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Accounting for Variability in Mother–Child Play

ABSTRACT In this article, I highlight contrasting perspectives in the study of mother–child play. One contrast emerges as we use the lens offered by anthropology as opposed to the more commonly used lens of psychology. A second contrast is apparent from descriptions of childhood in the ethnographic record compared to observations of children in the upper strata of modern society. Psychologists and advocates who adopt their perspective view mother–child play—from infancy—as both necessary for normal development and an unlimited good. Its self-evident value should be impressed on those who are unenlightened. Anthropologists frequently note the absence of mother–child play and, equally important, provide culturally nuanced explanations for why this is so. Psychologists see mother–child play as natural; anthropologists see it as cultural. I conclude by questioning the wholesale exportation of a culture-specific child-rearing strategy that may be quite incongruent with native belief and practice. [Keywords: mother–child play, anthropology, psychology, children]

MUCH OF WHAT we “know,” authoritatively, about child development comes from observations of Western bourgeois parents and children. Even when the field reports of anthropologists directly contradict this conventional wisdom, these “anecdotes” are treated as interesting variations on a theme, spice to make the stew a little zestier. In this article, I will take up a prominent issue—mother–child play—and proceed to demonstrate the dramatic contrast between the normative view that dominates both scientific and popular literature in the West and a view constructed from literature in history and anthropology.¹

Even a cursory review of websites and parent-oriented trade publications will yield the inescapable conclusion that good, effective parents play with their offspring from birth and continue, through adolescence, to take an interest in and manage the child’s toy inventory, game and sports schedule, and choice of play- or teammates. Failure in this vital role sets one’s child loose in a minefield of potentially debilitating outcomes. However, not only does one rarely see mother–child play when looking beyond our own society, if we examine the broader context in which children, traditionally, grow to adulthood, we can readily see why this is so. That is, the “cultural routines” that one commonly observes at work in childcare (Lancy 1996) are simply incompatible with mother–child play of great variety, duration, or frequency. In this article, the overarching theoretical argument is that mother–child play in contemporary elite society is much better attributed to “nurture” or culture than to nature, coupled with, in the concluding section, a prag-

matic plea not to impose our culture-bound views regarding play on the rest of the world.

I draw on several sources to construct the key arguments of this article. First, there is a robust contemporary literature—from the United States, Europe, and Asia—that examines, in detail, patterns of mother–child play during infancy and toddlerhood (roughly, ages three months to four years). There is a corollary body of literature and NGO-produced material that elevates mother–child play to the level of an exportable social good. The contrasting case will be built from an in-depth ethnography of child development in a very traditional Kpelle village in Liberia (Lancy 1996) and from a multiyear-long project to review published and archived (Human Relations Area Files [HRAF]) reports on childhood from anthropology and history (Lancy in press). Because the thesis hinges on two broad clusters of societies, those in which mother–child play is a given and those in which it is largely absent, no operational definition of *play* will be offered.² If an observer describes what they are witnessing as “play,” I take it at face value.

Arguments are laid out as follows: First, we will examine the rare cases of adult–child play in the ethnographic record, primarily among small foraging bands, which are shown as having unique adaptation patterns that affect childcare. The next section discusses several surveys that have explored cross-cultural variation in adult–child play, showing its infrequency. A broader view will help us understand why, from an emic or folk perspective, mother–infant and mother–child play does not seem either likely or

valuable. We next look briefly at fathers, showing that they are even less likely infant playmates than are mothers. The phrase “toddler rejection” in the title of a later section suggests that, as children age, they are less likely to be engaged with adults than during infancy.

After mapping the distribution of adult-child play in premodern society, we will trace its historical development in the West, noting how very recent the idea is and how shallow its penetration. That is, extensive mother-child play is a “must” only in the strata of society that expects children to, eventually, function at the top of the information economy. It is diminished or absent outside this strata. Cross-national variation—the United States versus East Asia—shows somewhat different patterns of mother-child play and purposes. However, both regions share mother-child play strategies linked to the development of fluent literacy—which I argue is the *raison d’être* for the practice—among other parental goals. In spite of the lack of strong empirical verification for the direct influence of parent-managed play on child development, a virtual movement has grown up to foster its dissemination. In the concluding section, I critically examine this parent-child play “cause” that has led to attempts to “train” lower-class parents and to export the phenomenon as a fundamental child “right” to the rest of the world.

