

Making a Good Thing Better: Ways to Strengthen Sociocultural Research in Human Development

Essay Review of *Children's Engagement in the World: Sociocultural Perspectives* by Artin Göncü¹

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William Kessen, long a voice for the role of history and culture in the study of children, once wryly observed that for all the obvious importance of a comparative theory of childhood and child learning, the rest of psychology and developmentalists by and large do *not* appear to be rushing out to defend conventional methods and approaches against cultural theories and comparative and historical data [Kessen, 1993]. The same for multiple methods: If ethnography seems so clearly to be among the most important methods in the study of human development, it nonetheless remains only occasionally, albeit increasingly, visible in most developmental research [Weisner, 1996]. It does not yet go without saying that an account of children and parenting in a journal would include some ethnographic case material for framing the context, use activity settings, include culturally rich descriptive information, and show understanding of the values and goals driving parenting and developmental pathways for children and child outcomes. In his foreword, Robert LeVine comments on the narrowness of establishment, individualistic developmental research. In contrast, he commends the authors and editors of this collection which '... suggests what the study of childhood might look like as a social science' [p. ix].

The authors of *Children's Engagement in the World* understand that children are engaged actors in a sociocultural world, and so recognize that the appropriate unit of analysis for studying children is the activity setting – the everyday cultural practices that a child engages, while bathed in language and meanings and actions. The goals of parents, their values about care and family, and cultural ecology are

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also at the center of inquiry throughout, since each plays a large role in how activities get organized. The psychological theories are primarily Vygotskian, along with psychocultural theories of context and interaction across cultures [Whiting & Edwards, 1988]. Vygotsky of course is congenial to cultural and contextual perspectives on development. Artin Göncü's introduction lays out the goals of the book: focusing on sociocultural engagement, seeing the child as an active participant in constructing tasks and activities, establishing sociocultural activities as a unit of analysis, and linking these notions to the work of the Whittings, Piaget, and other theorists as well as Vygotsky. Most studies are exemplary in their use of multiple methods including qualitative description and analysis, and quantitative measures tailored to the cultural community yet easily generalizable and useful for comparative work. These studies show that serious sociocultural developmental work does not need to be 'methodocentric' – rigidly using only qualitative methods, for instance. The projects have purposively-assembled samples that are well described and appropriate for the research programs they report. And best of all – there are *findings* about children and activities and cross-cultural differences that are interesting, subtle, and sometimes surprising.

So – why is the rest of developmental research by and large not routinely incorporating this sociocultural approach? The reason we do not have sociocultural research such as represented in this collection more in the mainstream in developmental research is not because sociocultural work lacks empirical and theoretical richness. The reasons for the separation have to do with disciplinary histories, methodological conventions, specialization, and perhaps some protectionism of academic and funding turf, among other reasons. Nonetheless, there are ways to extend this work in new directions from the sociocultural side, at least. After reviewing the contributions in *Children's Engagement in the World*, I will suggest some ways to engage sociocultural work more directly with human development research generally.

Artin Göncü and colleagues use cultural activity to understand play among 1- to 2-year olds in Salt Lake City, Turkey, a Mayan community in Guatemala, and a peasant community in India, as well as among 4- to 6-year-old children in four low-income communities (African-American and Euro-American in the USA, and a low-income community in Turkey). What children really do in play depends on community structure: the economics and resources to be found, the toys and settings, and the adult beliefs and communication patterns. They also interpret play as children being like adults; hence much play is about how children express their *interpretations* of the adult roles they see around them. Just as understanding play from a child's point of view requires grasping their interpretive frame, theories of play drawn from Western developmental theory are themselves potentially subject to local Western cultural concerns and interpretations (about literacy development for instance, or the press for individual creativity in the USA).

Jo Ann Farver offers data on toddler social pretend play in the United States, Indonesia, and Mexico, as well as a second series of studies of Euro-American and Korean-American preschoolers' play in the USA. True social pretend play means that children are interacting around a shared symbolic system; such play is an important developmental achievement. Farver blends methods beautifully in her studies. She finds that children in all three communities increase social pretend play from 18 to 36 months. But many group differences exist. American children en-

gaged with mothers in such play more than siblings; the reverse was true in Indonesia and Mexico. Pretend play mirrors what is well known but still remarkably understudied in child development: that siblings and people other than parents often provide the plurality or majority of care of children after infancy in many communities around the world. Farver found that USA mothers engaged in relatively more play and less teaching, while mothers in the Mexican and Indonesian communities did more teaching and directing, and less play.

