Cultural Similarities and Variations in Guided Participation

The fundamental aspiration of the whole of modern child psychology ... [is] the wish to reveal the eternal child. The task of psychology, however, is not the discovery of the eternal child. The task of psychology is the discovery of the historical child, of what Goethe called the transitory child. The stone that the builders have disdained must become the foundation stone. (Vygotsky, Thinking and Speech)

"The potential of every human being of becoming an artist," asserts the great French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, "remains unfulfilled without the individual's acquaintanceship and immersion into the artistic traditions of the past, and the distinctiveness of his culture." (John-Steiner, Notebooks of the Mind)

Most research on the zone of proximal development, scaffolding, and adult-child interaction has involved middle-class parents and children in North America and Europe. How, then, do the interactional processes observed in research with such samples relate to the broader spectrum of child-rearing practices around the world? How do observations made in nonindustrial societies or in other cultural communities in Europe or America compare and extend the theory? My use of the term culture indicates the organized and common practices of particular communities in which children live (which may differ from those of children's nations).

In this chapter, I suggest that guided participation may be widespread around the world, but with important variations in arrangements for and communication with children in different cultures. The most important differences have to do with the goals of development—what lessons are to be learned—and the means available for children either to observe and participate in culturally important activities or to receive instruction outside the context of skilled activity.

Universality of Guided Participation

The general processes of guided participation appear around the world. Caregivers and children make arrangements for children's activities and revise children's responsibilities as they gain skill and knowledge. These arrangements and adjustments facilitate children's extension of their existing knowledge to encompass new situations. With the guidance of those around them, children participate in cultural activities that socialize them in skilled roles.

Ethnographic accounts of teaching and learning in different cultures suggest that families structure children's activities and provide well-placed instruction in the context of joint activities, and that children are active participants in their own socialization (Fortes, 1938). For example, Mayan mothers in Guatemala help their daughters learn to weave in a process of guided participation (Rogoff, 1986). They divide the process of learning to weave into steps, providing guidance in the context of joint participation in the activity and adjusting their daughters' participation according to the girls' increasing skill and interest in progressing (Figure 6.1). Similar processes occur in the teaching and learning of weaving in Mexico and tailoring in Liberia (Greenfield, 1984; Greenfield & Lave, 1982).

Guided participation involves the structuring of children's activities and the offering of well-placed pointers as children participate in Guarani cultivation, animal husbandry, hunting, and fishing in the Orinoco delta of Venezuela:

The traditional vocational education system of the Guarani is highly structured and systematic, with either individual or small group instruction. Guarani feel that a knowledge of the intricate flora, fauna, and landforms of their island home, as well as the skill required to manipulate the implements used to exploit their habitat, can only be gained through repeated physical practice. Hence, emphasis is placed on "learning by doing" through repeated practice over time rather than by simple watching and copying. Regardless of the complex of tasks to be taught, a teacher's first step is to familiarize his student verbally and visually with the physical elements of the appropriate location. The entire complex is demonstrated over a period of time; proceeding from simple to complicated steps, the complex is divided into individual tasks. Instruction is not only sequential but additive, so that at each succeeding step, tasks learned earlier are repeated. Finally, an entire task complex is learned, with only occasional verbal or physical correction needed. When competent, the learner is allowed to help the teacher and to experiment and use his own initiative, and the teacher eventually eliminates his need to fill that role. (Ruddle & Chesterfield, 1978, p. 393)

Children participate in the cultural activities of their elders, with their responsibilities adjusted to their own initiative and skill. Caregivers provide guidance in specific skills in the context of their use. For example, toddlers in India learn at an early age to distinguish the use of their right and left
Figure 6.1  Learning to weave on the backstrap loom, in a Mayan community in Highland Guatemala. (a) Women sitting in their courtyard chatting and weaving, observed by two little girls. (b) By about age 5, girls begin to set up their own backstrap looms, using bits of thread that they find and plaiting long leaves to make warp and weft. (c) Around age 7, girls are assisted in beginning to weave a simple belt with the loom already set up for them. This 7-year-old from the United States is being taught by a Mayan woman, who has been explaining to the girl how the sticks are arranged, how the heddles are to be pulled to change the threads, and how the edges of the belt are kept straight. (d) By age 9, Mayan girls such as this one are weaving simple items independently, and by age 13, they are skilled weavers, handling all phases of weaving. (Photographs © B. Rogoff)
hands: the right is the clean hand used for eating; the left, the "dirty" hand used for cleaning oneself after defecation.

