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Orienting Concepts and Ways of Understanding the Cultural Nature of Human Development

Human development is a cultural process. As a biological species, humans are defined in terms of our cultural participation. We are prepared by both our cultural and biological heritage to use language and other cultural tools and to learn from each other. Using such means as language and literacy, we can collectively remember events that we have not personally experienced—becoming involved vicariously in other people's experience over many generations.

Being human involves constraints and possibilities stemming from long histories of human practices. At the same time, each generation continues to revise and adapt its human cultural and biological heritage in the face of current circumstances.

My aim in this book is to contribute to the understanding of cultural patterns of human development by examining the regularities that make sense of differences and similarities in communities' practices and traditions. In referring to cultural processes, I want to draw attention to the configurations of routine ways of doing things in any community's approach to living. I focus on people's participation in their communities' cultural practices and traditions, rather than equating culture with the nationality or ethnicity of individuals.

For understanding cultural aspects of human development, a primary goal of this book is to develop the stance that *people develop as participants in cultural communities. Their development can be understood only in light of*

the cultural practices and circumstances of their communities—which also change.

To date, the study of human development has been based largely on research and theory coming from middle-class communities in Europe and North America. Such research and theory often have been assumed to generalize to all people. Indeed, many researchers make conclusions from work done in a single group in overly general terms, claiming that “*the child* does such-and-so” rather than “these children did such-and-so.”

For example, a great deal of research has attempted to determine at what age one should expect “the child” to be capable of certain skills. For the most part, the claims have been generic regarding the age at which children enter a stage or should be capable of a certain skill.

A cultural approach notes that different cultural communities may expect children to engage in activities at vastly different times in childhood, and may regard “timetables” of development in other communities as surprising or even dangerous. Consider these questions of when children can begin to do certain things, and reports of cultural variations in when they do:

When does children’s intellectual development permit them to be responsible for others? When can they be trusted to take care of an infant?

In middle-class U.S. families, children are often not regarded as capable of caring for themselves or tending another child until perhaps age 10 (or later in some regions). In the U.K., it is an offense to leave a child under age 14 years without adult supervision (Subbotsky, 1995). However, in many other communities around the world, children begin to take on responsibility for tending other children at ages 5–7 (Rogoff et al., 1975; see figure 1.1), and in some places even younger children begin to assume this responsibility. For example, among the Kwara’ae of Oceania,

Three year olds are skilled workers in the gardens and household, excellent caregivers of their younger siblings, and accomplished at social interaction. Although young children also have time to play, many of the functions of play seem to be met by work. For both adults and children, work is accompanied by singing, joking, verbal play and entertaining conversation. Instead of playing with dolls, children care for real babies. In addition to working in the family gardens, young children have their own garden plots. The latter may seem like play, but by three or four years of age many children are taking produce they have grown themselves to the market to sell, thereby making a significant and valued contribution to the family income. (Watson-Gegeo, 1990, p. 87)

**FIGURE 1.1**

This 6-year-old Mayan (Guatemalan) girl is a skilled caregiver for her baby cousin.

When do children's judgment and coordination allow them to handle sharp knives safely?

Although U.S. middle-class adults often do not trust children below about age 5 with knives, among the Efe of the Democratic Republic of Congo, infants routinely use machetes safely (Wilkie, personal communication, 1989; see figure 1.2). Likewise, Fore (New Guinea) infants handle knives and fire safely by the time they are able to walk (Sorenson, 1979). Aka parents of Central Africa teach 8- to 10-month-old infants how to throw small spears and use small pointed digging sticks and miniature axes with sharp metal blades:

Training for autonomy begins in infancy. Infants are allowed to crawl or walk to whatever they want in camp and allowed to use knives, machetes, digging sticks, and clay pots around camp. Only if an infant begins to crawl into a fire or hits another child do parents or others interfere with the infant's activity. It was not unusual, for instance, to see an eight month old with a six-inch knife chopping the branch frame of its family's house. By three or four years of age children can cook themselves a meal on the fire, and by ten years of age Aka children know enough subsistence skills to live in the forest alone if need be. (Hewlett, 1991, p. 34)

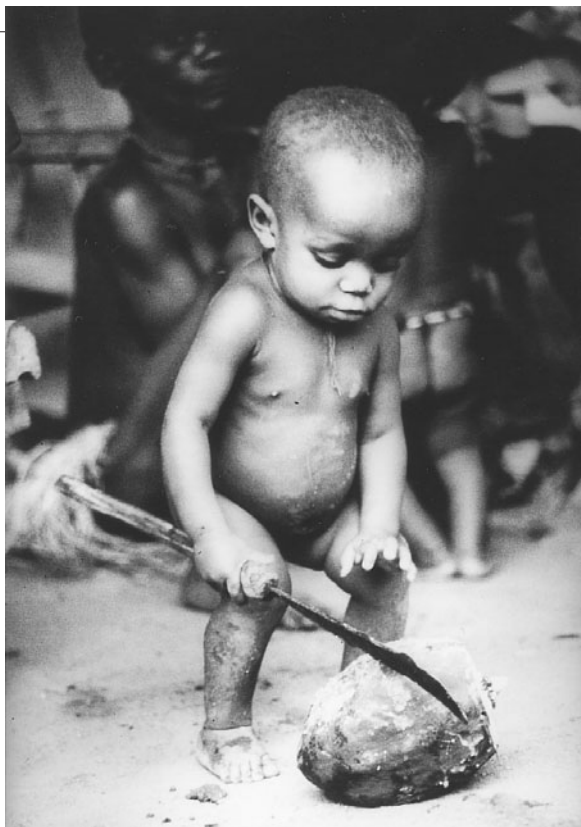


FIGURE 1.2

An Efe baby of 11 months skillfully cuts a fruit with a machete, under the watchful eye of a relative (in the Ituri Forest of the Democratic Republic of Congo).