Farver then unpacks her cultural difference findings by examining key activity setting features across these samples, using activity theory: personnel available; tasks and purposes of the activities; the cultural scripts for doing toddler activities; and salient cultural goals, values, and beliefs about development, play, and the person. For each community she specifies the circumstances of life for children (as understood through key child-caregiver activities and community structure) that produced the cultural differences in social play at these ages. Generally, her studies support the view that in cultural settings where siblings are the expectable play partners and caretakers, siblings provide equally or more cognitively challenging stimulation that is also more fun for children than is play with mothers.

Thus, scaffolding or the social support provided by a more skilled partner seems to be essential to the development of children's pretend play everywhere. But who does the scaffolding, *how*, *when*, and *why* it gets done, may be culture-specific and highly dependent on the environmental context.

Her preschool pretend play studies use a similar design, comparing Korean-American and Euro-American children. As an example of her findings, Korean children in social pretend play more often played family roles and everyday activities, talked about their play partner's actions, agreed more, and made polite requests. Euro-American children more often played danger and fantastic themes, described their own actions, issued directives to their play partner, and rejected partners' suggestions.

Jonathan Tudge and his colleagues report on their remarkable long-term program of research on how children become competent and what counts for competence. They studied parental values and beliefs and children's behaviors in four medium-sized cities: Greensboro, North Carolina; Suwon, South Korea; Obninsk, Russia, and Tartu, Estonia. In each city they sampled working and middle class families (less or more education and lower or higher status occupations). Would differences in values, beliefs, and activities be found across societies? Would social class differences emerge? Would children behave differently, reflecting possible differences in parental values? The results surprise and illuminate. The study found no substantial differences in parental values regarding individualism or self-direction across the cities; nor did an individualism/collectivism pattern appear across cities! But middle-class parents across all cities were more likely to positively evaluate self-direction. Middle class children were more likely to initiate activities. Educational experiences of parents, especially mothers, had impacts on child rearing values as great or greater than occupation across the four cities. These data also provide an important caution about over-generalizing societal differences. Their within-city differences, based solely on social class indicators, were at least as important predictors of child-rearing values and beliefs as were cross-city (cross-societal) differences.

Steven Guberman's work focuses on children's mathematical activities outside of school. He reviews the many situations in which arithmetic and mathematical reasoning occurs in the everyday life of children, and summarizes three lines of work: American mothers assisting their preschool children in solving number tasks, American children playing Monopoly, and Brazilian children in commercial transactions. He looks for *supportive* environments – those where the ability of the child is matched enough with the tasks such that scaffolding and shared assistance leads to engagement and learning. Such tasks and situations are socially constituted and provide windows into how children learn and use arithmetical understanding in life. Guberman also found a quote from Bill Kessen that captures something about the value of a sociocultural approach:

The intellectual reason for the study of everyday behavior is sweet in its simplicity: everyday behavior is what we want to know about. Somehow ... we lost sight of the core goal, the *understanding of what children do* [1993: p. 276, emphasis in the original].

Suzanne Gaskins summarizes her extensive research program among a Mayan community in Yucatan, Mexico, presenting a brief description of family life, a typical household routine, and three 'principles of children's engagement' in the Mayan world: the primacy of adult work (rather than children's interests); the importance of parental beliefs about the world and children (e.g., development in a child is internal, preprogrammed, 'it comes out by itself'), and the independence of child motivation (e.g., children expect they will have little influence on others' activities, and self-directed behavior is not socially manipulative). The chapter then beautifully shows the operation of these principles in various aspects of children's everyday life, including play (less symbolic play, less parentally supported), early self-maintenance (lots of it), work (important to the household and much more than in the USA), and learning (done as apprentices with adults, who give guidance during the learning tasks itself).

Gaskins points out that a theory of development centered around cultural engagement in a local world implies that there should be multiple criteria in social science for making judgments regarding the value of child outcomes; finding differences in outcomes across communities does not necessarily imply deficits. All cultures have benefits and costs to their way of engaging children, including ours, and Gaskins lists some costs that seem true of the USA:

In addition to certain benefits, there might also be some costs incurred by our own children engaging in the sort of child-oriented world of play and nonresponsibility that we construct for them and reward them for, including such things as identity crises, social isolation or selfishness, erosion of intrinsic motivation for real-world tasks, and low self-esteem [p. 58].

This is a strong challenge to business-as-usual developmental psychology, since there are few areas more clearly protected from comparative evidence than the scales and assessments used in Western developmental research. The assumptions about desired outcomes are built into the very items used in these scales. But Gaskins perhaps is also making some strong claims regarding the development of her *Mayan* children as well – that they do not have identity crises (or the same kinds as USA children have), that they are not as selfish, and that they do not suffer

from low self-esteem (or not in the way USA children and adults do). An exciting research program is suggested by such claims. The obvious incursions of globalization and delocalization facing the Maya also require further research.