If a child did not learn to eat with the right hand by participation and observation, a mother or older sister would manipulate the right hand and restrain the left until the child understood and did what was required. One of the earliest lessons taught a child of one-and-a-half to two years of age was to distinguish between the right and left hand and their distinctly separate usages. . . . Although we judged that the Indian style of eating required considerable manipulative skill, we observed a girl, not quite two, tear her chapati solely with her right hand and pick up her vegetable with the piece of chapati held in the right hand. (Freed & Freed, 1981, p. 60)

These caregivers structured the situation as well as relied on children's participation, and the children achieved an impressive understanding of the difficult distinction between right and left.

An example of the close mutual involvement of expert and novice is also provided in adult education for healing practiced by the Kung of Africa. The teacher regulates the learner's experience with the healing trance, supporting the ability to achieve and to control the trance through intimate joint participation (Katz, 1982). The learner may physically hold onto the more experienced healer around his torso, hanging over his shoulders; as the teacher heals a person, the healing energy goes through the teacher's body and into the learner's. The learner heals through the teacher, with the teacher "carrying" the novice healer into expertise. While this education is between adults, the joint participation and learning through osmosis that it exemplifies resembles the processes that may be especially available to young children, who spend so much of their time in intimate contact with more skilled members of their culture.

In these accounts, which illustrate the ubiquity of social guidance and participation in learning through structuring of activities for novices in close involvement with others, there are also obvious cultural differences. The lessons to be learned differ from culture to culture, and the interpersonal arrangements for participation and for communication vary. The remainder of this chapter discusses cultural variations in lessons to be learned and in means of communication with children, in turn.

Cultural Variation in What Is Learned: The Goals of Development

The most important differences across cultures in guided participation involve variation in the skills and values that are promoted according to cultural goals of maturity. For researchers to attempt to understand development without considering everyday activities and skills in the context of cultural goals would be like attempting to learn a language without trying to understand the meaning it expresses.

As detailed in Chapter 2, cultures vary in their institutions and related tools and technologies, and these cultural differences are closely linked with the disparate performance on cognitive tests of individuals from different cultures. Cultural psychologists and sociocultural theorists have argued that basic to the differences across cultural (or historical) groups are the intellectual tools used, such as literacy and arithmetic (Cole & Griffin, 1980; Rogoff, 1981b; Rogoff, Gauvain, & Ellis, 1984; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978, 1987). In like manner, speculations abound regarding the effect of computers on the thinking of children who learn to use them (Papert, 1980), and the influence of television on children's thinking and social behavior.

Along with differences in skills considered important (e.g., reading, weaving, sorcery, healing, eating with the right hand) and approaches valued (e.g., individual achievement, speed in performance) are differences in the situations available to children for the practice of skills and incorporation of values.

Skills for the use of cultural tools such as literacy begin to be practiced even before children have contact with the technology itself. American middle-class parents involve their children in "literate" forms of narrative in preschool discourse, as they embed their children in a way of life in which reading and writing are integral parts of communication, recreation, and livelihood (Cazden, 1988; Michaels & Cazden, 1986; Taylor, 1983). Picture books made of durable materials are offered to babies, and bedtime stories become a part of their daily routine.

Heath (1982, 1983) presents a fascinating comparison of middle-class, school-oriented practices for inculcating literacy with the practices of families from two communities whose children have trouble reading. Parents in a white Appalachian mill town taught their children respect for the written word, but did not involve book characters or information in the children's everyday lives; their children did well during the first years of learning to read, but had difficulty when required to use literate skills to express themselves or interpret text. Children of rural origin in a black mill town learned skillful and creative use of language, but were not taught about books or the style of analytic discourse used in school; they had trouble learning to read, which kept them from making use of their creative skills with language in the school setting. Early childhood in both of these communities did not include school-style reading and writing in the texture of daily life, and the children experienced difficulties with literacy in school.