LOCATING ADULT-CHILD PLAY

Play is a cultural universal. Children are observed playing in every society studied by anthropologists. Adults, while considerably less playful, nevertheless enjoy game playing in nearly every society (Roberts et al. 1959) recorded. However, one rarely sees adults playing with children. When it does occur, there seem to be special circumstances at work. Among Inuit pursuing their traditional mode of subsistence, mothers indulge, play with, and make toys for babies and early toddlers. But then mothers and children are stuck indoors together for long periods. The weather is so harsh most of the year, and the communities so small, that sending children off to play in the village with other kids is not an option (Briggs 1970; Crago et al. 1993).³ Further, there is every reason to believe that modern living conditions in which infants and toddlers are isolated from peers in single parent or nuclear households produces a parallel effect (Uno 1991:394–395).⁴

Ironically, the other demographic pattern that seems to foster adult-infant play (child-child play occurs wherever more than one child is present) is the tendency for an entire foraging band to assume a role in childcare. Among Efe of Central Africa, four-month-old infants spend only 40 percent of their time with their mother; they are constantly passed around the band, an average of 8.3 times per hour (Tronick et al. 1987). Barry Hewlett describes play with infants in another Central African forest-dwelling group, the Aka, notably by fathers (Hewlett 1991). Comparative research with Ngandu farmers, near neighbors of the Aka, shows them spending far less time interacting with their

infants. The effort that forager parents make to insure their baby’s health and well-being, including frequent physical contact and efforts to comfort and entertain, suggests the two groups are pursuing differing reproduction strategies. Foragers may provide high-quality care to preserve the lives of the relatively few children they bear, while, in farming communities like the Ngandu, high fertility is coupled with a less intense concern for a given infant’s welfare (Hewlett et al. 2000).

One finds, then, adult-infant and mother-infant play more commonly in foraging groups than elsewhere, including, as examples, the Yahgan of Tierra del Fuego (Gusinde 1937), the Garo from Bengal (Burling 1963), and several groups studied by the ethologist Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1983), such as the Eipo of Western New Guinea and the Himba of Southwest Africa. Play includes frequent kissing, holding babies *en face* while talking to them, games of peek-a-boo,⁵ and fondling the infants’ genitalia. Instances of mother- and father-infant play are also reported from societies dependent on maritime foraging, including, as examples, the Trobriands (Malinowski 1927), Wogeo (Hogbin 1943), and Rotuman (Howard 1970).

THE ABSENCE OF ADULT-CHILD PLAY

Even among foragers, mother-child play may not be universal. In Kalahari foraging groups, other band members actually talk to and play with babies more than their own mothers do. Furthermore, according to Roger Bakeman and colleagues

adults do not make toys for babies. Nor... encourage increasingly complex forms of object manipulation or object-focused language. Indeed, the folk view of development seems to emphasize a child’s need for space to explore, a view that is revealed by the !Kung phrase, *a n/tharo an/te* (he/she is teaching/learning him/herself). [1990:796]

Bakeman and colleagues continue, “These findings may challenge current theories of early communication development... that suggest that joint attention to objects with a nurturing language user is an important condition for the facilitation of language acquisition” (Bakeman et al. 1990:806).

An analysis of 186 ethnographies archived in the HRAF yielded wide variation in the amount of mother-infant play and display of affection (Barry and Paxson 1971). Robert LeVine persuasively argues that mother-infant attachment, surely the bedrock on which mother-child play must be built, is, based on the evidence of his long-term study of Gusii mothers, not at all universal. Gusii mothers are

extremely responsive to their infant’s distress signals but quite unresponsive to their nondistress vocalizations (i.e., babbling)... mothers rarely looked at or spoke to their infants and toddlers, even when they were holding and breast-feeding them... They rarely praised their infants or asked them questions but tended to issue commands and threats in communicating with them. [LeVine 2004:154, 156]

Other research shows that the *en face* position where the mother holds the infant facing her—*de rigueur* for peek-a-boo—is common in Westernized societies but rare elsewhere, as is the tendency of the mother to talk with the infant (Field et al. 1981; Ratner and Pye 1984).

Beyond relatively egalitarian foraging societies, in the broader literature, we find little evidence to suggest that mother–infant play is universal or even very common. In Beatrice Whiting and Carolyn Edwards’s cross-cultural studies of child rearing, only the middle-class U.S. sample gave evidence of playful mother–child interaction. In the remaining 11 societies, the relationship was “authoritative” (Whiting and Pope-Edwards 1988). This report from a Ganda farming community is fairly typical of what ethnographers observe or fail to observe:

If baby games were infrequent, so were hugging, nuzzling, and kissing. We saw no baby being coaxed to kiss or hug. I noted only three mothers who nuzzled and kissed their babies as they held them . . . Ganda mothers did not interact with their babies through toys . . . no instance of a mother trying to elicit a response from her baby by dangling a plaything in front of him. [Ainsworth 1967:94]

What is apparent from the literature is that there are many forces that work against the likelihood of mother–child play.

