Roots of Human Sociality
Culture, Cognition and Interaction

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Virtually all theories of human social development presume universal outcomes. They aim to explain the development of the human species as a whole, not the different trajectories of particular subgroups. When different group outcomes are encountered (e.g., by gender, socioeconomic status, or culture), they are viewed as superficial to the underlying, shared developmental trajectory. Yet most researchers also presume that one of the most significant characteristics of our species is its long period of dependency during which many skills and understandings necessary for successful adult functioning must be learned (Bruner 1972). Much of this learning is informal in nature, taking place during children’s everyday interaction with others. Finally, it is also presumed (at least tacitly) that during this period of dependency both the content to be learned and the everyday environment of that learning are both culturally organized and culturally variable.

None of these three presumptions is particularly controversial on its own, but they stand in an uneasy relationship to one another. The idea of universal yet experientially influenced developmental outcomes becomes suspect once the range of cultural variation in experience during childhood is acknowledged. A viable argument about development can only be made if at least one of the three presumptions (universal developmental outcomes, influence of experience on development, or cultural variation in experience) is discarded. The three viable solutions become that (1) development is dependent on experience but relevant experiences are universally present in all cultures (i.e., cultural variation is insignificant); (2) universal development is largely
genetically determined, and therefore experience, including culturally structured experience, is irrelevant (i.e., experience is insignificant); or (3) learning-dependent development is variable in its process and outcomes (i.e., outcomes are not universal).

Much of the research on early social interaction has adopted the first solution, claiming that universal developmental outcomes arise from children’s common interaction with social interlocutors (e.g., Bruner 1983; Gergely and Csibra this volume; Tomasello 1999; Trevarthen 1987). The particulars of interactions in Euro-American homes are typically used to build the common model of social interaction, and its characteristics are then drawn on to make specific arguments about universal mechanisms of social development. This chapter reviews the available evidence that this Euro-American–derived model of social interaction is not universally applicable. On the basis of this review, I conclude that this first solution is not viable: a model of social interaction based solely on Euro-American interaction norms cannot provide an adequate foundation for understanding human infant social interaction. In the conclusion, the viability of the two remaining solutions is discussed.

**Cultural Variation in Infant Social Interaction**

In Euro-American middle-class culture, infants are most often raised in nuclear families with few siblings and with primary care being given by the mother (or shared serially by mother and hired caregiver). Caregivers and infants are often alone together and interact frequently just for the pleasure of the interaction. Caregivers look and talk to their infants often, holding the infant away from their bodies to allow them to look at the infant face to face. They consider even very young infants as legitimate social partners, often interpreting any behavior or sound from them as meaningful. During the first year they play simple, turn-taking social games like “peek-a-boo.” Caregivers call infants’ attention to objects in the environment (or in books) by pointing to and naming them. They also play with objects with the infant, simultaneously talking about the activity. Caregivers make many social accommodations during these interactions, including changing their speech to “motherese” (baby talk). As the children begin to talk, caregivers work to understand the sometimes unclear or incomplete utterances by interpreting the children’s intentions, asking for clarification, and expanding on what the infant has said. The overwhelming pattern is one of adult focus on and accommodation to the infant.
In many other cultures, this pattern of social interaction does not occur. It is perhaps unique in the world in the degree of engagement between mother and infant. For any culture, the specific ways infants are treated by their caregivers, and expected to respond, cannot be understood without also understanding what deeper cultural factors are organizing their everyday behavior. As shown below, where different cultural factors are at work, such as the structure of the everyday life world, the specific cultural beliefs about young children, and the general social organization of the culture (Gaskins 1999), there will be different patterns of interaction. The evidence provided from other cultures demonstrates that the patterns of social interaction with infants that have been presumed to be universal are quite culturally variable; they are not appropriate candidates for universal learning mechanisms for social development.