Wendy Haight reports on pretend play in Taipei and in the USA (Euro-American and African-American). There was a similar frequency of pretend play across cultures, even though the USA children had more toys to pretend with. Taipei caregivers used shared knowledge of social routines to scaffold pretend more than they used toys. Chinese caregivers rehearsed appropriate conduct as part of play, unlike the USA pattern. USA mothers did more, and more varied, play of all kinds than USA fathers, unlike the Taipei parents. There was more mutual, 'child-centered' USA play, and more filialpiety-based beliefs translated into didactic and directed play in Taipei. Haight reports an interesting cultural practice in Taipei. It challenges USA definitions of play as being 'structured' (typically evaluated as not as 'good' for development) versus play that is 'open' or 'child-centered' (as the USA model names these dimensions). The Chinese parents provided a cultural framework for play through having fathers read poems to their young children. 'Through the memorization of many (3,000) Tsang poems, Chinese parents believed not only that the meaning of children's daily lives would be enhanced but also that the children would learn to write poetry' [p. 144]. Is this to be glossed as 'overly-structured' play, or (as Haight of course sees it) as a quite striking belief and practice intended to provide developmentally essential cultural meaning for children's play and promote richly engaged development – one that we might well like to emulate?

Mary Gauvain introduces the interesting idea of 'vitality' into her studies of the development of planning abilities in children. Vitality is a tacit, prospective commitment to move forward into the future to achieve goals. Socialization of children itself rests on vitality in some sense; why else would it happen, at least as a culturally favored practice? Opportunity for planning varies across cultures, as does the form that child participation in planning takes. Gauvain comments on the highly scheduled Euro-American early and middle childhood periods, where adults drive schedules without much open time and without joint participation of children. Yet middle childhood is a time when children are developmentally prepared to plan and perhaps would be better left to do more planning on their own, with other children. She (speculatively) links this to what she sees as often bored, restless, undirected USA adolescents who are not very well networked in shared planning activities, perhaps because they have not been prepared in middle childhood to do so.

Christine Pappas describes collaborative teaching styles among K and grade 1 classrooms in the 'borderlands' – by which she means the circumstances of children from diverse ethnic and language backgrounds. She argues for the use of joint participation and strategic assistance for such children and provides illustrations of effective use of such assistance. This is a chapter, though, that raises Kessen's questions, since without comparing the kinds of teaching she ethnographically describes to other teaching approaches, we are left with some useful case material, but without evidence to show substantial and sustained improvements in literacy in the children exposed to these methods, compared to either alternative or blended approaches.

Interesting and important as the studies in this collection are, how might they be made stronger, better able to engage a wider human development audience while remaining sociocultural in approach? Unfortunately, it will not be only by demonstrating its importance through the publication of high quality research using cross-cultural samples, essential as that always is, since most of developmental psychology has yet to rush to the ramparts to defend against, nor do they especially embrace these approaches. There are ways such work could move further in its own way, however: recognize a richer theory of mind, cognition and emotion, one that includes dysfunction, conflict, and the hurtful sides of sociocultural engagement; develop and test outcome measures; predict how change will affect children; and integrate evolution and neuropsychological approaches.

I did not read of a child in this book who *resisted* social engagement, was unprepared to participate in cultural activities, could or would not be guided or apprenticed, or who did not fit into the cultural place it was born into because of temperament or other reasons. Parents and teachers all attempted to gently scaffold the children in culturally appropriate ways; all the parents in this book were at least 'good enough' parents for their culture. A focus on scaffolding and learning to fit into cultural activities can lead to a rather one-sided view of the life of the child and community. One-sided because culture can and does hurt children – as it inevitably must. It hurts us because it was not designed with any particular child or family in mind – and so is never optimally fitted to any child. The needs of children are thwarted by culture and produce frustration because of the inevitable channeling of widely differing abilities and wishes.

The theory of mind derived from Vygotskian or activity theories does not allow for psychodynamic processes in children and parents that produce defense, resistance, and repression of cultural experience. Not just scaffolding but thwarting of desires. Not just co-construction but conflict and anger. Not a gradual matching of child to adult mind, but rather the '7 sins of memory' characterized by transience, absentmindedness, blocking, misattribution, suggestibility, bias, and persistence [Schachter, 1999]. None of the children in these accounts face the chaos and negative impacts of war, abuse, discrimination, or refugee status [Stephens, 1995]. I definitely do not suggest that cross-cultural research should attend only, or even necessarily preferentially, to the oppressed, poor, abused, and so forth as its primary mission. However, a broader, more inclusive view of the child and of the mind would help sociocultural approaches engage more fully with the true range of community contexts and child responses and kinds of parents to be found in the world. This would add due consideration of the negative impact of culture on children, children's evident resistance to parents and cultural engagement to some extent, and the effects of seriously harmful environments on the development of children everywhere.