FACTORS MITIGATING AGAINST MOTHER–CHILD PLAY

Unfortunately, quantitative studies of mother–child play that would yield a metric we might use in comparing incidence cross-culturally are rare. However, the argument that mother–child play is uncommon can be bolstered by a consideration of broader issues that impinge on the mother–child relationship. That is, I hope to show in this section that prevailing emic views (outside modern middle-class society) held of infants and toddlers are compatible with low expectations for observing mother–child play.

High infant mortality is an unfortunate fact-of-life that most societies must adapt to. In rural Guinea-Bissau, for example, child mortality between birth and five is over 33 percent and mothers are “not expected to engage in any kind of communication with [their] newborn” (Einarsdottir 2004:73). While few mothers react to the death of a newborn with apparent callous indifference—“without weeping” (Scheper-Hughes 1987, 1989)—still, a muted response to the newborn is widely expected. Among the Ayoreo, it is not unusual for the newborn to remain unnamed for several weeks or months, particularly if the infant is sickly. The reason given is that should the child die, the loss will not be so deeply felt (Bugos and McCarthy 1984:508).

Babies are often threatened by the machinations of evil spirits and spell-casting neighbors. Folk theories about the infant’s precarious existence may prescribe treatment that is anything but playlike. Ideally, they are tucked away and kept quiet through frequent nursing. For example, on the Malay Peninsula, Chewong—forest-dwelling bands—believe that children’s

bodies are not strong, their *ruwai* [spirits] are not strong, their smell is not strong, and . . . the bonds between these various aspects of the person [are] . . . not yet stabilized. . . . The fact that children are ill much more often than adults is taken as proof of the above assertions. . . . Numerous . . . prescriptions and proscriptions exist to protect the child from a disintegration of the self and from the attacks of harmful beings. [Howell 1988:153–154].

Aside from unassisted mortality, infants are subject to the resource-conserving decisions of their parents and the community at large. From South American nomadic foragers (Wagley 1977) to the ancient Greeks (Colón and Colón 2001), infanticide has been defined as acceptable—even mandatory. From changelings in Medieval Europe (Gies and Gies 1987) to snake children in Mali (Dettwyler 1994), societies have provided a comforting rationale for infanticide. But, again, if there is some chance that the infant will be culled, what incentive is there to play with it?

As anthropologists slowly uncover emic or native theories of child development (Harkness and Super 1996), we find a rich variety of ideas. In many cases, the folk theory states, in effect: “A quiet baby is a healthy baby.”

The apparent goal of virtually every [Yucatec Maya] care routine is to produce a contented, quiet baby. . . . The typical pattern of care contributes to the soothing effect. Infants are almost never stressed by overstimulation. . . . To induce long naps in older infants so mothers can attend to household chores, mothers carefully and routinely give infants cool baths, powder and dress them in clean clothes, and then feed and rock them to sleep. [Howrigan 1988:41]

Mechanical aids, such as swaddling (Calvert 1992), cradleboards (Chisholm 1980), cradles, and carrying slings all contribute to keeping the baby in a kind of benign coma.⁶ Consistently, then, the patterns we see in the treatment of babies are patently at odds with playful, stimulating interaction.

Meanwhile, although “they are vulnerable, babies are not thought to be perceptive or cognizant during this early period” (Platt 1988:274). There seems to be a common belief that babies are, essentially, brainless, and that communicating with them, in any form, would be a waste of time. On Ifaluk Island,

Infants younger than two years of age do not have any thoughts/feelings—*nunuwan*. Without *nunuwan*, they are not intelligent and do not know right from wrong, so . . . it’s useless . . . talking to babies younger than two, because they cannot understand what you say. Children do not acquire adult-like intelligence—known as *repiy*—until they are about five or six years old. [Le 2000:216, 218]

Others who have studied mother–infant relations in non-Western societies—the Kaluli, for example—also note the absence of speech directed toward the infant who has, as yet, “no understanding” (Schieffelin 1990:72). Alternatively, when village parents do take the trouble to shape their baby’s behavior to some end, play or speech may not be a suitable medium. Among the Sepik-area

Gapun, aggression and argumentation are highly valued, hence “when mothers visit one another, they sometimes hold their babies close together and encourage them to fight. . . . Babies . . . near a dog are encouraged to hit the dog, not pet it” (Kulick 1992:119).

Not only are mothers, generally, not expected to stimulate the baby’s mental development through play or other forms of interaction, there is the sense that to do so might interfere with the child’s in-born character and sense of autonomy (Rogoff 2003; Sorenson 1976). The child is expected to develop, unaided, a fascination with the activities of those older than herself and a powerful desire to emulate them (see !Kung example earlier).