**Patterns of infant social engagement**

Although infants may be biologically prepared at birth (or before) to attend to and learn about social engagement, the particular patterns they will be learning to express are culturally specific and quite varied. Infants begin to learn the appropriate social rules through their coparticipation in daily activities. There are three dimensions of engagement that infants have to learn: expressing inner experience, influencing or responding to another person’s behavior, and learning about and communicating information about the world. Examples of culturally different patterns for each of these dimensions given below demonstrate the dramatic range of infant social experience.¹

**Expressing Inner Experience**

The first dimension of engagement is expressing positive and negative inner experience. Cultures differ in their expectations about when expression of inner experience is acceptable for infants and when it is not. They also differ in who is listening and in whether and how someone responds. Euro-American newborns are allowed to express inner experience at any time, and they usually receive a response that acknowledges and interprets the experience and attempts to affect an appropriate change in the environment. If a newborn cries, for example, the caregiver typically responds to that cry, usually picking up the baby, looking at the infant, vocalizing, and trying to fix whatever is wrong. If a young infant smiles, the caregiver typically returns the smile
and verbalizes to the infant. These responses change subtly before the infant reaches six months. For example, although holding is the most frequent response for crying at four months, looking and talking are more common by seven months (LeVine et al. 1994).

Yucatec Mayan infants experience some of these responses, but there are also important differences. Yucatec Mayan caregivers are more likely to respond consistently to negative expressions than to positive ones (Gaskins 1990). The response is likely to involve holding but not verbalization. Caregivers are particularly good at understanding the source of the negative expression and therefore can quickly fix whatever is wrong. They hold their young infants most of the time (90% of the time at three months) and pay close attention to them. Their adeptness at reading body cues means that often infants’ problems are addressed before they escalate into overt negative expression of experience. This is an intentional cultural strategy to shape the infant’s expression of inner experience to produce a quiet baby, with little outward expression of inner experience (either positive or negative). Yucatec Maya infants at three months cry about half as often as Boston infants (Richman et al. 1988). Colic is unknown; a cry that cannot be stopped is taken as a sign of illness and is of great concern. Yucatec Mayan infants also hardly ever laugh out loud. These patterns of caregivers’ responses are more or less consistent during the infants’ first two years.

The Gusii of East Africa show a pattern of expression and response that is similar to the Yucatec Maya. They also respond more to negative expressions than to positive ones. LeVine (LeVine et al. 1994) has called this the “squeaky wheel” response and argues that this is an adaptive rule where there is a lot of infant illness and death. In the first year, if there is a verbal response at all, it is likely to be a soothing one. Soothing responses drop sharply at 12 months. Throughout the first year, there is also constant body contact (100% at three months and 90% at ten months), and Gusii caregivers respond consistently to cries, day or night. Like the Yucatec Maya, Gusii infants cry about half as often as Boston infants (Richman et al. 1988). Unlike the Maya, Gusii mothers do not often look at their infants, in line with a cultural norm of gaze avoidance (see below).

Responsiveness need not involve much effort to understand or respond to the infant’s intent. Although Italian mothers were very responsive to ten-month-old infants’ negative and positive expressions of inner experience (New 1988), many of these responses did not actually comply with the infants’ expressed desire or need. Through the subordination of the Italian infants’ needs to the ongoing families’ routines, the infants
learn that although included in the ongoing events, they are not always the most important participants. Similarly, the rural African American caregivers of Trackton feel that they know better than the infants what the infants need, so caregiving reflects the caregivers’ goals rather than contingent responses to what the infants are saying (Heath 1983).

Where infant intent is important, cultures nonetheless differ in their approaches. Yucatec Maya caregivers seek to understand and respond to their infants’ intent to express negative experience, but they base their response on direct evidence from the infants themselves. In contrast, Euro-American caregivers have conversations with their preverbal infants in which they carry on both sides of the conversation, imagining what the infants would “want” to say. They are also willing to take incomplete or unclear utterances by young children and try to figure out what their intent is. These routines put the burden of understanding (and the freedom to invent an understanding) on the adult. In other cultures, such as the Kaluli (Schieffelin 1990) and Samoan (Ochs 1988) cultures, infant intent is relevant only when the infant can make that intent clear, because it is culturally inappropriate to make an assertion about another person’s intent. Infant expressions and early verbal utterances with unclear intent are not “translated” because caregivers in these cultures are unwilling to guess or interpret what a child is trying to communicate. Rather, the children are encouraged to make their communications clearer, or they are just ignored (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984).

