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Mapping the landscape of children's play.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

Mapping the Landscape of Children's Play

David F. Lancy

INTRODUCTION

When I first began studying childhood among the Kpelle of Liberia in the late 1960s, I was immediately struck by the close relationship between the play activities of Kpelle children and the work they would do as they completed the “chore curriculum” (Lancy, 1980a; 1996, p. 144; 2012; 2014a; in press). At the time there was relatively little interest in the West in studying play in situ or in using play instrumentally (except at the fringes such as Montessori schools). Jean Piaget, the great child development scholar, reported on his observations of children playing marbles, but for him, the game was merely a convenient window to observe cognitive development (Piaget, 1932/1965).

Since then the landscape of play has been transformed entirely. It would not be an exaggeration to refer to a “play movement” comprising advocates for parent-child play as essential to “attachment,” advocates for the pedagogical value of play, and advocates who see play as a legal and ethical “right” of children—among others.

Schwartzman’s (1978) landmark volume cataloging anthropological reports on play brought to a wide audience the idea that play was not monolithic and was subject to considerable variability (one reason so many scholars have grounded on the shoals of play theory and defining what play is). However, I would argue that sensitivity to cross-cultural variation in play has since waned due in part to the phenomenon I refer to as “turning nurture into nature.” Basically, the child-rearing practices (nurture) of the dominant society are treated as normative (nature) (Lancy, 2010a).

As Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan (2010) so thoroughly document in the field of psychology, assertions of biological universals have been based almost exclusively on studies done in Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) societies. The researchers, theories, and subjects used in the great majority of work, as well as the journals in which the work is published, are from WEIRD society, and little attention is paid to cross-cultural variation. But as they convincingly conclude, “WEIRD people are the outliers in so many key domains of the behavioral sciences rendering them one of the worst subpopulations one could study for generalizing about *Homo sapiens*” (Henrich et al., 2010, p. 79).

I would argue that contemporary thinking about children’s play is filtered through the lens of minority world cultures and that attempting to generalize—let alone prescribe play and child-rearing practices for majority world peoples (Denham & Burton, 2003)—from this work should be done with great caution. This chapter reviews a personal collection of meaningful

differences between these two views on children's play. Like Google Earth, I want to hover over the sites typically studied by anthropologists and describe the play landscape, drawing particular attention to the contrasting landscape in the dominant culture.

PLAY WITH INFANTS

In the dominant society, mother-infant play is considered normal or even essential to the child's healthy mental development. Elsewhere, this view would be challenged (Lancy, 2007). Mother-infant play is found in only a few of the world's societies. Most of these communities are characterized by a foraging way of life, small band size, communal care of the young, lack of political hierarchy, and relative equality between the sexes. Among these groups are several studied by Eibl-Eibesfeldt. Play includes kissing, nose-rubbing, holding babies *en face* while talking to them, games of peek-a-boo, and fondling the infants' genitalia. For example, Yanomamo parents "blow-kiss, lick or manually rub the vaginal orifice of baby girls and stroke the scrotum of boys or mouth his penis until the age of three" (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1983, p. 208).

Even among foragers, however, mother-infant play may be absent, as among the !Kung, where other caretakers may play with the infant as the mother is too busy (Bakeman et al., 1990). Indeed, one of the main reasons that mother-infant play is so infrequent is the need for mothers to forage, garden, tend flocks, and maintain the household. Babies are kept close by, if not actually attached to the mother in a sling, and can be easily nursed when necessary without breaking stride. When mothers are at leisure, they much prefer to interact with adults. In the majority of societies, fathers have little to do with infant and child care (it diminishes their dignity and status), and even in the exceptional cases where they do get involved, this involvement doesn't include *playing* with infants (Hewlett, 1991).

A second impediment to adult-infant play is the infant's precarious hold on life. Across the spectrum of premodern society, infant/child mortality rates range from 25 to 50% of all births, and this includes deaths from infanticide and deliberate neglect. Furthermore, these figures are also representative of the complex societies of Europe and Asia, where infant mortality (Dyhouse, 1978) remained very high until the early twentieth century. Two common responses to this actuarial threat were to keep the infant in a state of quiescence via swaddling, protection from sudden noise and bright light, opiates, and prolonging sleep through frequent nursing. The second response was to maintain emotional distance from the infant (Lancy, 2014b). Of course these ideas are completely incompatible with a program of parent-infant play.