As nursing mothers are also, typically, the most productive members of society, the actual care of infants often falls to others. In an important HRAF survey, Thomas Weisner and Ronald Gallimore (1977) found that across nearly 200 societies, 40 percent of infants and 80 percent of toddlers were cared for primarily by someone other than their mother—most commonly, older sisters. In my observations of Kpelle infants, they were suckled by their mothers on demand, following which they were passed back to a sister-nurse to tend, while their mothers resumed fieldwork (Lancy 1996). Among the Ibo,

When a baby is born it is given, after being washed, to a small child to carry into the house. . . . Almost at once it will in part be looked after by quite small children. I have seen a little girl of about five or six carrying a newly born baby over her shoulder, or sitting down and giving it water to drink. [Green 1964:80]

Babies may be played with by a diffuse array of caretakers (Morton 1996). As the following observation from Fiji suggests, parents, because of their roles as disciplinarians (Wolf 1972), may be the least likely playmates:

The ties between the child and his grandparents grow closer. . . . His grandparents become a refuge to him, for he knows that they will always welcome him and protect him from the scolding and ill temper of his parents. [Thompson 1940:38]

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that prosperity and a reduction of women’s work automatically leads to the release of a natural and unfilled need on the part of mothers to play with their offspring. On the contrary, it seems that, repeatedly in history, one of the first signs of women’s emancipation has been to turn over infant and childcare to wet-nurses, nannies, and tutors (Golden 1990; Janssen and Janssen 1996; Rawson 1991; Shahr 1990), and this was true well into the last century in the United States (Beatty 1995).⁷

WHAT ABOUT FATHERS?

In only a very few societies are fathers expected to play a role in infant care, notably among Central (Fouts 2005; Hewlett 1991) and East (Marlowe 1999) African foragers, who are reported to play with and entertain babies. More commonly, father-child aversion is enshrined in well-established cus-

toms. Klamath fathers who attend to children are chided as “unmanly” (Pearsall 1950). Ifaluk fathers may be quarantined from their wives and new offspring from birth (Le 2000). Kipsigis fathers are often considered a direct or indirect (via intercourse with the mother) threat to the infant (Harkness and Super 1991). According to Brenda Gray, “The Enga believe that a baby will die should the parents cohabit, because it may drink the father’s war magic with its mother’s milk. . . . Accidental exposure to the gaze of a man who has ‘strong’ war magic is believed to kill the new born” (Gray 1994:67). And, vice-versa, in many areas of Papua New Guinea, association with women (and their offspring) is seen as debilitating to men (Herdt 1982). On Tonga, specific *tapu* (taboo) proscriptions separate children from their father’s person as well as his possessions (Morton 1996).

In a search of the HRAF, we found a few additional references to father-infant interaction, but they all followed a curious pattern we have labeled “baby parading” (Lancy and Grove 2006). Here are two examples:

Among the Eipo, fathers pick up their baby at the women’s area and carry it . . . for half an hour or so, getting friendly attention. [Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1983:208]

His [Fijian] father does not play with him . . . but occasionally he takes the child on his back to attend a meeting or to visit a neighbor. [Thompson 1940:39]

This behavior probably makes a significant contribution neither to childcare nor to the child’s play experience. What it may fit is the “show-off” model where conspicuous success and largess in hunting increases a man’s reproductive fitness (Hawkes 1991). A man who parades a healthy infant and demonstrates his own nurturing personality may, similarly, improve future mating prospects.

Overall, even when the society places a high value on shared infant care, fathers find better things to do. In a comparative study of Utah Mormon society, in which father involvement with children is prescribed, and Japan, where it is not expected, the investigators were surprised to find no appreciable difference. Father involvement (compared to mother involvement) in childcare was low in both cases (Shwalb and Shwalb 2005). Still, studies show that mainstream U.S. fathers, while playing less with their offspring than mothers, nevertheless behave as if this is a natural and appropriate part of their role, a view not shared in all modern societies (Kagitçibasi and Sunar 1992; Lamb 1987; New 1994; Uno 1991).

TODDLER REJECTION AND ADULT ANTIPATHY TOWARD PLAY

If mother-infant play outside of mainstream U.S. culture is uncommon, mother-toddler play is virtually nonexistent, even in societies where play with infants is observed. For example, “[Efe] . . . mothers play little with their 1-year-olds” (Morelli and Tronick 1991:104). The mother of a toddler not only faces potential conflict between childcare and work, she’s likely pregnant as well. Once again, Central African foragers (Bofi) anchor one pole of this dimension, with

long interbirth intervals (IBI) and relaxed weaning, thus extending the period of infancy and of mother–child play. Fouts documents the contrasting pattern found among Bofispeaking farming communities where IBI are much shorter and weaning is forced: “Mothers usually covered their nipples with . . . a bandage to resemble a wound” (Fouts 2004:138).

