

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Faculty Publications, Department of Psychology

Psychology, Department of

2010

The Whittings' Concepts of Culture and How They Have Fared in Contemporary Psychology and Anthropology

Carolyn P. Edwards

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, cedwards1@unl.edu

Marianne Bloch

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/psychfacpub>



Part of the [Psychiatry and Psychology Commons](#)

Edwards, Carolyn P. and Bloch, Marianne, "The Whittings' Concepts of Culture and How They Have Fared in Contemporary Psychology and Anthropology" (2010). *Faculty Publications, Department of Psychology*. 501.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/psychfacpub/501>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Psychology, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications, Department of Psychology by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

The Whittings' Concepts of Culture and How They Have Fared in Contemporary Psychology and Anthropology

Carolyn Pope Edwards

University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Lincoln, NE

Corresponding Author — 6619 Blue Ridge Lane, Lincoln, NE 68516; email cedwards1@unl.edu

Marianne Bloch

University of Wisconsin–Madison, Madison, WI

Abstract

This article presents a brief intellectual biography of John and Beatrice Whiting, followed by an examination of five key ideas that they put forward to the fields of psychology and anthropology through their theoretical and empirical writings. These key ideas are (a) the assumption of the psychic unity of humankind, (b) the cultural learning environment, (c) the psychocultural model, (d) the synergistic relationship of the disciplines of psychology and anthropology, and (e) the role of mothers as agents of social change through child-rearing roles as well as through various other ways they guide change in the communities and learning environments of their families and children. The authors provide readers with an introduction to several aspects of the Whittings' contributions to social science and an evaluation of the Whittings' enduring intellectual legacy.

Keywords: John Whiting, Beatrice Whiting, psychocultural model, cultural learning environment, cross cultural research

John Wesley Mayhew Whiting (1908–1991) and Beatrice Blythe Whiting (1914–2004) were leading psychological anthropologists, pioneers in the comparative study of child development, and one of the most illustrious and productive husband–wife collaborations in the history of the American social sciences. They met in graduate school at Yale University. John's doctoral field work on childhood learning in New Guinea during the 1930s led to the publication of *Becoming a Kwoma* (Yale University Press, 1941), whereas Bea's doctoral study of social control among the Paiute of California was published as *Paiute Sorcery* (*Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology*, no. 15, 1950). After graduating from Yale, they conducted most of the remainder of their work collaboratively, building an important laboratory devoted to comparative child development research at Harvard University that was the premier training base in comparative child development from 1950 through the 1980s and then beyond under the leadership of Robert LeVine, one of their former students. They produced a series of important projects that involved many students and colleagues as coresearchers, including the two of us who were doctoral and postdoctoral students, respectively, at Harvard, though not at the same time.

The Whitings devoted their long careers to the systematic comparison of child behavior and parental practices in diverse human societies, seeking to find generalizations about human development that would survive the test of cross-cultural investigation. They established a theoretical model and set of observational methods for describing variations in children's learning environments and testing cross-cultural hypotheses about socialization. The Whitings directed three major international projects: the Six Culture Study of the Socialization of the Child, in which comparative data on children's socialization and behavior were collected in six settings by a female and male research team; the Child Development Research Unit at the University of Nairobi, which collected basic community data on 13 communities in Kenya and involved Kenyans as collaborators in the research enterprise; and the Harvard Comparative Adolescence Project, which involved a series of graduate students and postdoctoral fellows in one of the first major cross-cultural studies of adolescence. Both Bea and John served as mentors to a very large number of students and colleagues, whom they hoped would continue their search for new discoveries and new variables important to an understanding of universals and culturally specific factors in understanding child rearing and child and adolescent development.

This article considers five key ideas put forward by both Bea and John Whiting and asks how they are faring today in psychology and anthropology. Although the Whitings clearly had certain individual interests, our focus is on the enduring legacy of many of the themes that pervaded the Whitings' work that was done by them jointly and that they carefully passed on to their many students in the United States and throughout the world. These key ideas are (a) the assumption of the psychic unity of humankind, (b) the cultural learning environment, (c) the psychocultural model, (d) the synergistic relationship of the disciplines of psychology and anthropology, and (e) the role of mothers as agents of social change through child-rearing roles as well as through various other ways they guide change in the communities and learning environments of their families and children. The article is intended to provide readers with an introduction to the Whitings' contributions and our evaluation of this intellectual legacy.

The Psychic Unity of Humankind

Beatrice and John Whiting believed that people throughout the world share a common biology and evolutionary past that provides them with uniquely human tools for adapting to their diverse environments. In every community and society, they believed, human beings need to perform the same basic tasks of constituting families, raising children, and passing on to the next generation habits and dispositions that will promote their survival and well-being. They were strong functionalists, following Bronislaw Malinowski and George Peter Murdock in stressing social institutions as a mechanism for addressing individual and broader social needs. Social institutions, such as the family, the community, religion, and political organizations, they believed, employ social control as a mechanism by which conflict is kept within acceptable limits. They also believed that childhood socialization is a mechanism by which the accepted norms and values of society are transferred to individuals within the group providing for necessary cultural and social continuity as well as allowing for change. The whole corpus of anthropological evidence, they felt, suggests that the extraordinary variety of human cultures (languages, values, beliefs, and practices) are products of geographic, economic, social, and historical differences in the problems that humans face in everyday life.