Thus, in this first domain of expressing internal experience, we see that infants by the end of their first year learn a set of culturally motivated patterns about how and when to express their inner experience and what kind of response to expect. Infants in different cultures learn a different set of patterns, many of which are clearly in place by three months. Over the first year, these patterns come to guide their behavior in social interactions that communicate their internal feelings to another person.

**Influencing Another Person**

The second dimension of engagement is influencing another person. The Euro-American interaction rules transmitted to infants are quite complex. First, the most common actions from either infant or caregiver are verbal or otherwise distal, rather than through body contact. Infants come to expect praise, encouragement, and leading questions to be convinced to do something. Infants’ and caregivers’ roles are reciprocal—that is,
infants are seen as having a legitimate right to influence the caregiver and vice versa. Under these circumstances, infants learn to pay attention to the feedback provided by caregiver facial and verbal responses to their behavior. Although caregivers have a high motivation to get infants to conform to culturally valued behaviors, they also respect infants’ individual preferences. During some interactions, infants’ individual preferences are given priority; during others, the caregivers’ desire for cultural conformity takes priority. Finally, infants learn that they have varying degrees of influence depending on the circumstances. During playtime a caregiver may give the infant undivided attention and primary control over what happens, during feeding the caregiver will assume some control but be willing to negotiate, and during a car ride, the caretaker will assert primary control, disregarding the infant’s feelings about riding in a car seat. Because these rules are complex, because the caregiver is often ambivalent about ignoring the infant, and because the infant is allowed, and even encouraged, to negotiate, these early interactions can be very difficult and emotionally draining for both infant and caregiver.

Yucatec Maya infants have a very different set of rules to learn about influencing other people. First, infants have the cultural right to influence only those events that are directly related to the infant’s own internal experience and well-being. The infant may always ask for food, warmth, sleep, comfort, or physical closeness, and caretakers will provide these things quickly and cheerfully, even when inconvenient. The most minimal gesture may be effective (a reach, a single sound, or even a glance), because the infant is being carefully monitored at all times. Because there is a general acceptance of each infant’s individual nature as being “just his (or her) way of being,” caregivers rarely try to influence their infants in this domain. When care of the infant is at odds with other responsibilities, caregivers may try to end an interaction by distracting the infant, but if the infant objects, the caregiving will continue until the infant is satisfied. The infant is irrelevant as an actor in most other household events (even when included as an observer), and the infant therefore neither attempts to interact nor is actively engaged.

This pattern leads to minimal negotiation between infant and caregiver. Infants quickly learn that the world is cleanly divided into events they have primary influence over and events they have no influence over. Many attempts to influence the action of another person, therefore, are both successful and free of negotiation and emotional expression. The motivation to pay close attention to caregiver responses is minimized,
because the only relevant condition is that the infant is expressing a personal need or desire. If infants feel that their legitimate rights to influence others are being ignored, they will complain vigorously and persistently. Conversely, they almost never object to or resist any activity not relevant to their immediate internal needs and desires.

Caregivers mediate infants’ actions in the world only out of concern for the infant’s well-being and safety. One-year-olds are not considered to have any responsibility for understanding a dangerous situation. The caregiver simply either removes the infant or the dangerous object from the situation, often with no explanation; the infant rarely objects. Gradually, during the second year, a command or threat accompanies these interventions until, finally, caregivers expect infants to obey just a verbal response. Because caregivers do not think the child can understand, they do not try to reason with the child, and they act with little emotion and impatience.

A different pattern of social interaction is found with young infants in a rural African American community in the southern United States. They learn early on that even though they will be engaged regularly in social interaction, they will often have little influence on how it unfolds (Heath 1983). As mentioned earlier, caregivers reason that they know a lot more than infants about what the infants need, so there is little need to take into account any specific information an infant might be trying to communicate. Also, infants are often engaged in nonverbal social games but only at the caregiver’s whim, not the infant’s. Even sleeping infants may find themselves awakened by a sibling who has returned home from school ready to play with the infant. From about 14 months on, boys learn that although most of the time they are ignored as conversational partners, they can be engaged by anyone in the public space in a teasing routine where they will have to respond to a series of verbal challenges. The only way they will be left alone is if they can demonstrate that they understand the adult’s taunts by responding cleverly to them. The explicit goal is to help the young boys learn how to read between the lines of someone’s speech and to defend themselves. For these infants, the motivation to understand other people’s communications and intentions is extremely high.