More commonly, the mother applies hot pepper to her nipples to hasten weaning, and this is reported to be quite efficacious (Culwick 1935). But the net effect is to abruptly terminate infancy—much to the child’s chagrin. Custom fully supports abrupt weaning following the onset of pregnancy. For example, any sign of illness is attributed to the nursing child imbibing breast milk that has been contaminated by the new fetus (Cosminsky 1985).

Clearly, however, denying the child the breast is only one among many signs of rejection. Long-term observers of the IKung (Ju/’hoansi) have noted the dramatic transformation in childhood as the foragers settled down to mixed farming. The IBI shortened, fertility increased, and the formerly loving, indulgent mothers had to ruthlessly separate their toddlers from themselves (Draper and Cashdan 1988; Konner and Worthman 1980; Lee 1979). Here is the Hawaiian version of this common story:

Hawaiian mothers are indulgent of infants . . . to the point of fostering extreme dependency. After . . . the next child is born . . . The [toddler’s] overtures are increasingly punished and he is forced to rely . . . on . . . older children. [Gallimore et al. 1969:393]

These are not the kind of conditions that foster mother–child play. On the contrary, I would argue that the mother’s greatest ally at this point in the child-rearing process is the magnetic attraction of the sibling or neighborhood play group (Parin 1963). The last thing a pregnant mother wants is for her child to see her as an attractive play partner:

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 1989:92]

However, “toddler rejection” (Weisner and Gallimore 1977:176) is by no means limited to the mother; a common theme suggests that the rejection is community wide (Field 1970; Gallimore et al. 1974; Levine 1965; Levy 1973; Van Stone 1965). And aside from an unwillingness to play with children themselves, adults may harbor doubts about the value of play in general (Gaskins et al. 2007; Lancy 2001). On Malaita, parents rely on child messengers to accurately report community news and gossip and, hence, discourage fantasy and inventive story construction (Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 2001). Among forest dwellers, parents may condemn play as exposing children to potentially fatal dangers (Kaplan and Dove 1987).

But the primary reason adults are likely to take a jaundiced view of children at play is because they would rather see them working (Bock and Johnson 2004; Munroe et al. 1984). “The ideal [Mayan] child is hardworking, obedient, and responsible; he does not waste his time in play” (Modiano 1973:55). “Overworked [Yoruba] . . . mothers . . . attempt to get more work out of children by prohibiting play, which they perceive as manifestation of indolence and hedonism that will be maladaptive in the future” (Oloko 1994:211). “[Hadza] . . . children are assigned many chores and errands. . . . Adults, not surprisingly, are largely intolerant of children’s play” (Blurton-Jones 1993:317).

To sum up, what I have found is that, outside the educated elite in contemporary, urban societies, parents see play as affording them relief from the care of children beyond infancy. At best, they look appreciatively on play as something that keeps their youngsters distracted and out of the way so that they can get their work done (Gaskins 1996; Lancy 1996) or relax from their labors.

REVALUING CHILDREN’S PLAY

The idea of mother–child play as an essential component of normal child development seems to be quite recent, even in complex, literate societies (Manson 1975). The Puritans, credited by historians with being the first society to propose specific responsibilities for parents in child rearing, publishing over 100 tracts for parents before the 18th century (Sommerville 1992), but they strongly condemned play in general—and parent–child play particularly (Pollock 1983). As recently as 1914, the *Infant Care Bulletin* of the U.S. 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” (Wolfenstein 1955:172). It was not until 1940 that the then-latest edition was updated to say, in effect, “Play, having ceased to be wicked, having become harmless and good, now becomes a duty” (Wolfenstein 1955:173).

Adriana Zelizer details the gradual change that transformed children from future farmers or factory workers—adding their critical bit to the household economy—to economically worthless but emotionally priceless cherubs. “While in the nineteenth century a child’s capacity for labor had determined its exchange value, the market price of a twentieth-century baby was set by smiles, dimples, and curls” (Zelizer 1985:171). And, in a more recent history, Gary Cross asserts: “Today, as perhaps never before, we are obsessed with kids. We come close to worshipping them” (Cross 2004:4).

With modernization, fertility dropped, demand for child workers dried up, and suburbia mushroomed. Gone were the extended family, the “mother ground” where children played under the casual supervision of adults in the vicinity (Lancy 1996:84–86), and the large brood of sibling playmates. In their place, we have an image of the care-free young mother pushing her toddler on a swing in the

backyard. An image that owed much to mass media and marketing became enshrined in academic discourse as well (Trevarthen 1983:159).