In other words, a *unity of human functioning* and capacities lies behind the great diversity of cultural systems. People everywhere have the same kinds of psychobiological needs, cognitive systems, and motives and behave differently only because of the circumstances that surround them (e.g., environment, economic opportunities) and the problems they face. The Whitings thus endorsed the concept of psychic unity and ar-

gued that children's learning environment and socialization make them into who they become as adults. The "psychic unity of mankind" postulate was originally put forward by the German anthropologist Adolf Bastian (1826–1905) and then was taken up by Franz Boas (1858–1942), father of American anthropology. It became a central tenet of American anthropology in the first half of the 20th century and was also an extremely important assumption for American psychology (though labeled in other terms, such as common inheritance or shared capacities).

How the Idea Fares Today

The terminology of psychic unity is now obsolete, but the underlying issue of universalities in human psychological functioning remains highly relevant and hotly contested. On one hand, as is described in the next section of this article, the effort to create unifying models of child and human development goes on, with the now widely accepted proviso that studies take full account of cultural context. Leaders in this endeavor are psychological and biological anthropologists and cross-cultural psychologists. Indigenous psychologists, once opponents of cross-cultural psychologists, today more often are important allies and colleagues in collaborative research by providing needed detailed data about the varied patterns seen in development in context and by enhancing the now recognized concept of child development as understandable within and across specific cultural contexts.

On the other hand, however, especially within the field of anthropology but also within sociology and some areas of psychology and education, there remain many authorities who are skeptical of any psychic unity of humankind. For example, certain humanistic anthropologists hold that cultural systems are based on inherently different symbol systems and conceptualizations, precluding any possibility of systematic cross-cultural comparison. Some psychologists, similarly, see more variation and omissions in the portraits of child development, suggesting that a "universal" child development or human development cannot be found (e.g., Bloch, 1991, 2000; Lubeck, 1994). In anthropology as well as in psychology, then, there is an emphasis on interrogating scientific representations of children and adults around the world as well as a critique of scientific methods, including ethnographies, more generally. This then fuels continuing debates about past studies that looked for universals in development. At the same time the majority of researchers in child development, education, and psychology continue to search for an understanding of how cross-cultural continuities and variations in human development play out in the myriad cultural contexts in which humans develop, learn, and act (Edwards, 2000). The debate about a modern "universal" childhood or universals in child development thus continues in a fruitful way across social science disciplines, and theoretical fields of study, as researchers seek to determine whether there are common maturational or developmental trajectories everywhere or whether these very trajectories are always culturally and contextually influenced. In practice, the concept of universal sequences and developmental processes, contextualized by cultural environment, is the predominant belief; in this way, the Whitings' work and that of their students has been extremely influential.

The Cultural Learning Environment

One of the strongest contributions of the Whitings was in their empirical demonstration of the importance of cultural learning environment to child rearing and development. In their work, they sometimes invoked the metaphor of theater to argue that the drama of child development takes place on a family and household stage in a theater which is a cultural community (B. Whiting & Edwards, 1988). In their metaphor, the

drama on the stage unfolds against a backdrop of great outside forces (history, ecology) and is acted out by protagonists who are children and their typical caregivers and social companions, family work responsibilities, and access to the wider community.

Moving quickly from metaphor to science, as was their preference, they coined the term *cultural learning environment* to refer to all of the dimensions (macro and micro) of the context of everyday life, which create normative patterns of child socialization and development. Beatrice Whiting (1980) operationally defined the child's context as "characterized by an activity in progress, a physically defined space, a characteristic group of people, and norms of behavior" (p. 97). The Whitings developed the ideas of cultural context and the cultural learning environment, along with methodological tools for studying them, in many key works (e.g., B. Whiting, 1963, 1980, 1983, 2003; B. Whiting & Edwards, 1973, 1988; B. Whiting & Whiting, 1975, 1991; J. Whiting, 1994a, 1994b, 1994c; J. Whiting et al. 1966), and they sought to enlist their students and close colleagues to join them in a collaborative and scientific search for independent variables at the cultural level that would be most powerful in explaining parent and child behavior around the world (Weisner & Edwards, 2002).

Indeed, one of their major accomplishments was to establish the case that a particular set of powerful predictors demonstrably influence normative patterns of child development: the gender, age, status, and rank of children's typical social companions; the type of and frequency of children's contact with nuclear and extended kin; children's ongoing activities of work, play, and rest; and the basic organizing features of daily life in their community associated with social structure (subsistence and other economic strategies and requirements, division of labor between males and females, family and household structure, residential patterns, education, media, technology, and social networks and community institutions). These factors were shown to influence what kinds of and how much play and work children do, with whom they spend their time, how and where they eat and sleep, what education they receive, and what contact they have with extended family members and the wider community.

How the Idea Fares Today

The potential of contexts of socialization to elicit or inhibit particular behaviors is widely recognized today. Many anthropologists and psychologists have gathered strong evidence of how children's lives vary worldwide in their routine activities, settings, and social companions in ways that are relevant to physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development. Furthermore, the idea of the cultural learning environment has been taken up by a series of cultural psychologists and anthropologists, who have sought to refine the concept further, as described in several articles in this volume. For example, contemporary socialization models focus on what is variously referred to as the "developmental niche" (Super & Harkness, 1986, 1999; Raghavan, Harkness, & Super, 2010), "activity settings" (Gallimore, Goldenberg, & Weisner, 1993), "cultural pathways" (Greenfield, Keller, Fuligni, & Maynard, 2003; Weisner, 2002, 2005), and "developmental microniche" (Worthman, 2010) as the context in which companions, roles, rules, and standing patterns of behavior shape children's behavior, learning, and development.

