Cultural Constraints on Children’s Play

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For at least 40 years the literature on children’s play has been colored by the view that play is “good for children.” Indeed, there are organizations that specifically promote the notion that play is a universal “right” of children.1 Societies that limit children’s play are to be sanctioned. My position in this chapter is different. From the point of view of inclusive fitness, children should probably not be allowed to play at all (Fagen, 1977). Children engaged in vigorous play will attract the attention of predators and, being distracted, are less vigilant and aware of potential threats. Lion cubs, for example, remain quiescent in tall grass while their mother is hunting and become active and playful only when she is there to protect them. Playing, children use precious energy (Rubin, Flowers, & Gross, 1986) and increase their risk of accident and injury (Fagen, 1993). Energetic games of tag, rough-and-tumble play, and mock battles all threaten people and property. Equally dysfunctional, playing children are not contributing to subsistence; in effect they are parasites. So rather than considering strategies to increase, channel, or promote children’s play, let us instead consider the many constraints that exist to curb it.

Bogin (1998) persuasively argues that childhood is a stage in mammalian development unique to humans. As compared to the other apes, humans have much higher fertility, which Bogin attributes to the crèche-like character of childhood. Its purpose is to provide a kind of holding pattern in which the child
producing more than they consumed. And the family enjoyed the fruits of children’s surplus output for at least six years before the children married and started families of their own.

Playtime is, therefore, typically limited by the expectation that, from a certain age, children will contribute to subsistence (Munroe, Munroe, & Shminn, 1984). Rogoff and colleagues (1975) conducted a comparative analysis using Human Relations Area Files data. Using a sample of 50 societies, they found evidence that the majority provide a transition during the child’s fifth to seventh years in which they are assigned certain responsibilities such as the care of livestock and younger siblings, and the gathering of materials. They are ready to begin learning from their elders and are expected to reduce the time spent in play. Hence, the ethnographic record shows that, for most subsistence-based societies, tribes, chiefdoms, and such, children’s play is gradually replaced by work beginning at age 5 or even earlier in some cases (Gaskins, 1990).

Our own society, therefore, presents an extreme contrast to the Hadza. As individuals are excused from making a living until later and later in their lives, play fills the vacuum, or at least there is a corresponding tolerance for heavy involvement in play at later and later ages. I would stick my neck out here and argue that adult responsibility in our society has become so drastically delayed that individuals “never grow up.” I return to this idea in my conclusion.

The play–work dichotomy maps on to a male–female dichotomy. For example, Bloch and Adler (1994) found, in a Senegalese village, that girls were more likely than boys to engage in “play work.” girls transitioned from play to work earlier than boys, and girls were more likely than boys to be called away from play to work. This disparity seems to hold true in most societies, according to Whiting and Edwards (1988; see also Munroe et al., 1984). I am not aware of any carefully conducted study of playtime budgets in our own society, but I see no reason not to extrapolate from studies of child-minding and household chore allocation (Hochschild, 1989) in the United States, which show a similarity disparity—women work, men play.

The prevailing wisdom in our society seems to be that gender differences in play are primarily, or even exclusively, influenced by the culture and especially parents, through such things as toy selection (see, e.g., Garvey, 1991). I do not think so. I believe that gender-specific patterns of play are influenced as much by genes as culture. Twenty years ago, I conducted a small-scale experiment with my own daughters, Nadia and Sonia. They spent infancy and toddlerhood in Papua, New Guinea, isolated from television; their mother worked and domestic duties were performed by our houseboy. I had shipped to PNG a rich collection of “boy toys”—Fisher-Price dumptrucks, graders, and the like; wooden cars and mechanical pull-toys; a large sandbox for them to play in; a jungle gym to climb over, slide down, and swing on. And, most importantly, there were no dolls in the house. It was a safe, secure environment indoors and out, and they had the run of the place. Weather was not an issue. The only time
they played with the construction toys was when I was there to play with them; otherwise they never went near the materials. Instead, they took to raiding the dirty clothes hamper to “dress up,” and when we relented and admitted a few dolls into the house, they were enormously popular, as were most of the feminine-oriented play things that started to arrive as presents over the years. While gender clearly constrains play, careful comparative analysis within species has yet to be done.

In traditional, non-Western societies, parents emphatically do not actively shape their children’s play (Gönçü, Mistry, & Moisier, 1999), and toy-making by adults is fairly rare. Nevertheless, children reliably gravitate toward “gender-appropriate” play. Among the Kpelle (Lancy, 1996), I cannot think of a single occasion when I observed a parent directing a child’s play in a positive sense and only a few occasions when I saw them curtailing children’s play. Playing on the mother ground makes it easy for adults to supervise children, and equally important, children, observing the nearby adults, gain access to prime script material for their make-believe play. Adults, when asked, gave their hearty approval of make-believe play and, indeed, as is widely reported in the literature, parents believe that the primary means for children to acquire the skills of adults is through observation, imitation, and trial and error—not, in other words, through adult instruction.