The previous examples illustrate cultural variation in the general organization of infant social interaction, but cultures vary as well in some specific rules of interaction often assumed by developmental psychologists to be universal. For instance, face-to-face interaction with sustained eye contact with infants, which is often presumed to be universal, is not a prevalent activity in many cultures around the world.
Yucatec Maya mothers and infants when nursing may sometimes glance at each other, but these looks are usually not coordinated or sustained. Both spend more time looking at other people or nearby animals or simply staring out the door or into space. LeVine and his colleagues explain compellingly how culturally inappropriate such mutual gaze would be for Gusii in East Africa (LeVine et al. 1994), giving five different reasons Gusii mothers would want to actively avoid eye contact with their infants. As a result, Gusii mothers spend on average between one and 12 percent of their interaction time looking at their three- to ten-month-old infants (although in a comparison sample, Boston mothers spent between 40% and 45% of their interaction time looking at their infants). Other cultures are not specifically concerned about avoiding eye contact but limit it nonetheless by orienting the child away from the mother, toward other social participants in the household (Martini and Kirkpatrick 1981). In cultures in which infants are tied to the mother’s back high enough to see, the child shares a mother’s visual perspective out on the world and are encouraged very early to observe and engage in the social world beyond the mother.

In many cultures in which infants are encouraged to engage socially with others, there is an additional social routine to help them enter into conversations. Many languages have a word (or morpheme) that is added to a sentence and that tells someone to repeat the sentence, word for word (e.g., much like our word say in “Say ‘I want candy.’”). For example, Schieffelin (1990) reports that once Kaluli children begin to use understandable words, caregivers use such a form of direct language instruction to tell children to repeat the caregiver’s sentences to another person. Such usage is thought to encourage the child to be assertive in an interaction, thus “hardening” the child’s speech. These sentences are not simplified for the child and reflect what the caregiver thinks should be said, not what the caregiver thinks the child wants to say. The Kwar’a, of the Solomon Islands, believe that such repeating routines are a useful teaching technique beginning at six months, an age at which they believe the infants can understand language even though they cannot yet talk (Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1986). The Samoans (Ochs 1988), the Quiche [K’iche’] Maya (Pye 1986) and the Yucatec Maya (Lucy 1993) also use such a term. For the Yucatec Maya, this technique is used for at least two distinct purposes. First, it helps children negotiate interactions with other people, often carrying an extra implicit message (from the caregiver) of instruction or criticism to the listener. Second, it teaches young children to memorize verbal passages verbatim so that they can reliably run errands and deliver
messages (similar to the Samoans). Using this technique, a two-year-old becomes a reliable messenger.

A second specific rule of interaction that has been identified as universal and developmentally relevant is the use of motherese. Ferguson (1978) proposed that there are 17 different characteristics that make up a universal type of distinctive speech to young children. Contrary to Ferguson’s and others’ predictions, many of these characteristics are not found in some cultures in which talk to children has been closely studied. The Kaluli avoid such “bird talk” as it recalls the mythic identification of birds with the souls of dead children (Schieffelin 1983). Heath (1983) observed that rural African American’s speech to children was quite similar to speech to adults; further, they criticized children who used “baby talk.” The Samoans (Ochs 1988), the Quiche [K’iche’] (Pye 1986), and the Gusii (LeVine et al. 1994) are also reported not to use motherese. These observers argue that, in general, child-directed speech sounds quite similar to adult directed speech. Some of the characteristics of motherese may be culturally specific compensations for engaging in talk with preverbal infants; in those cultures in which there is not a lot of talk with preverbal infants, like the ones mentioned above, there would be less need to use such characteristics with older infants.