Super and Harkness (1986, 1999; Raghavan, Harkness, & Super, 2010), focusing on the child as a developing as well as learning organism, have put forward the highly influential concept of the *developmental niche* to describe the setting around the developing child, defined in terms of three key features: (a) the physical and social settings and daily routines in which and through which the child lives, learns, grows, and develops; (b) parenting practices, the culturally regulated routines of child care and child training that are used by the child's caregivers; and (c) cultural belief systems, the cognitive models and folk theories, or *parental ethnotheories*, that caregivers hold and bring to their interaction with children. Harkness and Super (1996) focus their research on the third component of

the developmental niche, namely, parental ethnotheories, because they believe that ethnotheories are a source of the first two components, daily organization and parental practices (Harkness et al., 2001, p. 9). In this respect, Harkness and Super disagree with the Whitings, who were philosophical materialists in holding that belief systems are consequences that derive from material conditions and dimensions of everyday life rather than the reverse (B. Whiting, 1980; J. Whiting et al., 1966). The Whitings put forward for empirical test the proposition that how families live is primary and predictive of parental values and beliefs, and they hypothesized that changes in parenting are brought about more by socioeconomic and population changes than by the introduction of new ideologies. The Whiting materialist view is well expressed in the statement by Greenfield, Maynard, and Childs (2003): "In sum, socialization and development are not fixed but adapt, in a coordinated way, to changing ecological conditions" (p. 455).

Ronald Gallimore and others have taken the idea of the cultural learning environment in a slightly different direction from Harkness and Super in proposing the concept of the *ecocultural niche*, or *activity setting* (Bloch, 1989; Bloch & Pellegrini, 1989; Farver, 1999; Gallimore et al., 1993; Tudge et al., 1999; Weisner, 1984, 2002). This formulation retains the functionalist assumption that cultural learning environments evolve continuously over time to promote adaptation to constraints imposed by external factors, changes in the subsistence base, climatic changes, and the political economies of the region. Activity settings are defined as the routine everyday experiences that provide children with opportunities to learn and develop through modeling and interacting with others. Activity settings are the instantiation of the ecological and cultural systems surrounding the child and family and the means by which institutions and prevailing cultural norms make themselves felt in the lives of children and influence their development.

The activity setting concept, of course, over the years since its introduction has taken different directions depending on researchers' theoretical ties to, for example, neo-Vygotskian activity theory (see, e.g., Rogoff, 2003) as well as other perspectives on the functionalist theoretical perspectives that assume adaptations to material conditions are generally necessary and a result of progressive or positive changes. Although the Whitings' theory of activity settings embodies a notion of positive adaptation and normative changes in institutions and cultural learning environments, the idea of activity setting and cultural change can and does also relate to more negative environmental influences such as the growth in poverty and the impact of negative changes in the economy, land ownership, national and trans-national relations, and migration. These nonlocal influences also affect learning environments. Thus, although the Whitings' perspectives on cultural learning environments are often taken to be supportive of a functionalist perspective, their work (and the work of their colleagues and students) also pointed toward a better understanding of why and how some cultural traditions are retained or continue despite adverse conditions and also allows for understanding how subtle and more rapid (material) changes occur, sometimes with positive outcomes for children, adolescents, and adults but sometimes with negative outcomes (e.g., a need to move to urban areas, where extended family support often breaks down, with varying consequences for children and parents).

One newer approach is the concept of cultural pathways, which builds on the idea of activity settings but adds a much needed time dimension. The thought is that cultural communities not only provide positive developmental moments to children but also project complete developmental trajectories, or pathways, that are cultural solutions for universal developmental tasks (Keller, 2007). Successful development is enabled for children when communities lay out meaningful and accessible pathways that children can follow. These pathways include culturally defined and valued directions for development and sets of skills that children should master to succeed (Weisner, 2005). Cultural pathways consist of organized series of activity settings, and they provide a sure

way for (many or most) children to succeed at the three universal tasks of relationship formation, knowledge acquisition, and the balance between dependency and interdependency (Greenfield, Keller, et al., 2003; Weisner, 2005).

A second example of recent theory drawing on the idea of activity setting is illustrated by Worthman (2010). She presents the concept of the *developmental microniche*, which builds on the prior revisions of the cultural learning environment but accounts for time in the opposite way to that of cultural pathways because it shrinks or narrows the time focus to the immediate moment of learning and development. The developmental microniche, according to Worthman, comprises the exact site where stimulation and stress are experienced and the organism responds with vulnerability or resilience, that is, where cultural scaffolding promotes the child's learning in his or her zone of proximal development.

In sum, the concept of the cultural learning environment appears to be one of the strongest and most enduring contributions of the Whittings to psychology, anthropology, and education. This idea has pervaded contemporary social science related to children's health and nutrition, studies of education, and psychological and anthropological studies of children. Nonetheless, the focus on a scientific examination of macro cross-cultural variables that affect learning environments (e.g., infant care strategies in nuclear versus extended family structures) has not drawn as much attention in recent years as studies of the cultural context related to children's more localized activity settings.