So our current view of parent-infant play as a given—indeed it is treated as obligatory (Trevarthen, 1983)—is a product of our very recent history. In 1914 the *Infant Care Bulletin* of the US Department of Labor's Children's Bureau warned against the dangers of playing with a baby because "it produced unwholesome [erotic] pleasure and ruined the baby's nerves." However, from 1940, "[p]lay, having ceased to be wicked, having become harmless and good, now [became] a duty" (Wolfenstein, 1955, pp. 172–173).

PLAYING WITH TODDLERS

A major point of contrast between dominant or minority and nondominant or majority society is the issue of parents playing with or, more extreme, *teaching* children how to play (Rakoczy, Tomascello, & Striano, 2005; Waldfogel, 2006, p. 43). Not only is adult-child play largely unreported in the ethnographic record, many anthropologists document parental ethnotheories that would proscribe such behavior. First, a parent conversing or playing with a child would be viewed as "eccentric . . . since . . . a child is not a valid human being until he reaches the age of

'sense'" (LeVine & LeVine, 1981, pp. 43–44). Second, most societies valorize the child as an autonomous learner who will lose that ability if others—particularly adults—interfere (Gray, 2013; Lancy, 2014a). And this view—of children requiring the autonomy to learn on their own—is practically universal (Lancy, 2010b).

One reason that village mothers do not play with their young children is that they don't want to diminish the seductive power of the playgroup (Konner, 1975; Shostak, 1981). With the arrival of the next sibling, *dénanola* (infancy) is over. Now, play begins and membership in a social group of peers is taken to be critical to *nyinandirangho*, the forgetting of the breast to which the toddler has had free access for nearly two years or more. As one (Mandinka) mother put it, "Now she must turn to play" (Whittemore, 1989, p. 92).

In multisite cross-cultural studies of child rearing, only the middle-class US sample gave evidence of playful mother-child interaction. In the remaining eleven societies, the relationship was "authoritative" (Whiting & Pope-Edwards, 1988). "From weaning, [Kako] children get used to a hierarchical relationship with their mother. . . . There is no play, no talk, no cuddle; the relationship is one of authority and obedience. In this way children learn to be emotionally independent of the mother and to fit in a wider network of kin who care for them" (Notermans, 2004, p. 15). Further cross-cultural surveys by Rogoff and colleagues underscore the divide between WEIRD and non-WEIRD communities on this issue. Only the educated mothers routinely play with their children (Rogoff, Mistry, Goncu, & Mosier, 1993). Even when village mothers were given novel objects, along with guidance and encouragement to use the objects in play with their children, they persisted in the attitude that children should explore them independently while they did their work (Göncü, Mistry, & Mosier, 2000).

Yet adult attitudes toward children's play can vary quite a bit. The Baining people of New Britain discourage nearly all play as the antithesis of proper behavior. They may "use a piece of bone to pierce the septum of the nose" as punishment and an active irritant if the child becomes too exuberant (Fajans, 1997, p. 92). Far more typical is the attitude that children's play within the peer group is an excellent way to keep them busy, cheerful, out of adults' way, and yet supervised.

Some societies go further in crediting play as an educational medium and may donate scaled-down or cast-off tools to support this process (Fortes, 1938/1970). But no society documented by anthropologists treats children's play as essential for normal development or reports concerns that children might not be getting adequate opportunities to play. On the contrary, there are so many well-documented cases of parents redirecting children's energy from playing to working that I characterized children as a "reserve labor force" (Lancy, 2014a).

PLAY WITH OBJECTS

At any age, a child will be drawn to playing with objects, but it is somewhat more apparent in the very young, who aren't quite ready for more social forms of play. Toys are rarely provided for children at this age, but they are usually permitted to play with found objects. Anthropologists frequently report (with horror) parents' indifference to and even encouragement of toddlers playing with machetes and other sharp and dangerous tools (Howard, 1970, p. 35). For example, from the Kwoma of PNG: "I once saw Suw with the blade of a twelve-inch bush knife in his mouth and the adults present paid no attention to him" (Whiting, 1941, p. 25).