Presumably the reason a child engages in sociocultural activities and is expected to do so in the right way by parents is to achieve well-being. Well-being is the engagement in activities deemed desirable by a cultural community – as well as the psychological experiences (of happiness, trust, effectance, and so forth) that are presumably produced thereby [Weisner, 1998]. Hence the goal of development, and a worthy outcome for child study, is such child participation, and ways communities organize or restrict engagement, and so forth. Including well-being as an outcome measure would perforce place the study of childhood squarely where the au-

thors of this collection want us to be: amongst children engaged in cultural activities that they find enhance well-being. These studies are poised to do this. We need better sociocultural outcome measures that matter to children and parents and communities. Farver, Göncü, Haight and others question defining 'child-centered' play as USA researchers do. Gaskins points to the costs and benefits of USA and Mayan cultural activities and parental goals and beliefs. She is surely right that all socialization systems have costs and benefits, and that costs are underexamined in the dominant, pedagogically driven outcomes familiar in the USA. Conversely, what most USA measures would measure as 'costs' due to low levels of 'stimulation' and preliteracy training among Maya, she sees as clearly benefits to well-being among the Mayan community she worked in, benefits unappreciated or even unrecognized by existing measures. Sociocultural researchers can generate testable assumptions about better or worse outcome, develop the scales and procedures that would systematically assess costs as well as benefits of different child pathways with different cultural activities – and then directly challenge conventional measures.

Such efforts are underway. Asher Ben-Arieh and Helmut Wintersberger [1997], for instance, have developed comprehensive indicators of children's well-being for international research and policy use that uses 'beyond survival' indicators. They include five broad domains: civil life skills (community awareness, activities, and opportunities for participation); personal life skills (family supports, communication, conflict resolution, academic); safety and physical status (exposures to risks from the environment); economic and social resources (child expenditures, equality, access, and child contributions), and children's subcultures and activities (activities, time distribution, satisfaction). Peter Benson [1977] from the Search Institute has assembled a community-based index. This can be compared to the enormous variety of statistical indicators of children's well-being currently in use in the United States, covering health, education, economic security, population, family and neighborhood characteristics, and social development and problem behavior [Hauser, Brown & Prosser, 1997]. The point is that everything about the sociocultural approach in this volume is relevant to creating new child and family outcome measures and testing the domains and the positive or negative directions in which the items should be framed. In this way, sociocultural work can be better tied directly to applied, intervention and policy arenas. But such measures need to be tested against conventional, currently existing approaches and show added value.

Most parents and most children today appear to be willing – more than willing, they hunger for – pedagogical skills. Economic and information systems around the world require literacy and numeracy and technical skills. Sociocultural work can research the ways change like this can be achieved in everyday activities, and where it perhaps cannot be. Parents want children who have the dispositions that would help gain such human-capital-relevant skills – yet also retain a morally appropriate, respectful life in their community and family [Weisner, 2000]. Parents want a blending of the cleverness and brightness to achieve in school, the moral and responsibility training and social intelligence important to the local community, and the community resources and investments to accomplish both. Perhaps most want a 'satisficing' strategy – they would like change, neither entirely traditional nor entirely modern or post-modern. Change in parenting and childhood experience is mediated by the sociocultural world and by activities.

Finally, the focus on parental goals and cultural 'vitality' is a welcome aspect of this book. But the goal of development is not solely to attain proximal goals of parents and the community. Another goal is survival and reproduction – producing a child who can and will reproduce and be a good-enough parent to his/her own children. Sociocultural and activity theory can and should engage with evolutionary and biocultural data and theory regarding how children are prepared for engagement as a way to survive [e.g., Small, 1998]. There are hints of this here and there, such as Gauvain's mention of the developmental preparedness of children around five for complex planning. But little mention is made either of brain research on preparedness of children for social engagement, or evidence for the *selective* advantages of different patterns of cultural adaptation and child strategies for engagement in different environments (more predictable social and physical resources or less predictable, for instance). Children are already prepared to engage the social world with a certain temperament, for example. Some children are shy and others bold; some show early 'secure' attachment while others are more avoidant or resistant; some have high social intelligence and some lower.

Differences in these abilities involve more than accounting for individual differences in cultural samples. Presumably, such patterned differences have been selected for in past environments because one or another strategy of social engagement helped children survive in the varied past social ecologies parents and children faced, or such patterns co-evolved with other behaviors that helped children survive [Chisholm, 1999]. Any one of these further directions for sociocultural studies of development, much less all four, will strengthen the field and maybe even get the attention of other developmentalists who would benefit from engagement with sociocultural studies.

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Human Development



Zena, on 'phone' to her Head Start classmate:
'Guess where my kids told me to take them? To the store....I don't got time to do that!'
(See pp. 323–348; photo courtesy of William A. Corsaro and Katherine Brown Rosier.)

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