The Whiting Model for Psychocultural Research

The cultural learning environment was part of a larger system that John Whiting (1994c) put forward as a model for psychocultural research (see Worthman, 2010, Figure 1). The model is elegant and intentionally linear and directional. Through the model, the Whittings put forward a comprehensive theory about how the physical environment and history shape cultural maintenance systems, which in turn influence the child's learning environment, which in turn predicts adult behavioral styles, skills and abilities, value priorities, conflicts, and defenses, which finally themselves influence cultural projective-expressive systems (magic and religion, ritual and ceremony, art and recreation, games and play, crime and suicide rates). Their stated goal was for the psychocultural model to act as a heuristic for stimulating research and a stream of readily testable sets of hypotheses. For example, they encouraged people to make hypotheses about how the arrangement of people in space (settlement patterns, household arrangements) affected children's ability to freely explore in the community or their capacity to be welcomed in neighboring households. They realized, certainly, that the arrows in the model represented assumptions about the direction of causation and that in many instances the true direction of causation might be the reverse or that there might be feedback loops or skipped steps in the assumed sequence. Yet under their leadership at Harvard University, the model as stated served for 20 years as an exciting stimulus for research and an organizer for a great deal of empirical findings.

How the Idea Fares Today

As suggested at the end of the last section, the Whiting model for psychocultural research is not commonly included today in texts or reference articles, but it still exerts influence in contemporary psychology and anthropology, as explicated in Keller's and Worthman's articles in this special issue.

In psychology, it would be fair to say that Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems model of human development has eclipsed the Whiting model and indeed all other alternatives as a schematic for understanding environmental influences on developing in-

dividuals. In this wellknown theory, a series of contexts encircle the individual (micro-system, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, chronosystem). Bronfenbrenner's model alerts people to the importance of cultural context but is not a direct descendant of the Whiting model and conflicts with it in key ways. For example, in Bronfenbrenner's model, culture is located at the outermost circle or periphery of the system. It is part of the macrosystem that contains the broad ideologies, laws, and customs of the person's culture, subculture, and social class. This contrasts strongly with the Whiting model, where culture is infused throughout the model from maintenance systems to projective-expressive systems. In addition, Bronfenbrenner's system, as used in research, still focuses greatest attention toward the micro- and mesosystem levels (e.g., home-school relationships, home-local community contexts); thus, the tradition of empirically examining larger ecological and maintenance systems cross-culturally that is a part of the Whitings' theory and research, and that has had historically important influences, is nonetheless not widely used currently in most applications within psychology, education, or anthropology. However, the importance of the material and ecological environment is today a largely taken-for-granted assumption of the cultural niche, the cultural or ecological context of children's development. Thus, the influence of the psychocultural model remains present in those ways. Barbara Rogoff (1990, 2003) has made a strong case for the cultural nature of child development. Rogoff (2003, p. 43) discusses the Whiting model and why researchers need to understand the situations in which children develop – their proximal and more distal surroundings. She considers herself to have been strongly influenced by both the Whiting and Bronfenbrenner models as well as by neo-Vygotskian approaches to activity theory but is now searching for ways to represent cultural processes that do not involve diagrams with individuals and cultural processes depicted as "entities connected by arrows or contained in concentric circles" (Rogoff, 2003, p. 49). Rogoff strongly acknowledges the Whiting model but criticizes some of its assumptions, in particular, the chain of causality and the treatment of individual and cultural processes as separate entities that exist independently of one another.

Heidi Keller is a strong descendant in the Whiting tradition. Keller's (2007; 2010) ecocultural model of child development, the foundation of her research program on cultures of infancy, draws on the Whiting model but strengthens it by linking it with contemporary evolutionary concepts, for example, linking Bea Whiting's concepts of "elicitation" (B. Whiting & Edwards, 1988) with biological concepts of "easy learning." Keller's ecocultural model is hierarchical and linear in the way of the Whiting model, and geography or climate, population parameters, and socioeconomic structure are seen as determinants (predictors) of socialization strategies, which in turn are seen as determinants of child development outcomes. Keller's (2010) discussion explicates the parallels and contrasts between the Whiting model and her ecocultural model and suggests how an integration is fruitful; evolutionary theory adds an ultimate or final cause level to the analysis, whereas the Whiting model adds richness and density of hypotheses to the proximal level of analysis.

In anthropology, the Whiting model has influenced a generation of psychological anthropologists and those who carry on the tradition of scientific anthropology, in the context of disciplinary debates within the field between scientific and humanistic anthropologists. Roy D'Andrade (1994), in writing the foreword to the collected works of John Whiting, presents an enlightening discussion of the model as he attempts to locate it within a conceptual map of anthropology and describe how it is both similar to and different from current positions in anthropology. In his view, the model served as an important framework during its era for showing how biological and sociocultural factors interact. He has been among those anthropologists disturbed by the harsh and seemingly irreconcilable conflicts between those anthropologists who do and do not believe in the utility of cross-cultural comparative methodologies.

In sum, elements of the Whiting model endure in developmental psychology and scientific anthropology today where there is a strong, ongoing search for contextual, evolutionary, transactional, and systemic models that accomplish many of the same heuristic purposes as the Whiting model by incorporating cultural, historical, ecological, and biological explanations into a comprehensive and general understanding of children's learning and development (e.g., for the development of gender differences; see McIntyre & Edwards, 2009). There are still significant debates about the validity of the linear, correlational, or causal explanations found in the past, and even the possibility of understanding the complexity of culture, and cultural change, in the ways the Whitings and others have done. The Whitings would appreciate the continuing debates regarding multiple ways of doing research and would certainly appreciate the continuation of interdisciplinary research using any of these conceptual frameworks.

