANTS

The participants comprised 32 children (20 from the U.S. [11 females], 12 from Korea [6 females]), aged between 28 and 45 months. In both countries, the cities were very similar in terms of size, cultural and educational amenities, and presence of a sufficient number of adults who worked in the professional sphere and those whose jobs were non-professional. In each city, families termed middle class consisted of at least one parent with a college degree whose occupation, by Hollingshead criteria, was professional (range 7–9 Hollingshead ranking). Working class families were those in which neither parent had a college degree, and whose occupations were non-professional (range 2–5 Hollingshead ranking). In both countries the median family income was quite different between the two social class groups, although U.S. families typically earned a good deal more (in dollar terms) than their Korean counterparts. Participants were recruited from birth records in the United States, and by word of mouth in Korea (access to birth records not being possible there). Data were gathered by natives of their respective countries, all of whom had been trained by the first author.

RESULTS

A total of 5,725 observations were coded, in which the target children were engaged in a total of 6,751 different activities. As can be seen in Figure 1, children in each of the four communities were far more likely to be observed in play than in any other type of activity. This was particularly true of the children in the Korean communities, although in both countries the working class children were somewhat more likely to
be observed in play than their middle class counterparts. (It should be pointed out that some, although not all, of the greater observation of play in Korea may be explained by the fact that they were less likely to be observed in the "other" category, which included eating, sleeping, dressing, and so on.)

As can be seen from Figure 2, "other" play (play with toys, with objects from the adult world, with objects from the natural world, or with no object at all) comprised the largest proportion of these children's play. Expressed as a proportion of all play, the results were very similar in the two countries, with working class children engaged in other play more than their middle class counterparts. The amount of TV watching was also very similar. We shall focus more on the remaining two categories of play—pretend and play with academic objects.

On average, as can be seen in Figure 3, children in the two Korean communities were more likely to play with academic objects than were their counterparts in the United States. However, the bulk of this cross-cultural difference is explained by the middle class Korean children. In both countries, middle class children were more likely than their working class counterparts to play with academic objects, but this difference was far more apparent in Korea. By contrast, children in the U.S. communities were more likely to engage in pretend play.

Breaking these data down by gender, it is apparent that in both countries middle class girls were more likely than middle class boys to be engaged in play with academic objects, although this was not true of the working class children (see Figure 3). It is interesting to note, by way of contrast, that in our U.S. communities there was a very clear distinction between both class and gender in terms of academic lessons (differentiated from play with academic objects by virtue of either the child requesting information, being asked a question, or being proffered information about some
academic object). In the U.S. communities middle class children were more likely than working class children to engage in academic lessons, and boys in both communities were more likely than girls to be engaged. In Korea, middle class children were also more likely than their working class counterparts to engage in academic lessons, but in both groups girls engaged in more such lessons than did boys. Interestingly, the four groups of children engaged in approximately the same equivalent proportions of academic lessons.

In terms of cross-cultural comparisons, we found very interesting similarities in terms of the relative frequencies with which children were engaged in different types of play as well as some interesting differences. Most striking were the within-societal differences as a function of social class, differences that were mirrored across societies. As we mentioned above, Kohn has found strikingly similar social class differences across an array of societies. Critical to Kohn’s analysis, however, is the view that middle class parents are more likely than their working class counterparts to socialize their children to become self-directed and exert initiative; by contrast, Kohn has argued, working class parents are more likely to stress obedience and conformity in their children.

To what extent did these children exercise differential amounts of self-direction in play, as measured by their initiation of play (either alone or in collaboration with a partner), and by their initiation of involvement in play (irrespective of whom initiated the play itself)? Across all categories of play, children in each community were most likely to initiate play themselves, as is displayed in Figure 4. (Initiation of involvement in play was even more likely under their own direction—in each community more than 90% of all such initiation was under the direction of the children themselves.) Ignoring social class, the U.S. children were more likely than those in Korea.
to initiate play themselves or with a partner, but the cross-societal differences were primarily a function of within-society social class variations; Korean working class children were less likely to initiate play than children in the other three groups, as displayed in Figure 4. In Korea, middle class children were more likely to initiate play than working class children, but there was no clear difference in the United States. In the United States, boys were more likely than girls to initiate play themselves or in conjunction with another person, but this tendency was reversed in Korea.