Aka mothers regret it when their infants cut themselves while playing with knives, but they don't want to restrain their exploration and learning (Hewlett, 2013, pp. 65–66). Children demonstrate an interest in and willingness to explore virtually any object they can lay their

hands on, and it is not difficult to sustain an argument that object play is universal and very old. The only other primate species that routinely uses tools—the chimpanzee—is also the only species in which the young routinely play with objects (Byrne, 1995).

So ubiquitous is the tendency for children to play with components of or scaled-down versions of adult tools that I called attention to the phenomenon with the expression “play stage.” During the play stage children learn to hunt (starting with small birds and lizards) using a miniature bow and arrow; learn to husk “rice” (sand or gravel substitutes for precious grain) using a small mortar and pestle; learn to manage a herd by first caring for (and playing with) a kid or a calf; and first weave on a toy loom. The literature is replete with instances of children transitioning from smaller versions of tools to potent, usable versions as they matriculate, seamlessly, from playing to working (Lancy, 2012). Would we be such effective tool users without play? I doubt it.

Our own children are generally prohibited from playing with found objects, which are considered too fragile or dangerous. On the other hand, they are buried under an avalanche (think of the nursery room floor just before mom tidies up) of manufactured toys, which may hold only their fleeting attention. Most interesting to me is that, while we deny children access to our tools, the toy substitutes don’t serve them very well (ever tried to use a plastic hammer to drive a nail?) because they must be “safe.”

MAKE-BELIEVE PLAY

Ethnographic descriptions of make-believe play are rich and varied. I observed and recorded Kpelle children’s amazingly detailed and faithful replication of the blacksmith’s forge in an episode of make-believe. The blacksmith’s compound was a popular gathering place in the village, consistently attracting a crowd of enthralled spectators and gossips, young and old. Children could watch the action of the smiths and eavesdrop as village affairs were discussed. They built up a stock of script material that could be woven into their make-believe play (Lancy, 1980a).

Dhebar boys who will become shepherds “use camel and sheep droppings to practice herding sheep and lambs” (Dyer & Choksi, 2006, p. 170). Goody (1992) describes a continuum from make-believe to “for real” food preparation in which older children model for younger ones, real but scaled down pots may substitute for toy pots, and if mother’s willing, edible ingredients go into the pot rather than grass. Franz Boas describes Baffin Inuit boys “play-hunting” seals using miniature harpoons fashioned by their parents (Boas, 1901, p. 111).

While the everyday work activities of adults provide a common theme, we also see replicated the processes involved in carrying out trance-induced shamanism (Katz, 1981); simulated marriage, including copulation (Gorer, 1967); and religious rituals (Fortes, 1938/1970). Gender roles are highlighted in play, with older children strictly enforcing the division of the sexes in role assignments. Hogbin recorded an indignant Wogeo player refusing to do “women’s work,” claiming: “We men don’t touch such things” (Hogbin, 1970, p. 136).

The idea that make-believe play may have an important role in the child’s acquisition of culture (Barber, 1994, p. 85, calls it “vocational kindergarten”) has also received theoretical support. The importance of children acquiring useful skills (indeed, their “culture”) from those older and more expert via imitation is widely acknowledged and considered to be one of the distinguishing characteristics of the species (Hopper et al., 2012). Additionally, learning through play is more *efficient* than learning from instruction for several reasons, not least because the latter is rather boring to the young while play is arousing, and because the latter “requires an investment by a second party, the teacher” (Lancy, 1980b, p. 482).

There is, however, considerable variability in the duration of this “vocational kindergarten.” Generally speaking, forager children are under less pressure to transition from playing to working than are children from agrarian societies (Hewlett et al., 2011). And girls’ play work morphs into real work—typically caring for a younger brother or sister—much earlier than boys’ (Lancy, 2001). In a significant number of the world’s societies, children are primarily workers rather than players by the age of seven years.