The Synergistic Relationship Between Anthropology and Psychology

The Whitings' work embodied the interdisciplinary spirit of Yale University, where John and Bea did their graduate training in the 1940s, and the Harvard Department of Social Relations and Harvard Graduate School of Education, in which they held their longest, and ultimate, appointments. Their closest colleagues came from at least four fields—psychology, anthropology, sociology, and education—and they helped to create a particularly fruitful and synergistic relationship between anthropology and psychology. Anthropology was their home discipline, to be sure, but their expansionist vision was to stimulate an interdisciplinary, international research project uncovering universal laws that described the development of children and adolescents in cultural context. To build up all of the links in their psychocultural model, and given the interdisciplinary and historical timing of their initial work during the 1940s, they (and others close to them) argued for the need to draw from both anthropology and theories and methods of psychology. They wanted to elaborate the then-current concepts of innate needs, drives, motives, and capacities that the child brings as well as the processes connecting all the links in the causal chain of their model from the child's learning environment to adult expressive-projective systems. Clearly, the psychoanalytic theory that was a part of their model was important initially and helped them to examine the relations between material conditions in societies, different institutional and maintenance systems, the resultant cultural learning environments, and the postulated projective beliefs produced.

However, the field of psychology was a rapidly moving target during the long period of their professional lives, which continued long after their official retirement from Harvard (e.g., see Edwards & Whiting, 2004). Early on, they were particularly influenced by learning theory and psychoanalytic theory, as evidenced by, to mention just one example, the elegant testing of Freudian-derived hypotheses in J. Whiting and Child's (1953) *Child Training and Personality*. Bea Whiting (2001) describes her discovery of Freud's theory during her graduate student years, her training analysis, and her use of Freudian concepts in understanding the Piute during her fieldwork for her doctoral dissertation (Whiting, 1950).

During the 1960s and 1970s, Piagetian psychology was the dominant paradigm in the Department of Human Development, where Beatrice Whiting held her appointment. The Whitings deplored the way in which emotion was ignored or downplayed by cognitive developmental psychologists, and as they had throughout their careers, they sought to look to advances in psychology as sources of understanding and new hypotheses. One result of their integration of ideas from developmental psychology is evident throughout B. Whiting and Edwards's (1988) *Children of Different Worlds*, where the child is described as an active agent in his or her own socialization (Edwards, deGuzman, Brown, & Kumru, 2006).

How These Ideas Fare Today

Perhaps because of the extraordinary breadth of their intellectual reach, the Whitings' ideas about the synergy of psychology and anthropology have proved prescient and robust. Today, the idea of the Society for Research in Child Development or the American Educational Research Association taking place without many papers addressing issues of cross-cultural or intercultural diversity is inconceivable, and likewise, psychological theories are part of the regular intellectual tool kit of most anthropologists studying human development. The methodological orientation of mixing ethnography or qualitative research with quantitative research, which was always a feature of the Whitings' research, has also taken hold as renewed interest in the value of "integrated mixed methods" (quantitative and qualitative data including ethnographic case studies used together). The usefulness of multiple disciplines, theories, and methodologies then has been recognized as essential for greater depth in understanding child development in context—ideas the Whitings always seemed to appreciate and encourage, even though the content or direction of the ideas, disciplines, and methods may have changed over time (Yoshikawa, Weisner, Kalil, & Way, 2008).

The Role of Mothers as Agents of Social Change

Periods of rapid social change create exceptional stresses as well as opportunities in child development. Bea and John Whiting focused on two key ideas related to this broad and important idea that also pertained to gender and the role of mothers, particularly as agents of social change. First, they believed that changes in parenting beliefs and practices are brought about by socioeconomic and daily life changes rather than by introduction of new ideologies (this was part of their philosophical materialism). Second, based on extensive cross-cultural research, they argued early on that women are agents of societal change in their parenting role as well as active change agents in society more generally.

Beatrice and John Whiting were deeply impressed with the creative role of women as agents of social change as evidenced by their pioneering study of child rearing in six cultures and continuing with their collective, and Bea's specific, interest in cross-cultural universals related to gender and child development (e.g., B. Whiting & Edwards, 1988). Beyond that, their deep research experience in Kenya and elsewhere helped them to see beyond the narrow conceptions of "female" work and activity dominant in much Western European and American research and theory. A pioneering woman herself, eventually rising to the pinnacle of success by becoming one of the first women to receive tenure as a full professor at Harvard University (finally granted by Harvard when Bea Whiting was 60 years old), Bea was as concerned with the role of women in the transformation of culture as with the socialization of children. Her final book, *Ngecha: A Kenyan Village in a Time of Rapid Social Change* (2004, edited with Carolyn Edwards), focused on the rural community outside Nairobi closely studied by the Whiting team during the transformative years of 1968 to 1973, only a few years after Kenyan independence. The village women were micro entrepreneurs also responsible for their large households, family gardens and animals, and collection of water and fuel. Far from being overwhelmed, the mothers coped and adapted by modifying their parenting goals and behavior to prepare their children for future wage-earning jobs requiring schooling. As in many cultural groups undergoing significant cultural change, the children of Ngecha, in turn, experienced evolving educational practices and new individualistic achievement expectations that challenged traditional family-based morals and obligations.