This pattern of results hardly fits the model of middle class children’s parents’ greater encouragement of self-direction in their children. However, play is an activity that is perhaps more likely to be under children’s own direction than other activities in which children could be involved. It is therefore worth pointing out some comparisons with other activities. For example, we have argued elsewhere that middle class US children were more likely than their working class counterparts to initiate both lessons and work (Tudge, Putnam, & Sidden, 1993, 1994; Tudge & Putnam, 1996). As displayed in Figures 5 and 6, on average children in the U.S. communities were more likely than those in Korea both to initiate lessons and initiate their involvement in lessons. In both countries, however, children in the middle class communities were much more likely to exercise this type of self direction than their counterparts in the working class communities.

Finally, we wish to discuss some data regarding the children’s partners in play. As shown in Figure 7, in all communities the mother was the single most likely partner in their children’s play. This is not surprising, given that she was available to the children far more than any other single person, particularly in Korea and in the middle class U.S. community where many of the mothers were not employed outside of the home. What is somewhat surprising, however, is that the Korean children were observed playing alone almost as much as their U.S. counterparts were.
FIGURE 5. Initiation of lessons by child alone or with a partner (in %).

FIGURE 6. Initiation of involvement in lessons by child alone or with a partner (in %).
compared to people living in the United States, are more likely to stress interdependence and collectivism than independence and individualism (Choi, Kim, & Choi, 1993; Hsu, 1985). We therefore had expected that the Korean children would have played alone a good deal less than those in the United States. There is some evidence, however, that the degree of stress on interdependence is declining, particularly among the middle class, who are more influenced by Western culture (Cha, 1994; Kagitcibasi, 1989; Yi, 1993).

This finding is yet more noteworthy when we examine the role taken by the mother in the four communities. Mothers were observed engaging with their children far more in Korea than in the United States (439 observations vs. 383 observations, but these 439 observations were taken from data on 12 children rather than the 20 children observed in the U.S.). However, their engagement was far more likely to be passive (as an observer) than as an active participant in play. In the United States middle class community it was particularly striking that when mothers were engaged with their children in play they took a very active role. This finding nicely parallels research on U.S. middle class mothers' greater active participation in their infants' play (Gönçü & Mosier, 1991; Haight, 1994; Lewis & Wilson, 1972).

**CONCLUSION**

It is clear that there are some striking cross-cultural similarities in terms of both the amount and types of play in which these young children were involved. Play, as one might expect from a group of two- to four-year-olds living in most societies, occupied a good proportion of their time. Along with the cross-societal similarities, however,
FIGURE 8. Mother's role in play in U.S. (% of engagement).

FIGURE 9. Mother's role in play in Korea (% of engagement).
are within-society differences as a function both of social class and gender. In contrast to many cross-cultural studies, which for the most part deal with between-culture differences, we have argued that it is as important to take into account within-culture differences. Being raised as a Korean or a U.S. citizen is indeed likely to be associated with learning through participation in somewhat different sets of activities, learning different values and beliefs, and coming to see the world in somewhat different ways. These children's play, and the ways in which their partners play with them, both reflect cultural differences and serve to recreate them. Nonetheless, neither the United States nor Korea are homogeneous societies; focusing on social class and gender revealed striking differences within each society, some of which (particularly associated with class) were mirrored in each society.

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NOTE

1 We wish to point out that our intention is not to generalize from any "sample" to a wider population, for our participants in this research constituted the population of children (at least of those whose parents agreed to participate) of the requisite age and background from the four communities of interest. Inferential statistical tests are therefore not appropriate and have not been performed.

REFERENCES