Once again the major contrast, which sets apart the contemporary, postindustrial elite, is the involvement of *parents* in children’s make-believe (Gaskins et al., 2007; Haight & Miller, 1993). Another contrast, which flows from the first, is that in WEIRD society, children’s make-believe is quite creative and inventive. Children don’t necessarily base their “scripts” on the reality they observe around them—the norm for village children—but they create alternate realities. Aside from the direct instruction provided by their parents, our children are inspired in their fantasy play by media (including toys, of course) representations of alternative worlds.

CONTESTS

Although make-believe play episodes don’t always unfold without discord, they are not, primarily, contests. Contests, whether rough and tumble (R & T) play, games, or sports, do incorporate elements of competition. R & T play is widely distributed cross-culturally and found in many other species. It has been linked specifically to the construction of the male dominance hierarchy (Pellegrini, 2004). Play fighting merging into vigorous combat sports is particularly characteristic of warrior societies, which see this type of activity as essential to socializing males (Ottenberg, 1989).

By contrast, relatively peaceful and egalitarian societies tend to suppress competition and violence. !Kung children throw a weighted feather in the air and, as it floats down, they strike it with a stick or flick it back up into the air. The “game,” called *zeni*, is played solo, and children make no attempt to compare skill or success (Draper, 1976, p. 203). Among the Tangu of Papua New Guinea, children in teams play a game called *taketak*, which is designed—in keeping with local values—to end in a tie (Burridge, 1957).

Children in Semai subsistence-farming communities in west central Malaysia rarely witness aggression, and one of the few times an adult will intervene in children’s play is to curb fighting. R & T play is extremely mild: “two children, often of disparate sizes, put their hands on each other’s shoulders and wrestle, giggling, but never quite knocking each other over . . . [and] pairs of children in the two- to twelve-year age range flail at each other with sticks, but stop just before hitting each other” (Fry, 2005, p. 68).

Another factor that tends to create a “level playing field” is that the play-group from which players are recruited may be quite small. That is, in smaller villages, mountain hamlets, and foragers’ camps there are relatively few children; hence the play-group will consist of children of varying ages and both sexes (Lancy, 1984). This places an upper limit on the complexity of the game (and the overall size of the game repertoire) and the degree to which physical strength and experience must be restrained. The mixed play-group will also be prevalent in communities where children must mind younger siblings. To fulfill this obligation (ensuring one’s charge isn’t injured or excessively frustrated), game rules and the course of play must be adjusted accordingly. Stronger, more advanced players “self-handicap” (Boulton & Smith, 1992) to allow players of lesser potency to play and also to prolong play bouts.

This scenario is quite different from contemporary play-groups in the dominant society, which tend to be quite homogenous; in many contests, adult coaches take pains to ensure that only the most worthy get to play. Certainly the outcome of these contests is a linear ranking or

dominance hierarchy (Weisfeld, 1999, p. 55). As noted earlier, village girls' play opportunities are curtailed relative to boys'. Indeed, girls who continue playing into middle childhood may be branded as immodest and unreliable and impair their local reputation (Lancy & Grove, 2011a). In WEIRD society, by contrast, girls are now accorded, by statute and culture, equal play-time, as it were.

As with other types of play, contests are said to afford fitness benefits to good players. Chick (2001) believes that successful players are advertising many positive but nascent qualities to potential future mates. One suite of potential benefits emerges when one embraces the notion of Machiavellian intelligence (MI). The essence of the MI hypothesis is that intelligence evolved in social circumstances. Individuals would be favored who were able to use and exploit others in their social group, without causing the disruption and potential group fission liable to result from naked aggression. Their manipulations might as easily involve cooperation as conflict, and sharing as hoarding (Byrne, 1995, p. 196). Successful individuals (in terms of inclusive fitness) are those who both "fit in" and can garner resources and support through diplomacy or what has been referred to as "gamesmanship" (Lancy & Grove, 2011b, p. 491).