In their work with graduate and postdoctoral students, and in the interdisciplinary nature of their writing and teaching, both John and Bea Whiting encouraged alternative

ways to examine the role of women and mothers in different cultural contexts and the importance to children of these cultural contexts and the many specific activity settings in which children often learned or were assigned and, most likely, learned gendered behavior. Their research led to groundbreaking studies of women's work and caretaking as well as examinations of the status of women and men cross-culturally. These studies related cultural patterns of fertility, family planning, and education (both women's own education and that of their children), with women's changing work and responsibilities. The Whitings' interests in the important and changing roles of women (and men) in societies were then related to child development, child labor, and children's access to different educational opportunities, learning, and types of community training versus school knowledge.

How These Ideas Fare Today

The Whitings posited that changes in parenting beliefs and practices are brought about first and foremost by socioeconomic and daily life changes and adaptations to the environment. This idea has been influential but not decisive. For example, in the field of anthropology today, there are many competing strands of research, with some focused on the influence of the material environment on parenting beliefs and practices and others focused on such issues as the representation of gender roles and the discursive organization of "ethnotheories" related to parenting or childrearing and educational decisions. The latter work emphasizes the role of ideologies on behavior; in the field of psychology, a bidirectional influence from beliefs to resources and back is assumed. Nevertheless, the work of the Whitings resulted in greater attention to cross-cultural variations in ecology, economic conditions, and the importance of historical kinship relations. With respect to the particular idea of the gendered divisions of labor, their work influences current emphases on the organization of child care work and other forms of "labor" as an important aspect of parenting and child rearing in different cultural contexts (e.g., Bloch, 1987, 1989; B. Whiting & Edwards, 1988). Although today the concept of child labor is examined in relation to exploitative labor conditions, worldwide, the positive contributions of children's labor to many cultural systems is better understood because of the Whitings' influence. Children's work is no longer overlooked, whether as a positive contribution to the family system or in terms of the often negative impact children's work can have on interfering with school attendance, for example (Anderson-Levitt, Bloch, & Soumare, 1998).

The Whitings' research was innovative in bringing an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural perspective to parenting roles, particularly bringing an anthropological focus into developmental psychology. By examining the material context of women's and children's lives around the world, they were able to compare the amount of work women engaged in worldwide as well as the different ways women and men participated in work. Some of these tasks overlapped, and others were different yet complementary. Through the detailed empirical, multidisciplinary examinations of children's and family life cross-culturally, the Whitings and their students illustrated the importance of cross-cultural research for formulating and testing universal generalizations about children, child rearing, human development, and women's and men's activity patterns.

Similarly, the second key idea—that women are agents of societal change in their parenting role as well as active change agents in society—was extremely important and remains so today. For those of us most familiar with the Whitings' work, the idea that women were actively engaged as parents, as well as in the economy of their household and society, presented timely cross-cultural evidence of a critical idea about the important and multiple roles of women in most world societies. Their findings on women's agency reaffirmed the importance of anthropological scientific evidence describing women's active, even dominant, influence in communities and differing but active

roles in politics, religion, and domestic household affairs, depending again on material cultural differences. Although others have asserted these same ideas, the Whitings' particular approach to interrelating child rearing, women's roles, and child caretaking environments allowed for a recognition of the importance of sibling caregivers' importance around the world (Weisner & Gallimore, 1977) and highlighted the crucial role of women in local subsistence economies and market economies, their ability to combine child rearing with economic activities, their influence in fostering children's nutrition and health, their role in making family planning decisions, and their power to foster access to schooling for both sons and daughters.

Although other anthropologists have focused on women's economic and political agency with little attention to the importance of child-rearing and parenting roles, the Whitings demonstrated that all these different types of work must be understood as part and parcel of the concept of "work." Many in the field of anthropology still exclude women's family and child-rearing roles in work on other aspects of gender. However, the Whitings' work clearly showed and illustrated the conceptual and empirical importance of family work along with other forms of work and the need to understand variations and consistencies in its organization as it affects children as well as youth (often the alternative child caretakers) and adults.

In psychology, the influence of the Whitings' work is evident in many subtle as well as more direct ways. For example, in recent years we have seen an increasing focus on cross-cultural and cross-national research on the importance of early interventions—with a focus on mothers as key agents of change. However, the Whitings would not have wanted a focus on mothers without consideration of other caregivers in a particular context, and they would not have approved of the almost exclusive attention on micro- and mesosystems (drawing on Bronfenbrenner's 1979 terminology). Thus, the broader implications of the importance of institutional and ecological as well as maintenance system variables have still had, as suggested earlier, too little continuing attention by researchers. The agentic and multiple identities of parenting and extended family caregiving and mothering and even of children's own agency have not been as fully integrated into current work as the Whitings might have wished. This allows space for more work to be done and continuing challenges to mainstream research and practices.

Conclusions

The Whitings' work has been as influential in developmental psychology as in psychological anthropology. The idea of the cultural learning environment is a major part of the new contextual look of developmental psychology. The idea of women's and children's agentic, complex, and changing roles in society and in relation to child rearing and child care, although not the Whitings' idea alone, has been increasingly recognized in research and social and economic policy. One future challenge may be to apply more powerful statistical models to understand the dynamic, multilevel, and transactional nature of socialization across cultures, whereas a continuing challenge is to respect the value of multiple, mixed-model methodologies and perspectives in research on families cross-culturally.

