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The Contribution of Social Partnership and Activity Settings to the Emergence of Sex Differences

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- **Invited lecture** for Roundtable on the Emergence of Sex Differences in Early Childhood, sponsored by the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women and the Center for the Study of Human Development, Brown University, Providence RI, November, 2004.

Certain sex differences are observable in children's behavior in social interaction in many cultures worldwide.

- Age 3-6: Insulting, rough and tumble play, and dominating egoistically are the most clearly masculine behaviors, and seeking or offering physical contact, dominating prosocially, and seeking help the most feminine.
- These differences are strengthened or weakened, magnified or reduced according to cultural context. (They are smallest in Orchard Town and Nyansongo).

Together with colleagues, we reexamined these conclusions in *The Children of Different Worlds* project, which drew upon the running record observations from 12 communities to get a much larger data set also based on improved observational codes and longer observations; as well as spot observations from 6 communities.

Robust Findings:

- Girls spend more of their day working, while boys spend more time in undirected activity or play (from age 3 on)
- Sex segregation is the grand rule of social interaction during middle childhood (age 6-10)
- During middle childhood, boys reduce contact and interaction with their mothers and other adult females, and are observed at greater distances from home than are girls
- Girls have more contact and interaction with, and responsibility for, infants than do boys.

What lies behind these findings?

- Interaction of *socialization pressure* (parental assignment of children to different settings, companions, locales) and *self-socialization* (children seeking out different social companions, locales, activity settings, and types of play/work within the settings). These experiences provide the contexts in which children's behavior emerges and changes.

Strong versus weak contexts

- Snyder and Ickes (1985) proposed that the manifestation of individual variability ob behavior in a context depends in large part on the strength of situational variables. Given a particular category of individuals, some situational variables are potent in their eliciting power and limit or constrain the range of behaviors that individuals exhibit, muting individual variability. Others are "weak" in their eliciting power and have minimal influence on behaviors, amplifying the expression of individual variability.

The Case of Nurturance to Infants

- Girls' greater contact and interaction with infants is consistently documented at age 5 and above. This is most visible in communities where mothers have a heavy workload and where parental ethnotheories support an early separation of boys' and girls' roles (e.g. Juxtlahuaca, Mexico).
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Examples:

- Bhubaneswar, North India (Seymour, 1988) lower status families
  - Girls aged 6-10 years cared for, assisted and disciplined infant siblings 4 times more frequently than did boys
- Mombasa, Kenya (Wenger, 1983, 1989) spot observations, children were seen to
  - Perform infant care: girls aged 8-11: 8%; boys: 1%
  - Have infants in their interactional space:
    - 2-3 year olds: girls 18%, boys 11%
    - 4-5 year olds: girls 21%, boys 13%
    - 6-7 year olds: girls 22%, boys 19%
    - 8-11 year olds: girls 27%, boys 5%

- Children's involvement in infant care bears no relationship to fathers'.

  (Father involvement is highest in hunting, herding, and advanced agricultural societies, and those that do no combine polygyny, patrilocal residence, and extended family organization (Katz & Konner, 1981).

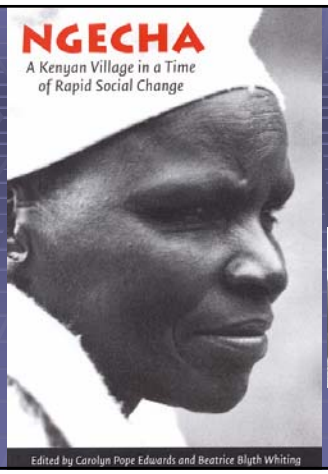
- Girls' greater nurturance to infants and toddlers is less clearly established, but trends can be seen in the observational data looking at proportion of all acts to infants and toddlers which are nurturant.

Probing for Causes

- Evidence for socialization pressure can be found in the form of parental ethnotheories
- Evidence for self-socialization can be found in girls' cooperation (compliance) with maternal commands, their fantasy play, and their behavior to infants in US controlled day care observations
- Both sets of evidence are incomplete

Probing for Consequences

- Only a few studies can be found that examine whether children who spend more time in sibling care are more nurturant and responsible to others in other situations as well, e.g. in peer play
  - Whiting and Edwards (1988)
  - Weisner (1987)
  - Munroe et al (1984)



Naomi Muthoni, one of the "executive women" whom Bea Whiting came to know well during the years in Ngecha.

Beatrice Whiting
1914-2003

Prosocial Behaviors in Context: A Study of the Gikuyu Children of Ngecha, Kenya. Maria Rosario T. de Guzman, C.P. Edwards, & Gustavo Carlo, under review.

- 89 children aged 2-10, at home, 1968-1973
- Individual scores based on rates of coded acts of nurturance, prosocial dominance, and responsible work, in five activity settings: self-care, idle/social, play, childcare, labor/chores

Basic Questions (Concern the Settings Component of Developmental Niche)

- How is the emergence of sex differences influenced by children's interaction with categories of *social companions* defined by sex, age, familiarity, status or kinship relationship, and especially, group size? These partners are differentially distributed across cultural communities, and also sought out differentially by boys & girls.

- How is the emergence of sex differences influenced by different *activity settings* (e.g. school, work, play) that are differentially distributed across cultural communities and also differentially occupied by girls and boys? The distribution is determined by such factors as adult subsistence strategies, leisure patterns, family structures, household organizations, and forms of social networks.

- Within activity contexts, how is the emergence of sex differences influenced by differences in the amount of adult supervision and direction they receive, the types of toys and materials they interact with, or the types of routines they execute? E.g. playing with vehicles and blocks versus dolls and domestic props, or by herding animals versus childcare versus carrying wood and water?

- How is the emergence of sex differences affected by where in space children spend time (e.g. outside, inside, near or far from home, in a safe place or dangerous place, etc.)

- Finally, are sex differences affected by the stability or instability of the social partners, activity settings, and locales in the child's day, e.g. sheer number of different companions and settings, number of transitions, who controls the transitions, discontinuity over time of companions and settings? (balance of optimal stimulation versus stressful change; boys are more vulnerable)

- These are not theoretical claims, but instead hypotheses about variables to which we need to attend. I agree with organizers that we need to build new theoretical frameworks combining elements of cognitive theories, dynamic systems theory, social learning theory, social psychology, anthropology….