PARENT-CHILD PLAY IN MODERN SOCIETIES

In this and the next section, I'd like to situate mother-child play in the precise cultural milieu in which it thrives and further attempt to account for its perceived adaptive value.⁸ The mother-child play described in contemporary textbooks (Scarlett et al. 2005) is largely an artifact of modern, middle-class society in which parents have relatively high levels of formal schooling. Artin Göncü and colleagues (2000) have done cross-national research on the phenomenon. Middle-class mothers in the United States and Turkey, along with village mothers in India and Guatemala, were given some guidance and encouragement to play with their children. Like Taiwanese and U.S. mothers (Haight et al. 1999; Morelli et al. 2003; Rogoff et al. 1993), the middle-class, urban Turkish subjects showed considerable facility in playing with their children.⁹ In sharp contrast with these middle-class urban mothers, village mothers

appeared to interpret... exploring novel objects, as an appropriate context for children to play with the objects independently, not as a context for adult-child interaction or play... [while children played with the objects, mothers]... returned to their chores. [Göncü et al. 2000:322]

Even in acculturating societies, parent-child play is absent. Of the Lebou in Senegal, Marianne Bloch writes: "Collaborative play... between parents and other adults and children was indeed rare" (Bloch 1989:145). And in the United States, ethnographers have noted the reduction if not complete absence of mother-child play in lower-class households (Heath 1990; Ward 1971).

However, as researchers have observed play between middle-class mothers and their offspring cross-nationally, the influence of differing values is apparent. In practices that may be related to aspects of Chinese culture of great antiquity, Chinese mothers go to considerable lengths to bind their infants to themselves emotionally (Potter 1987), and play is used as a means to this end. This powerful attachment is fundamental to two interrelated goals that all Chinese (as well as Japanese [Lebra 1994] and Korean [Cho 1995]) parents share. First, the mother is the child's first and most important teacher. She is responsible for socializing the child to restrain his or her own desires and adopt a cooperative and deferential attitude toward others. Failure to do so brings scorn on the parents and humiliation for the mother. The Chinese mother is also responsible for insuring that the child strives to be successful in school (Stevenson et al. 1992). China—and, by extension, Japan and Korea—has operated, since the time of Confucius, as a meritocracy. One's political and economic standing are determined, to an extraordinary degree, by one's success in national examinations. And society charges the mother, quite specifically,

with insuring that offspring, especially male, are steadfast in pursuing their studies.

Until quite recently, Asian parents had a very direct stake in their child's success as their future well-being depended on the caretaking zeal and largess of their grown children. Hence, the mother works extremely hard to insure that her child will respond to her direction as teacher as well as to feel deep filial piety and gratitude toward both parents for the remainder of their lives and beyond (Kim and Choi 1994; Lebra 1994; Uno 1991; Wu 1995).

Wendy Haight and colleagues (Haight 1999; Haight et al. 1999) have conducted extensive observations of Chinese (Taiwanese) mother-toddler play. Influenced by Confucian principles, mothers take considerable pains to use pretend play as a vehicle to promote an awareness of social relations and of appropriate vocabulary and manners for social interaction—especially with various adults including sales clerks. Mothers also use didactic means to familiarize their toddlers with the kind of academic routines typically found in preschool.

Values projected by Euroamerican mothers are, as Haight suggests, somewhat different. Curiosity, creativity, virtuosity, and the ability to hold one's own in a mixed social group may be stressed. In the United States and Europe, social welfare programs have lessened parents' dependence on their offspring for financial support. Nevertheless, I have a sense that, among the intelligentsia, mothers cultivate their children for their future value as social capital—as friends, correspondents, and confidants. Mothers, in playing with and reading to their children, may be establishing a lifetime relationship of enormous value—especially when we consider our high mobility and the socially isolating effects of suburban sprawl and urban angst. Denny Taylor's (1983) case studies of mother-child interaction in highly educated families illustrate this phenomenon.

The common theme in these reports of high levels of mother-child play and verbal interaction is that children are being groomed for success in academic settings and for eventual participation in the information economy. Where children are not seen as having such futures, because parents equate current social class with destiny, their mothers may not spend time playing with them (Kusserow 2004; Lareau 2003; Martini 1995; Morelli et al. 2003). Indeed, parent-child play joins a regimen of expensive and time-consuming activities that parents contribute to their child's development, including the following: setting challenges for the child and praising effort and persistence ("Good job!" [Rogoff 2003:307]); bedtime story reading and other literary activities (Lancy 1994); organized sports (Fine 1987; Sokolove 2004); and private lessons in music, art, and academic subjects (Schneider et al. 1994).