In addition, in many cultures, the burden of understanding is on children, not adults, because of rules of social rank. In Samoa not only must the children work to be understood, but they must also explicitly ask for clarification or simply wait when they do not understand someone else. Very young children are explicitly trained how to pay attention to what others are doing, how to deliver a message verbatim, and how to report what they see, all skills they will need to enter as a low-ranking person into the social system (Ochs 1988). Even more demanding are those cultures in which speech is often used in ways that do not express direct meaning and children are expected to be able to read the nonverbal and contextual signs to understand the deeper meanings. As discussed above, in the rural African American community of Trackton, boys are intentionally trained through public teasing and direct challenges to be able to react to subtle changes in meaning, beginning soon after their first birthday (Heath 1983). And among the Gusii, young children are expected to interpret the adults’ indirect style of speaking about certain topics, using the nonverbal clues that accompany such discreet talk (LeVine et al. 1994).

We see that infants from different cultures have vastly different rules to learn about influencing other people and about reading other people’s intentions. In their first two years, infants learn who to look at, who are
appropriate social partners, what are appropriate behaviors (and in which specific contexts), and what are legitimate topics. As they begin to talk, they learn to incorporate verbal interaction into these understandings. In some cultures they are excused from paying much attention to other people’s intentions, although in others they are not considered social partners until they do. There are also significant differences in cultural attitudes about infants learning these rules. Infants in some cultures have more pressure on them to master some rules quickly; others do not. In some cultures they receive direct instructions about social rules, sometimes accompanied by praise and punishment for their mastery and failures; in others they are simply guided through interactions in their daily activity; and still in others they are ignored as social partners until they can master the rules on their own. Many of the underlying assumptions and many specific patterns of interaction (such as social games, face-to-face interaction, and motherese) experienced by Euro-American infants that have been assumed to be universal are not.

**Gaining and Exchanging Information about the World**

The third dimension of engagement is gaining and exchanging information about the world through social interaction. Euro-American infants are encouraged to engage with the physical world assertively, manipulating and experimenting with objects. Much of this exploration of the physical world is done collaboratively with a caregiver who acts as both goal setter and mediator between the infant and the world. Caregivers offer objects designed for play that offer a challenge to the infant. They talk a lot about what they are doing together and encourage their infants to talk. And they facilitate the infants accomplishing the goal by either simplifying the task overall or breaking it down into subtasks that the infants can do, a process of “scaffolding” (Wood et al. 1976; see also Vygotsky 1978, 1987). The activity is often accompanied by praise and encouragement, sometimes with the additional claim that the infant has done the task “all by yourself!”

This focus on caregiver mediation of object interaction turns learning about the world into a highly verbal, shared social activity, with two active participants who consistently need to maintain joint attention and to negotiate their roles. It gives the infant a great deal of information about the world, much of which comes from the caregiver, and it conveys to the infant not only that the physical world is interesting but that exploration of it is best done with social support. It gives the caregiver responsibility for finding activities for the infant and for setting goals.
It also links the pleasure of learning and mastery with the pleasures of controlling someone else’s attention, pleasing someone important, and receiving praise (including false praise). Thus, Euro-American infants become dependent on a social audience—the “Mommy, watch me” phenomenon. This pressure can become so strong that they fail to find intrinsic pleasure in an activity, relying heavily on the rewards of social attention and praise.

This pattern demonstrates the ambivalent goals of Euro-American caregivers. Although they say that teaching their infants to be independent is their primary goal, they actively work to shape their infants’ behavior to match culturally valued activities at a rate that at least matches, and hopefully surpasses, the average. To accomplish this, they must strip the infant of true independence. Likewise, infants, who strenuously assert their rights to do things independently, also seek the facilitating scaffolding and praise of the caregiver. This complex agenda requires both parties to expend a great deal of energy, causes great tension, and often results in an escalation of emotion on both sides. To recover, both caregivers and infants feel they need time when their engagement with each other is minimized.