The variety of research in anthropology—from psychological anthropology to post-modernist studies of gender and to cultural studies of family, work, and gender relations—suggests that the Whitings' influence has been most important in the long run by breaking down assumptions—by providing evidence that refutes narrow ways of "knowing" children, families, and cultures. In the face of the huge amount of psychological research still using Western European or American samples to understand a putative model of parenting in general, the research of the Whitings and their students has been instrumental in opening the doors to realizations that cross-cultural research is required for any understanding of "universal parenting and development."

Last, the work of the Whittings that focused on gender and development was particularly important to the two of us; looking backward, there were few others in psychology or education, particularly, who focused on the importance of nurture over nature (recognized as a false choice) through studies of girls and boys in such diverse cultural contexts. The Whittings' ability to see the importance of such work and to guide others to understand the importance of cross-cultural contexts in our studies of similarities and differences was incredibly influential in its time and is part of their legacy that we need to highlight. No researcher's work exists in isolation from its historical context; and therefore we can appreciate the significance of the Whittings' theories and findings yet recognize limitations incumbent on their time and place in history. We acknowledge their continuing commitment to the study of peoples and patterns beyond Europe and North America, and believe that their legacy and influence, especially in Western social sciences, were, and remain, generative and worthy.

Acknowledgments

Earlier versions of this article were presented at the International Congress on Cross Cultural Psychology, Spetses, Greece, 2006, at the Society for Research in Child Development, Boston, Massachusetts, 2007, and at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2008.

References

- Anderson-Levitt, K., Bloch, M. N., & Soumare, A. (1998). Inside classrooms in Guinea: Girls' experiences. In M. N. Bloch, J. Beoku-Betts, & B. R. Tabachnick (Eds.), *Women and education in sub-Saharan Africa: Power, opportunities, and constraints* (pp. 99-113). Boulder, CO: Lynn Reinner.
- Bloch, M. N. (1987). The development of sex differences in young children's activities at home: The effect of the social context. *Sex Roles, 16*, 279-301.
- Bloch, M. N. (1989). Young boy's and girls' play at home and in the community: A cultural-ecological framework. In M. N. Bloch & A. D. Pellegrini (Eds.), *The ecological context of children's play* (pp. 120-154). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Bloch, M. N. (1991). Critical science and the history of child development's influence on early education research. *Early Education and Development, 2*(2), 95-108.
- Bloch, M. N. (2000). Governing teachers, parents and children through child development knowledge. *Human Development, 43*, 257-265.
- Bloch, M. N., & Pellegrini, A. D. (Eds.). (1989). *The ecological context of children's play*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *Ecology of human development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- D'Andrade, R. A. (1994). Introduction: John Whiting and anthropology. In E. H. Chasdi (Ed.), *Culture and human development: The selected papers of John Whiting* (pp. 1-13). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Edwards, C. P. (2000). Children's play in cross-cultural perspective: A new look at the Six Culture Study. *Cross Cultural Research, 34*, 318-338.
- Edwards, C. P., deGuzman, M. T., Brown, J., & Kumru, A. (2006). Children's social behaviors and peer interactions in diverse cultures. In X. Chen, D. French, & B. Schneider (Eds.), *Peer relations in cultural context* (pp. 23-51). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Edwards, C. P., & Whiting, B. B. (Eds.). (2004). *Ngecha: A Kenyan village in a time of rapid social change*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