MOTHER-CHILD PLAY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF NARRATIVE

Beyond sociability and general school readiness, the one purported benefit of mainstream U.S. mothers' play

intervention that has received much attention in the literature and seems intuitively compelling is the development of narrative competence (Pellegrini and Galda 1994). Infants need no incentive or guidance to play with objects; they are programmed to do so. Nevertheless, the educated mothers we are concerned with do invest a great deal in managing the baby's interaction with objects. The typical U.S. nursling is surrounded with manufactured toys that represent a range of colors, textures, sounds, and shapes. They are designed to stimulate visual search and examination, auditory acuity, and tactile sensitivity. Mothers actively guide the baby's exploration leading him or her to discover attributes he or she might otherwise overlook. But a prominent feature of these interactions is the parent labeling objects and holding two-way (where parent supplies both parts) conversations with the baby about them (Thiessen et al. 2005).

Mothers encourage fantasy and make-believe even before the child begins to pretend on its own. They do this by providing character toys and dolls and the props to go with them. Special play spaces in the home are common. With infants, mothers may model pretending for the child, by holding up and making a stuffed animal or doll talk. With toddlers and preschoolers, mothers provide play scripts and embellish their children's early fantasy constructions (Howes and Matheson 1992).¹⁰ Not limited by make-believe that merely incorporates the reality around them (characteristic of village children's make-believe), middle-class mothers actively lead children into realms of fantasy in which a wide vocabulary can be brought into play and the child can experiment with hypothetical characters, relationships, and situations. Studies repeatedly show that imaginative, playful mothers successfully "push" children to higher levels of symbolic play (Bornstein 2006). These children seem to demonstrate enhanced symbolization abilities (Haight 1999). They learn to "talk like a book" (Martini 1995:58) before they learn to read. The play space is populated with a continuous stream of new toys, adjusted to expand on various active storylines and to reflect a developmental progression as the child's play narratives become more sophisticated (Haight and Miller 1993).

However, verifying the long causal chain between pretend play with infants to rapid acquisition of reading has been difficult. Careful review of experimental research shows only a very tenuous relationship between play and enhanced cognitive functioning (Smith and Cowie 1991), for example, probably because of the fact that the positive studies "exhibited several methodological drawbacks" (Smith 2002:131). A healthy skepticism by researchers regarding the instrumental value of play dates at least to the 1980s and "has continued into the 1990s, [while] research activity has waned" (Power 2000:xi).¹¹

THE PROMOTION OF MOTHER–CHILD PLAY

In spite of the absence of strong experimental verification for the value of mother–child play in reading readiness, the child's overwhelming need to play—almost from birth—

seems to offer a window of opportunity to jump-start academic preparedness. Even a casual perusal of popular literature (Auerbach 1998; Mikelson n.d.; Sargent 2003; Singer 2003) and the Internet yields a plethora of individuals and well-funded organizations (Alliance for Childhood 2004; Australian Childhood Foundation 2005; Earth Easy 2005; Nemours Foundation 2005; Playing for Keeps 2005) that aim to promote and guide parent–child play. MacDonald argues: "The movement to encourage higher levels of parent–child play among lower-class-families... is... an attempt to modify parenting practices towards a high... investment parenting style... ideally suited to life in an advanced postindustrial society" (MacDonald 1993:128–129).

A well-informed, conscientious parent in the United States, Europe, or East Asia would have a difficult time not accepting the charge to carefully orchestrate their child's play curriculum.¹² Do we not all now "know" that, left to their own devices, children can injure themselves in play? We fear that their innocence can be compromised by violent or sexually suggestive images that filter into much of the commercial successful children's media (Sternheimer 2003). Inappropriate playmates threaten the trajectory we have carefully set for them. Without a rich play life, our children's emotions may be blunted. But what about less-well-informed parents?

So powerful is the influence of the parent–child play movement (which includes teachers and parent organizations) that policymakers have embraced various schemes to alter the behavior of parents who may not otherwise play with their children.¹³ Considerable sums have been spent by anxious governments to teach parents how to play with their offspring. This is undertaken at least in part to "level the playing field" in terms of better preparing poor children for school (Greenspan 1990; Laosa 1980; Levenstein 1976).¹⁴ Here is an example from the state of Massachusetts:

Parent-Child Home Program (PCHP) emphasizes the parent-child verbal interaction critical to early brain development. . . . Home Visitors help parents to realize their role as their child's first and most important teacher, and generate excitement about learning and verbal interaction in the home through books, toys, and play. [Parent-Child Home Program 2004]

