5 Making Sense

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Introduction

Children are keen observers. Their observations are often incorporated in their play, showing that they are learning the culture. Children also learn through exploration and the handling of objects, or tools.

In modern society, children are seen as capable of obtaining knowledge from birth. Whereas, in the village, young children are often perceived as “unable to benefit from direct teaching.”

Children as spectators

Most societies are aware of children's ability to learn through observation. Public ceremonies often display expected behavior, such as the display of post-nuptial blood-stained sheets in the Middle East so children can observe and learn the meaning of this rite.

Culture is not reserved to humans; research has shown that chimpanzees pass on information or practices from generation to generation.

Culture is often explained as information, with humans as the storage units. Social learning, from more mature individuals, combined with a desire to "fit in," enables the establishment of cultural traditions.

Exploration and play with objects

A correlation between play and routine tool use exists; humans and chimpanzees are the only species where both are present. According to Jean Piaget's theory, object play is considered essential to cognitive development. Object play exists, yet varies, in all societies.

Our society focuses on access to a wide variety of toys, de-emphasizing the need for space to explore, unlike traditional village societies. Children in villages are often left to explore any and all objects around them, sometimes resulting in harm, but emphasizing the importance of learning without parental intervention. Other societies may restrain infants and toddlers, denying access to objects that may cause harm. Some societies prevent crawling because it is perceived as animalistic behavior. However, once ambulatory, most children are allowed to play and explore, with some supervision.

It's only make believe

Make-believe is critical in practicing culture. Children imitate what they see, even rare events, in make-believe play. Although make-believe play is prevalent in all societies, it seems to be more conservative in other cultures in comparison to ours; social relationships and routines are often repeated.

Contrary to village societies, where children are less concerned with their own lives as displayed through make-believe, contemporary societies expect children to evaluate emotional problems *through* make believe. Further, middle-class parents while engaging in fantasy play with their children prepare them child for academic success.

The age of reason

Modern society believes intellectual development begins in infancy, perhaps even in the womb. However, these expectations seem to be rare. Children are often seen as incapable of “getting sense” until about 5.

Definitions of intelligence and similar qualities differ from culture to culture; independent or creative thought, as valued in our society, would be looked down on by villagers. Instead they look for obedience, initiative, accepting responsibility and, paying attention.

The decision to teach our children

"Active teaching" is uncommon but "facilitation" may be observed, even in chimpanzees. Learning depends on observation and practice. In most societies, teaching in even a limited degree is put off until mature behavioral patterns are acquired.. Active teaching, often through myths, is often used to direct children away from harmful situations but it is rare and is often seen as intrusive.

Active teaching is more prevalent in modern, western society. Cultural expectations dictate what is actively taught, for example, toilet-training. Active teaching is accentuated by the need to meet these expectations for the transition to a student-role.

The importance of good manners

Although active teaching is rare in pre-modern society, etiquette and social relations are taught at an early age. Knowledge of kin structure and relationships are emphasized in order to show proper respect. Bad behavior is quickly corrected, especially because it reflects poorly on the parents.

Unlike traditional society, where active teaching is more prevalent, U.S. society places less emphasis on instruction of etiquette and kin terminology. Assigning almost full responsibility to the mother for childrearing, and teaching, may explain this lack of instruction. That is mothers don't have to worry as much about socializing their children to be pleasant and conforming to the expectation of others—who may function as substitute caretakers. Rather contemporary, urban mothers seek to "establish bonds of friendship" that may not be aided by etiquette and kin term instruction.

Fostering conformity and altruism

Belonging to a social group offers benefits that promote altruism. “Reciprocal altruism,” or the golden rule, serves as a universal motivation. Language allows for mutual dependency and teaching of altruistic acts.

Anti-social acts are rejected in both upper and lower classes in developed nations. Many strategies are used to promote proper behavior including: proverbs, shaming, teasing, threats, and corporal punishment in many societies. Physical punishment is more common in societies where violence is common.

Euroamericans prefer the rarest strategy of enforcing good behavior: reasoning with children. Although this strategy may not be as effective as others, it promotes negotiation and complex skills, while fostering the (parent-as) teacher-pupil relationship that has become the norm in modern society.

Fostering aggression

Aggression is encouraged among males by both female and male adults in societies where inter-village and inter-sexual conflict is prevalent. Historically, socialization for aggression was more common, but has decreased with European contact and pacification ideals.

Socializing gender

Gender differences are rarely unimportant in most societies, and are often prescribed at birth. Males are frequently weaned later and fed more than females. Gender differences are also accentuated through rituals.

Limits and expectations differ with boys and girls. Boys often experience more freedom, and girls have more restrictions imposed on them. Gender differences imposed by adults are amplified by peers. Hazing is a strategy used by peer groups to enforce gender socialization.

Assigned chores also amplify gender differences and seem to be universal. Culturally ascribed gender roles have come under more scrutiny since the Women's Liberation Movement and many have attempted to eliminate gender stereotypes without success.

Parent-child conversation

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