- Farver, J. A. (1999). Activity settings analysis: A model for examining the role of culture in development. In A. Goncu (Ed.), *Children's engagement in the world: Sociocultural perspectives* (pp. 99-127). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Gallimore, R., Goldenberg, C., & Weisner, T. (1993). The social construction and subjective reality of activity settings: Implications for community psychology. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 21*, 537-559.
- Greenfield, P. M., Keller, H., Fuligni, A., & Maynard, A. (2003). Cultural pathways through universal development. *Annual Review of Psychology, 54*, 461-490.
- Greenfield, P. M., Maynard, A. E., & Childs, C. P. (2003). Historical change, cultural learning, and cognitive representation in Zinacantec Maya children. *Cognitive Development, 18*, 455-487.
- Harkness, S., & Super, C. (Eds.). (1996). *Parents' cultural belief systems*. New York: Guilford.
- Harkness, S., Super, C. S., Axia, V., Elias, A., Palacios, J., & Welles-Nystrom, B. (2001). Cultural pathways to successful parenting. *International Society for the Study of Behavioral Development Newsletter, 1* (38), 9-13.
- Keller, H. (2007). *Cultures of infancy*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Keller, H. (2010). Linkages between the Whiting Model and Contemporary Evolutionary Theory. *Journal of Cross Cultural Psychology, 41*(4), 563-577.
- Lubeck, S. (1994). The politics of developmentally appropriate practice: Exploring issues of culture, class, and curriculum. In B. Mallory & R. New (Eds.), *Diversity and developmentally appropriate practices: Challenges for early childhood education* (pp. 17-43.). New York: Teachers College Press,
- McIntyre, M. H., & Edwards, C. P. (2009). The early development of gender differences. In D. Brenneis & P. T. Ellison (Eds.), *Annual review of anthropology* (Vol. 38, pp. 83-114). Palo Alto, CA: Annual Reviews.
- Raghavan, C. S., Harkness, S., & Super, C. M. (2010). Parental Ethnotheories in the Context of Immigration: Asian Indian Immigrant and Euro-American Mothers and Daughters in an American Town. *Journal of Cross Cultural Psychology, 41*(4), 617-632.
- Rogoff, B. (1990). *Apprenticeship in thinking: Cognitive development in social context*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rogoff, B. (2003). *The cultural nature of human development*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Super, C. M., & Harkness, S. (1986). The developmental niche: A conceptualization at the interface of child and culture. *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 9*, 545-569.
- Super, C. M., & Harkness, S. (1999). The environment as culture in developmental research. In S. L. Friedman & T. D. Wachs (Eds.), *Measuring environment across the life span: Emerging methods and concepts* (pp. 279-323). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Tudge, J., Hogan, D., Lee, S., Tammeveski, P., Meltsas, M., Kulakova, N., et al. (1999). Cultural heterogeneity: Parental values and beliefs and their preschoolers activities in the United States, South Korea, Russia, and Estonia. In A. Göncü (Ed.), *Children's engagement in the world: Sociocultural perspectives* (pp. 62-96). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Weisner, T. S. (1984). Ecocultural niches of middle childhood: A cross-cultural perspective. In W. A. Collins (Ed.), *Development during middle childhood: The years from six to twelve* (pp. 335-369). Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Weisner, T. (2002). Ecocultural understanding of children's developmental pathways. *Human Development, 45*, 275-281.
- Weisner, T. S. (Ed.). (2005). *Discovering successful pathways in children's development: New methods in the study of childhood and family life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Weisner, T. S., & Edwards, C. P. (Eds.). (2002). Honoring the contributions of Beatrice B. Whiting. *Ethos: Journal of the Society for Psychological Anthropology, 29*(3), 239-389.
- Weisner, T. S., & Gallimore, R. (1977). My brother's keeper: Child and sibling caretaking. *Current Anthropology, 18*, 169-190.

- Whiting, B. B. (1950). *Paiute Sorcery*. New York: Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology, No. 15.
- Whiting, B. B. (Ed.). (1963). *Six cultures: Studies of child rearing*. New York: John Wiley.
- Whiting, B. B. (1980). Culture and social behavior: A model for the development of social behavior. *Ethos: Journal of the Society for Psychological Anthropology*, 8, 95-115.
- Whiting, B. B. (1983). The genesis of prosocial behavior. In D. L. Bridgeman (Ed.), *The nature of prosocial development* (pp. 221-242). New York: Academic Press.
- Whiting, B. B. (2001). Freud in the field. *Ethos: Journal of the Society for Psychological Anthropology*, 20, 247-258.
- Whiting, B. B. (2003). *Ngecha, Kenya, behavior observations* (C. P. Edwards, Ed.; M. R. Tretasco de Guzman, M. Kobus, N. Miller, J. Tuel, M. L. Freyer, L. Christensen, J. Ranjbar, L. M. Gacke, E. Eisenhauer, C. Connelly, N. Kovtun, W. Liu, A. Kovtun, & M. Husset, compilers) [CD-ROM]. New Haven, CT: Human Relations Area Files Press.
- Whiting, B. B., & Edwards, C. P. (1973). A cross-cultural analysis of sex differences in the behavior of children aged 3-11. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 91, 171-188.
- Whiting, B. B., & Edwards, C. P. (1988). *Children of different worlds: The formation of social behavior*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Whiting, B. B., & Whiting, J. W. M. (1975). *Children of six cultures: A psycho-cultural analysis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Whiting, B. B., & Whiting, J. W. M. (1991). Adolescence in the preindustrial world. In R. M. Lerner, A. C. Peterson, & J. Brooks-Gunn (Eds.), *The encyclopedia of adolescence* (pp. 814-829). New York: Garland.
- Whiting, J. W. M. (1994a). Environmental constraints on infant care practices. In E. H. Chasdi (Ed.), *Culture and human development: The selected papers of John Whiting* (pp. 107-134). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Whiting, J. W. M. (1994b). Fifty years as a behavioral scientist: Autobiographical notes. In E. H. Chasdi (Ed.), *Culture and human development: The selected papers of John Whiting* (pp. 14-44). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Whiting, J. W. M. (1994c). A model for psychocultural research. In E. H. Chasdi (Ed.), *Culture and human development: The selected papers of John Whiting* (pp. 89-104). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Whiting, J. W. M., & Child, I. (1953). *Child training and personality*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Whiting, J. W. M., Child, I. L., Lambert, W. W., & the Field Teams for the Six Cultures Series. (1966). *Six cultures series, Vol. 1: Field guide for a study of socialization*. New York: John Wiley.
- Worthman, C. M. (2010). The Ecology of Human Development: Evolving Models for Cultural Psychology. *Journal of Cross Cultural Psychology*, 41(4), 546-562.
- Yoshikawa, H., Weisner, T. S., Kalil, A., & Way, N. (2008). Mixing qualitative and quantitative research in developmental science: Uses and methodological choices. *Developmental Psychology*, 44, 344-354.



Carolyn Pope Edwards, EdD, is Willa Cather Professor in the Departments of Psychology and Child, Youth, and Family Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in Lincoln, NE.

Marianne Bloch is professor of education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in Madison, WI.