Japanese caregivers (almost exclusively mothers) interact with their infants as much, if not more, as Euro-American caregivers, but their goals as parents and their rules of engagement are somewhat different. Instead of independence, they see the development of a mutually dependent social relationship as their most important socialization goal. Thus, Japanese mothers devote much of their daily energy toward satisfying their infants’ basic needs to “convince” the infant to become interdependent (Doi 1973). This accomplished, infants are expected to comply voluntarily with their mothers’ wishes to please them. Similarly, in terms of learning about the world, Japanese infants are taught that interactions with people are more relevant than interactions with objects. Although Euro-American mothers and infants spend more time interacting with objects, Japanese mothers and infants spend more time in strictly social interaction or in focusing on the social meaning of objects (Bornstein 1989). Further, in an otherwise indulgent environment, they are taught to act on the world in ways that take other people’s feelings and needs into account (Clancy 1986). So, although Japanese infants and caregivers have an intense pattern of interaction, it is built on the ideals of an indulgent mother and a compliant infant who attends to the intentions and feelings of other people.

The Yucatec Maya expectations about infants’ learning and exchanging information about the physical world are quite different from either of
these two cultures. Yucatec Mayan caregivers recognize that infants like to explore their physical surroundings and are interested in manipulating objects. As soon as they can sit, infants are put on a cloth placed on the ground, and from there, they are allowed to crawl and then walk with a great deal of freedom. (There is always a caregiver who is carefully watching ready to remove infant or object when there is a danger.) Although infants are still immobile, they are given whatever discarded household items happen to be nearby on the floor to explore. These are offered in a minimal manner, usually placed next to the infant with no talk, no smile, and no demonstration. Even with this paucity of objects and minimal social engagement, 12-month-old Yucatec Maya infants spend as much time in object play (35.7%) as Euro-American infants do (36.7%). But in their play, they spend much less time exploring the characteristics and uses of an object. In addition, even though overall they spend almost as much time in social interaction overall as Euro-American infants do, they pay almost no attention to other people when they are playing with objects. They do not talk to others and they do not look to others for advice or guidance in their exploration of the physical environment (Gaskins 1990).

There are a number of specific interaction routines, like social games, pointing to and naming objects, and demonstration of and playing with objects, that have been seen as important insofar as they demonstrate specific social understandings and have potential developmental consequences (e.g., Bruner 1983; Gergely and Csibra this volume; Tomasello 1999). All of these interaction routines presuppose that caregivers and infants have abundant optional, playful, and non-need based interaction. This is not true in many cultures, especially those in which adult workload is high and it is considered inappropriate for adults to play with children. In the Kaluli (Schieffelin 1990), Samoan (Ochs 1988), Gusii (LeVine et al. 1994), and Yucatec Maya (Gaskins 1996) cultures, parents do not play with children. In all of these cultures, in which parents are busy with economic and household responsibilities, play is inappropriate for someone of high status, and children are expected to accommodate to the adult world, rather than adults accommodate to an artificial child’s world. In all of these cultures, and in many others, the amount of time spent during a child’s first two years with caregivers in social games, pointing and naming, and mutual play with objects with is dramatically lower than in Euro-American homes and in some cases virtually nonexistent.

In general, across a wide range of cultures, children gain and exchange information in quite variable ways. Euro-American infants are at one
end of the continuum in terms of the amount and complexity of social interaction that accompanies exploration of the world in everyday activities. Routines such as pointing and naming and mediation of play with physical objects are not common in many cultures. For many infants, exploration of the physical world happens independently of social interaction and occurs more often through observation rather than manipulation.

The Role of Others in Social Interaction

In many cultures, mothers are not the only or primary caregivers of infants, so I should not confine my theoretical attention to mothers. In many cultures in which non-nuclear families are the norm, there are multiple adults and children who are regular caregivers for the infants in the household. Such complex families also have more activities to watch and more people to interact with. For example, one 12-month-old Yucatec Mayan infant observed was in almost daily contact with over 25 members of her family, all of whom provide some care: mother and father, three siblings, two grandmothers, one grandfather, two great grandmothers and one great grandfather, one great aunt, eight aunts and uncles, and at least eight cousins. Under these circumstances, one cannot understand the infant’s social world by looking only at the interaction with a single “primary caregiver.”