Make-believe, or at least the imitation of one’s elders, seems to be the bedrock upon which all play is built. Fantasy play, in which the characters are taken from legend (cowboys and Indians, Romans and Carthaginians) is merely a more elaborate version of “playing house.” In one memorable scene from my Kpelle study, three toddlers, using found objects, were pretending to hull rice with a mortar and pestle—an adult activity they have witnessed every day of their lives. Games with rules also seem to be rooted in fantasy; thus, while playing “hopscotch,” children recite a litany of conquest—each square is a “town.” And it is in make-believe that children—with no guidance from adults—unerringly home in on gender-specific roles. However, societies vary in the scripts they make available for children to take up in make-believe. In a U.S. study of make-believe play in upper-middle-class and lower-class neighborhoods, there were large differences in the amount and richness of children’s make-believe scripts—especially of make-believe work, which closely corresponded to the number of people employed and the range of occupations in the two communities (Lancy, 1982). The findings of Smilansky’s (1968) and other studies of the paucity of make-believe play in poor migrant communities also come to mind. Despite the heart-warming rhetoric we dish out in our teacher-training classes, children do not have unlimited imagination; their make-believe and, by extension, other play forms are constrained by the roles, scripts, and props of the culture they live in. In fact, in Ashley Maynard’s (1999) recently completed study in a Mayan village in Chiapas, she observed older siblings guiding and teaching younger children during make-believe, focusing their attention on washing, caring for babies, and cooking.

Children imitating their elders—especially at work—is looked on with indulgence, and when adults fashion toys for children, they are, invariably, miniature tools—knives, bow and arrows, hoes, canoes (Hewlett, 1991; Hobbin, 1970). Dolls can be seen as tools when the emphasis is on learning how to carry and hold an infant as opposed to learning to dress up and primp one’s Barbie doll. Similarly, most child-produced toys are miniature tools, cooking utensils, miniature houses, and the like. The primary difference is that adults take considerable care in fashioning toy or scaled down versions of adult equipment, whereas children, as often as not, grab whatever is at hand and let their imagination do the rest. Put differently, if a child’s skill level is such that he or she can fashion accurate replicas of tools, chances are they are apprentice toolmakers in their own right—no longer playing with toys. On the other hand, play that appears to be unrelated to adult work or is otherwise unfamiliar is probably discouraged, if not forbidden outright by adults. Children’s play, in societies without formal schooling (e.g., all but a handful), is the curriculum that prepares them for adulthood and is looked upon with the same conservative eye we focus on “academic standards” and the “canon.”

A quite subtle influence that culture exerts on play, while noted by some anthropologists (Burridge, 1957), was called to the world’s attention initially by a social psychologist. I am referring to Millard Madsen’s (e.g., Madsen & Lancy, 1981) studies of cooperation and competition among children. In study after study, Madsen showed that U.S. children inevitably treated as competitive a novel game while children from village-based societies treated the same game as requiring a cooperative approach. That is, in our society, we might say that the “default option” for play is competition—including competition for toys as scarce resources—whereas in non-Western societies, the default option is cooperation.

I discovered another way children’s play is constrained in less complex, smaller-scale societies. We were testing one of Brian Sutton-Smith’s (1976) theories about the relationship between cultural complexity and the complexity of games in the play-form inventory. We found, in a sample of seven societies in Papua New Guinea, that most of Sutton-Smith’s more complex game types were absent. The reason turned out to be that in these very small hamlets where children were to forego play for work at an early age, play groups were, inevitably, small and of mixed age/gender. The only available games were those that could be played effectively by children as young as 4. Hence, only the most rudimentary—tag, target-shooting—games were played (Lancy, 1984).

A final and quite obvious limitation on children’s play is their physical and emotional health. Children who are malnourished, ill, or physically abused suffer a sharp drop in play. And from a purely statistical point of view, these privations affect an enormous number of the world’s children at any given time (Worth-
man, 1993). According to Edgerton’s (1992) analysis, at least some of this privation is brought on by well-established, almost hallowed customs that are patently maladaptive for child health and well-being.

To sum up matters, culture constrains children’s play by:

- Imposing limits on where and how vigorously children may play in the interests of safety—an interest that must be balanced against the need for children to become self-sufficient at an early age.
- Imposing chores earlier for girls than boys—leading to the expectation of economic self-sufficiency.
- Ensuring that play is appropriate to the child’s sex.
- Providing a finite set of scripts—from contemporary adult activity and from myth and legend—which children may draw on in play.
- Promoting an ethos of cooperation, at least where children are concerned.
- The sheer physical size of the community influences the composition of the play group. Game inventories, in particular, are likely to be richer and more complex, where play groups of same gender are the norm.
- Failing to provide a “benign environment” (Lancy, 1980), the society limits children’s play time.

All of which suggests that the benefits of play to children must be extensive and profound in order to overcome these pervasive attempts at restraint.

NOTES

1. The International Association for the Children’s Right to Play was formed in Denmark in 1961. An American branch was instituted in 1973.

2. A survey found little evidence of malnutrition or chronic illness among Hadza children (Jeliffe et al., 1962).


4. Nor are children discouraged from observing adults at work, providing they are not shirking on their chores. In fact, non-Western societies create a very favorable climate for children to serve as passive observers—television did not give birth to the first couch potatoes.

5. I was fascinated to learn (Wiedemann, 1989) that daughters of the Roman aristocracy did play with Barbie-like dolls—to prepare themselves as decorative accessories to their husbands. As high-ranking wives they were relieved of virtually all child-care responsibilities, hence had no need to acquire those skills.

REFERENCES


Part II

Role of Age, Gender, and Ethnicity in Play