In the developed countries, this campaign may have some utility, but one extremely influential organization, The International Association for the Child's Right to Play, would like to take the parent–child play movement around the entire globe. Founded in 1961, the organization has campaigned through the United Nations to define children's opportunity to play as one of the fundamental human rights. At their 2005 annual meeting, attendees were welcomed by the President of the Federal Republic of Germany with these words:

Children at play not only require the understanding of adults but also their active support and participation. Parents must find the time to play with their children. . . . I am especially happy when adults regard the noise of

playing children as the music of the future. [International Play Association 2005]

This statement is tantamount to a condemnation of the child-rearing beliefs and behaviors of three-fourths of the world's parents and is completely unjustified by either the experimental literature in child development or, especially, the ethnographic literature. There are plentiful examples throughout the ethnographic record in which mother-child play is not valued, and these should not be viewed as signs of deficiency or neglect. Parents in these societies can, when pressed, cite numerous reasons why playing with children might not be a good idea.¹⁵ As a final caution, we must be wary that efforts to promote parent-child play are not driven by the desire to use play to "civilize the irrational natives" (Sutton-Smith 1993:27).

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NOTES

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1. An earlier, parallel analysis (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984) of adult-child language interaction also concluded that ethnographic studies in non-Western societies should be used to "de-universalize" claims made in the mainstream developmental psychology literature.
2. In other words, I am not trying to uncover some subtle differences in play patterns cross-culturally. That would require a very precise definition of the variable of interest.
3. However, the same isolation also breeds child abuse among the Inuit and in urban ghettos (Graburn 1987).
4. Several observers of chimpanzees in the wild (Clark 1977; Lawick-Goodall 1968; Plooj 1979) have noted the isolation of mother-infant pairs and the increased likelihood—compared to other primates—of mother-infant play.
5. Consistent with the theme of this article, a noted developmental psychologist claims the universality of peek-a-boo and its importance in the early cognitive development of the child (Bruner and Sherwood 1976:277), whereas no such universality is apparent in the ethnographic record.
6. Or, perhaps, not so benign: "In the late 1800s opium was traditionally used to soothe babies. Packaged in a variety of elixirs, opium-laced preparations were widely available (from grocers!) . . . an Australian Royal Commission estimated that 15 thousand babies a year were killed by overdoses of opium contained in these 'soothing' preparations" (Edgerton 1992:107).
7. During the Renaissance, "Even the wives of skilled laborers, many of whom worked, preferred to hire wet-nurses rather than suffering the inconvenience of nursing their own children. Nursing was work for peasants, and sending infants out to nurse was one of the first luxuries women demanded" (Sommerville 1982:80).
8. As an anonymous reviewer pointed out, my argument that mother-child play is the norm in our society must be tempered by the fact that multitasking mothers must exercise ingenuity in getting their children to play independently or to get fathers to entertain them. Busy mothers use their time strategically and that includes time spent playing with infants and children.

9. However, a quantitative study of parent-infant play in a highly educated, middle- to upper-middle-class sample from Delhi found "low levels of play interactions with . . . infants" (Roonparine et al. 1993:298).

10. Hall (1991) points out that the scripts children use in make-believe play closely resemble, structurally, the stories they will soon be asked to read in school.

11. For example, parents who foster and guide pretend play in their two-year-olds also read lots of picture books to them, so how can one separate out the unique impact of play?

12. Although, recently a backlash against "Supermomdom" has begun (Mead-Ferro 2004; Warner 2005).

13. A strikingly parallel situation is reported for Japan. Only an outline can be provided here. While living in Japan, Ann Allison placed her son in a private Japanese nursery school (de rigueur for a successful academic and professional career), and learned that she would need to spend hours each day preparing a homemade, beautifully arranged, thoroughly Japanese, multi-item lunch-box. This meal is called *obento*, and it serves as a test of the child's rapid acquisition of school culture—eat your whole lunch quickly without grumbling—and of the mother's dedication to her child's academic success. "*Obento* guidelines issued by the school and sent home . . . [mean that] Motherhood is not only watched and manipulated by the state but made by it into a conduit of ideological indoctrination" (Allison 1991:202, 206).

14. In Utah, local Family Assistance Centers (FAC) routinely provide mother-child play instruction as a core element in their Parent Education curriculum (M. Annette Grove, personal communication with author, July 18, 2005).

15. The ethnocentrism inherent in such promotional campaigns goes beyond mother-child play. In middle-class, postindustrial society, parents look on their children as "projects," and, as such, they are extremely attentive and responsive to "evidence"-driven advice on how to "improve" their "projects." Parenting improvement campaigns mistakenly assume that all parents are similarly motivated.

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