Extrapolating from this argument, if children have social brains and, further, those brains need to be exercised to fully develop, games or more generally contests, would be the perfect mental gym. That is, contests reward strategies that increase success but also reward good diplomats. As Low notes from a cross-cultural survey, "the negotiation of rules was as important as the game itself (1989, p. 318)." Goodwin expands this insight from her work on pick-up games (e.g., hopscotch, jump-rope): "Conflict about rules and fouls . . . instead of breaching relationships . . . are a central part of the fun of playing it. Rather than treating conflict and cooperation as a bipolar dichotomy, the girls build complex participation frameworks in which disputes [include] rich possibilities for cognitive organization" (Goodwin, 1998, p. 25). Gray echoes these views from work with children in hunter-gather societies: "Leaders in social play exert leadership not by forcing their own wishes on others nor by evenhandedly treating all players by the same standards, but by being sensitive to each player's wishes and proposing rules and procedures that can accommodate them all" (2009, pp. 492–493).

Other ethnographic studies of game play, marbles in particular, also reveal the complex negotiations undertaken to ensure that the competition is fair and that the players, while vigorously competing to become "winners," still end up wanting to play again if they aren't (Opie & Opie, 1969; Piaget, 1932/1965). But the pick-up games that the Opies recorded have become ephemeral, at least in WEIRD society. Changing attitudes toward children's recreation (it shouldn't just be fun; it should also be "developmental"); the loss of neighborhood play spaces (Beach, 2003); the decline of "recess"; and exaggerated concerns over children's safety and negative peer influence (Marano, 2008) have transformed the experience.

Euroamerican parents now carefully manage their children's play—from birth (Power & Parke, 1982, p. 162). Nowhere is adult management of play more evident than in organized sports and other forms of competitive play (where prizes and kudos are awarded). In Little League baseball, the rules are recorded in a rulebook, which is all but sacred. No one would even consider attempting to negotiate an alteration in the rules to accommodate a particular player or situation (Fine, 1987).

This suggests that adult management of play denies children the opportunity to negotiate and construct joint activity with peers (Budwig et al., 1986, p. 88). In turn, we have argued that this loss of opportunity to spontaneously develop gamesmanship skills through child-managed play may well be a factor in the rise of bullying (Lancy & Grove, 2011b).

THE SEISMIC SHIFT

Continuing the landscape metaphor, I think it is not inappropriate to describe the shift that is occurring in children's play as "seismic." But this shift in play is embedded within a broader alteration in the nature of childhood. Among the contemporary elite—globally—the birth rate has fallen drastically; children go to school for upward of sixteen years beginning in early childhood; and they are no longer vital to the domestic economy, although their emotional value has risen. Earlier, "a child's capacity for labor had determined its exchange value [now] the market price [is] set by smiles, dimples, and curls" (Zelizer, 1985, p. 171).

We have seen a shift from the gerontocracy, in which children are the least important members of society, to a neontocracy, in which they are arguably (given the amount invested in them compared to the return) the most important (Lancy, 1996, p. 13). However, the magnitude of that investment is revealed in the exaggerated concern for children's safety and a parallel concern for the polluting effect of inappropriate playmates (Kusserow, 2004). It is from these concerns that the preference for organized, adult-managed play and sports arises.

In a neontocracy, children are treated as cherubs whose innocence and purity is nurtured and prolonged through (supervised) play, while work (even household chores) and the freedom to range beyond adult supervisions threaten that innocence. Cherubs are precious in part because we now have few of them and they arrive later during the child-bearing years. Smaller, isolated (compared to the village) households mean there is less opportunity for play with siblings and peers, leading to greater amounts of solo play and play with parents. Play is geared to socializing the child to become a "unique individual" rather than preparing the child for membership and participation in the family—characteristic, for example, of Latina immigrants in the United States (Uttal, 2010).

The inexorable demands of schooling have had an outsize effect on play. Many have argued that school is now the child's job, and play may be attenuated proportional to time spent in the classroom, doing homework, or at piano lessons or Kumon tutoring. Furthermore, parent-guided play that involves the construction of story-like narratives increasingly is seen as instrumental in preparing children for schooling and sustaining their success (Pellegrini & Galda, 1994). And this language-rich play begins in infancy, leading to a dramatic increase in vocabulary—a major predictor of school success (Hart & Risley, 2003).

Of course these changes in children's play may have unintended consequences, including undermining the child's sociability, initiative, willingness to take risks, and interest in learning independently without a teacher's direction (Lancy & Grove, 2011b). We are turning "free range children" (Skenazy, 2009) into a "nation of wimps" (Marano, 2008).

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