So, at what age do children develop responsibility for others or sufficient skill and judgment to handle dangerous implements? “Ah! Of course, it depends,” readers may say, after making some guesses based on their own cultural experience.

Indeed. It depends.

Variations in expectations for children make sense once we take into account different circumstances and traditions. They make sense in the context of differences in what is involved in preparing “a meal” or “tending” a baby, what sources of support and danger are common, who else is nearby, what the roles of local adults are and how they live, what institutions people use to organize their lives, and what goals the community has for development to mature functioning in those institutions and cultural practices.

Whether the activity is an everyday chore or participation in a test or a laboratory experiment, people’s performance depends in large part on the circumstances that are routine in their community and on the cultural practices they are used to. What they do depends in important ways on the cultural meaning given to the events and the social and institutional supports provided in their communities for learning and carrying out specific roles in the activities.

Cultural research has aided scholars in examining theories based on observations in European and European American communities for their applicability in other circumstances. Some of this work has provided crucial counterexamples demonstrating limitations or challenging basic assumptions of a theory that was assumed to apply to all people everywhere. Examples are Bronislaw Malinowski's (1927) research questioning the Oedipal complex in Sigmund Freud's theory and cross-cultural tests of cognitive development that led Jean Piaget to drop his claim that adolescents universally reach a "formal operational" stage of being able to systematically test hypotheses (1972; see Dasen & Heron, 1981).

The importance of understanding cultural processes has become clear in recent years. This has been spurred by demographic changes throughout North America and Europe, which bring everyone more in contact with cultural traditions differing from their own. Scholars now recognize that understanding cultural aspects of human development is important for resolving pressing practical problems as well as for progress in understanding the nature of human development in worldwide terms. Cultural research is necessary to move beyond overgeneralizations that assume that human development everywhere functions in the same ways as in researchers' own communities, and to be able to account for both similarities and differences across communities.

Understanding regularities in the cultural nature of human development is a primary aim of this book. Observations made in Bora Bora or Cincinnati can form interesting cultural portraits and reveal intriguing differences in custom, but more important, they can help us to discern regularities in the diverse patterns of human development in different communities.

Looking for Cultural Regularities

Beyond demonstrating that "culture matters," my aim in this book is to integrate the available ideas and research to contribute to a greater understanding of *how* culture matters in human development. What regularities can help us make sense of the cultural aspects of human development? To understand the processes that characterize the dynamic development of individual people as well as their changing cultural communities, we need to identify regularities that make sense of the variations across communities as well as the impressive commonalities across our human species. Although research on cultural aspects of human development is still relatively sparse, it is time to go beyond saying "It depends" to articulate patterns in the variations and similarities of cultural practices.

The process of looking across cultural traditions can help us become aware of cultural regularities in our own as well as other people's lives, no matter which communities are most familiar to us. Cultural research can help us understand cultural aspects of our own lives that we take for granted as natural, as well as those that surprise us elsewhere.

For example, the importance given to paying attention to chronological age and age of developmental achievements is unquestioned by many who study human development. However, questions about age of transitions are themselves based on a cultural perspective. They fit with cultural institutions that use elapsed time since birth as a measure of development.

One Set of Patterns: Children's Age-Grading and Segregation from Community Endeavors or Participation in Mature Activities

It was not until the last half of the 1800s in the United States and some other nations that age became a criterion for ordering lives, and this intensified in the early 1900s (Chudacoff, 1989). With the rise of industrialization and efforts to systematize human services such as education and medical care, age became a measure of development and a criterion for sorting people. Specialized institutions were designed around age groups. Developmental psychology and pediatrics began at this time, along with old-age institutions and age-graded schools.

Before then in the United States (and still, in many places), people rarely knew their age, and students advanced in their education as they learned. Both expert and popular writing in the United States rarely referred to specific ages, although of course infancy, childhood, and adulthood were distinguished. Over the past century and a half, the cultural concept of age and associated practices relying on age-grading have come to play a central, though often unnoticed role in ordering lives in some cultural communities—those of almost all contemporary readers of this book.

Age-grading accompanied the increasing segregation of children from the full range of activities in their community as school became compulsory and industrialization separated workplace from home. Instead of joining with the adult world, young children became more engaged in specialized child-focused institutions and practices, preparing children for later entry into the community.

I argue that child-focused settings and ways in which middle-class parents now interact with their children are closely connected with age-grading and segregation of children. Child-focused settings and middle-class child-rearing practices are also prominent in developmental psychology, connecting with ideas about stages of life, thinking and learning processes, motivation, relations with peers and parents, disciplinary practices at home and