Other adults might be expected to provide social interaction that is culturally structured like the infants’ mothers’ interaction, although there might be gender and generation differences. Yucatec Mayan fathers, for instance, who are pulled into a caregiving role only for short intervals, often take the opportunity to engage in much more focused interpersonal interaction than other caregivers. They may talk directly to the infants face to face and play physically with them, but they usually sustain this interaction for no more than a few minutes. If their caregiving responsibility lasts longer than that, they may become distracted or bored and actually pay less attention to the infants following their initial burst of interaction than is the cultural caregiver norm.

It has been argued that children, who may not yet understand the cultural norms for social behavior or not yet be held to them, are likely to interact with each other in ways that differ from adult patterns (Weisner and Gallimore 1977). Those who are invested in the argument that children develop social knowledge through playful interaction have sometimes assumed that in the absence of maternal play, children, whether as companions or as caregivers, would provide the proposed
necessary social experiences in their shared play activities. Heath (1983) reports just this sort of behavior for the rural African American community of Trackton, where infants are considered playthings by their siblings and neighbors. But LeVine et al. (1994) found that this assumption of playful routines by children was not true for the Gusii. The type of behavior that child caregivers directed toward infants reflected their role as responsible caregivers, not as potential playmates. Similarly, Yucatec Maya child caregivers’ primary efforts are to soothe and comfort the infants, not to stimulate them. Young children who are not directly responsible for caregiving may not provide infants much playful interaction either, because they are often directly ordered to leave the infants alone in an attempt to minimize the infants’ stimulation and likelihood that they will cry. It is not until the toddler begins joining the other children at play in the yard that they are likely to be true play partners, and then only to the extent that they can enter into the older children’s play activity.

Thus, in most cultures, to understand infants’ social worlds completely, one must look beyond mother–child interaction and recognize the varied world of social partners available to the infants. One should not assume that all adults will act like the mother nor that all children will act differently. The limited information currently available suggests that, in many cultures, legitimate caregiving responsibility requires strict adherence to cultural norms about behavior toward the infant no matter the age or status of the caregiver.

Conclusions about Cultural Diversity in Infant Social Interaction

We can see in these ethnographic cases drawn from a wide range of cultures that social interaction with infants is not universally of one kind. Most of the evidence presented is not new, but it has often been ignored by researchers who study child development from a psychological perspective. Different standards for data collection (experiments vs. observation in natural settings) and different targets of analysis (infant capacity, i.e., what infants can do vs. infant expression, i.e., what infants do do) explain some of this neglect of research on other cultures. But it is also the case that these data are difficult to reconcile with popular claims about development based on the argument of universal patterns of social interaction.

Even if ethnographic data of everyday life are not sufficient for psychologists’ purposes for demonstrating the development of infants’ capacities for social interaction, they suggest that researchers must
demonstrate (rather than assume) the claim that relevant infant social experience is universally shared by infants growing up in these vastly different worlds. As part of a revised research agenda, it must be clarified whether an infant needs only minimal exposure to a key experience (some sort of “low-threshold model”) to trigger development or needs to be exposed through sustained everyday experience over time. In addition, it should be clarified whether a particular experience is uniquely important or rather only one facilitating experience from among a set of possibilities. Claims about development of social capacities over time also need to clarify if they are theoretically tied to specific ages of the infant, represent a logical order of acquisition, or are merely possible clusters of behavior. The more limited all of these claims, the more likely they will be found to be universal across cultures, but the less explanatory power they will have.

To collect more adequate data on infant social development and interaction in other cultures is difficult. Each culture will have its own unique distribution of characteristics that can potentially influence social interaction patterns with infants. Thus, it is not as simple as comparing the world’s cultures as an undifferentiated Other with middle-class Euro-American culture. For example, many peasant agricultural cultures give primary importance to adult work, have multiple caregivers for infants, place a higher priority on infant safety than on infant stimulation, expect the child to accommodate to and participate in the adult world, and expect young children to be obedient and responsible. However, they do not all agree on more general social organizational principles, including the importance of social rank, the appropriateness of expressive or assertive social behavior, the practice of interaction taboos, the legitimacy of asserting other people’s intentions, or the balance between the importance of one’s responsibility to the group needs versus responsibility to one’s own individual needs. In all cultures the primary goal of parents’ socialization practices is the child’s mastery of the culturally specific rules about how to interact with other people. If the end goals differ from culture to culture, then the socialization practices can be expected to differ also, even between cultures that share many other beliefs.

**Alternative Developmental Theories of Social Interaction**

The information about cultural variation in infant experience presented in this chapter leads us to question the viability of a theory of development driven by universal social experience, but there are two
other possibilities to consider: (1) universal developmental patterns are primarily driven by biological maturation (rendering culturally structured experience irrelevant), and (2) culturally varied experiences produce variable developmental outcomes. To evaluate these two options, it would be necessary to determine from a variety of cultures whether infant developmental outcomes are similar or vary.

Given the amount of information available about existing practices of infant socialization across cultures, it is surprising that comparable information about infant capacities and behavior are not available. Ethnographic studies involving early socialization have devoted much more attention to adult behavior than to infant behavior. Thus, we simply lack the most basic descriptive data about infants. We do not know whether children everywhere show the same social behaviors, and at the same ages. For instance, we do not have much data from other cultures on the onset of pointing, which can be construed as a social developmental milestone demonstrating a capacity for joint attention (see Tomasello, Liszkowski this volume). Furthermore, we do not know much about how infants in other cultures use these capacities once they acquire them or in what ways basic capacities come to be integrated into more complex and culturally structured social interaction patterns.

It seems likely, given the need of human infants to be cared for and to learn a great deal from their social environment, that some basic social capacities must be biologically present at birth with others developing later as a result of maturation. But the pregiven set may well be small, because encoding fixed behaviors genetically seems at odds with the generalized flexibility characteristic of human adaptation. So the list probably would include only those capacities that are necessary and sufficient for entry into some social world.

It seems equally likely that, given the amount of cultural variation in adult social interaction patterns (e.g., Levinson this volume), those basic capacities will be supported and expanded in culturally specific ways through participation in everyday social routines, beginning early in the child's life. Thus, for instance, even if joint attention is reliably first evidenced by pointing in all infants sometime around their first birthday (making it a candidate for a universal and biologically determined social capacity), it is likely to serve different communicative functions for infants in different cultures, depending on the caregivers’ cultural understanding about the nature of interaction with infants. In some cultures in which extended conversations and play with objects are highly valued activities with infants, pointing will become a significant means of socially manipulating attention. In other cultures with limited
opportunities for infants to participate in conversations, it will be a social tool that is rarely used.

Thus, a universally present social capacity need not yield universal characteristics and functions. Because infants are biologically social creatures, they are likely to have some universal social capacities that mature over the course of the first two years. At the same time, because they are also biologically cultural creatures, these innate social capacities will be applied to culturally structured ends. That is, humans are not designed to be “Social” in general but to be “social” in a particular, culturally constrained way, just as they do are not designed to learn “Language” in general but one particular “language”—the generic capacity being manifestly in the service of acquiring highly specific outcomes (cf. Goldin-Meadow this volume). Thus, whatever social capacities infants gain as they mature will be both amplified and constrained by the particulars of the cultural community in which they live, with all the complexity described above. This process will be more pronounced as children grow older and become more integrated into the social world around them, until they become full adult members of the culture. But even as early as the end of their first year (and probably before), infants do not demonstrate “raw” expression of capacity but, rather, an expression of capacity already heavily mediated by the specific social–cultural environment.

Articulating the specifics about the balance between universal and variable social interaction in infants will have to wait until there is much more systematic information available about non-Western infants’ behavior. That information needs to be both culturally valid and comparable across cultures, a combination that presents significant methodological challenges. But it is an important step forward to recognize that we already have evidence that social interaction with infants varies significantly across cultures and to question, as I have here, the modeling of developmental theories of social interaction that rely heavily on the specific practices of Western cultures.
Note

1. Many of these examples come from work that is 20 or more years old, when much of the work on cultural differences in infant socialization was done. The insights into the range of variation in infant social interaction that these older descriptive studies provide do not diminish with age. Moreover, because this evidence has been around for quite a while, it is even more remarkable that it has not been incorporated more thoroughly into developmental theory.

References