The socialization of narrative style varies across cultural groups, with differences appearing as early as first or second grade in the kind of toporal oral account that teachers value (Michaels & Cazden, 1986). The narrative styles used in "sharing time" (show and tell) by black and white children differ in the approval they receive from teachers, and in the extent they resemble the literate styles that teachers aim to foster. White children use a "topic-centered style" with tightly structured and marked discourse on a single topic, using temporal grounding, a statement of focus, and marking of structure through tone grouping and pausing. In contrast, the sharing-time narratives produced by black children use an episodic style with a series of episodes linked to an
implicit theme, marking transitions through pitch contour, tempo, and temporal markers. When adults from the two groups were presented with segments of narratives from which identifying information about children's group membership was removed, they differed in their judgments of the excellence of the two styles. The white adults judged the white children's style as more skillful and indicative of greater chance of success in reading, while the black adults found the black children's narratives to be better formed and indicative of language skill and likelihood of success in reading. The adults' value judgments reflected their shared culture with the children, and presumably were based on their appreciation and understanding of the children's use of culturally bound narrative scripts that specify both what is interesting to tell and how to structure it.

Cultural Goals and Developmental Outcomes

The importance of understanding the variations in what children are expected to learn in different cultures is linked to the assumptions of this book that thinking and learning are functional efforts by individuals to solve specific problems of importance in their culture, and that developmental courses vary in their goals rather than having a universal endpoint to which all should aspire. Thus in understanding cognitive development, it is essential to take into account the particular problems that children are attempting to solve and their importance in the culture.

It may be important for preschoolers in a culture in which literacy provides a primary means of communication and is a requirement for economic success in adulthood to learn to attend to the nuances of differences between the colors and shapes of small two-dimensional representations. However, such a focus may not matter in other cultural groups, in which it may be more important for young children to learn to attend to the nuances of weather patterns or of social cues of those around them, to use words cleverly to joust, or to understand the relation between human and supernatural events.

It is easy for middle-class American and European researchers to focus on skills that are important in our own daily lives and in our community, not only because as humans we all tend to be ethnocentric, but also because in many other nations, skills such as literacy (and the arbitrary skills associated with a particular form of literacy and schooling) are adopted as national priorities in the attempt to change the countries' economic position. Researchers' judgments of the importance of literate (or other technological) skills for intellectual development can be misled by the worldwide export of these tools to other nations (or to economically disadvantaged communities in the United States and Europe) and by attempts to convert their inhabitants to a Euroamerican view of the natural world and literate ways of thinking and acting. We must be careful not to confuse the specific uses of skills with the economic power of their users. This point is clearer when we consider the respect that is now being given to socialization practices and cognitive processes of the Japanese, apparently because of their success in beating Americans at their own game (i.e., economic power and excellence in mathematical and technological skills).

To understand development, we must examine children's skills and interaction with their partners in terms of the function of such skills in achieving locally valued goals, conscientiously avoiding the arbitrary imposition of our values on another group. It is impossible to avoid judgments of good and bad courses of development if one is attempting to influence another group. But if the aim is to understand development, it is essential not to impose assumptions about the goals of development of one group on individuals from another. Interpreting the activity of people without regard for their goals renders the observations meaningless.

Coda

Does this dismiss the possibility that there are bad outcomes of development? No. The purpose of the previous section was to argue for the importance of avoiding the imposition of outside goals while interpreting the activities of a functional human group. In any group, there is some agreement about undesirable outcomes for individuals. Because we act according to consensus in issues of values, it is important to question whose consensus it is.

I suppose that there would be agreement across cultures that the survival of an individual is some measure of success, but that the survival (or gain) of an individual at the expense of the group would have negative connotations. But even using such criteria, there would be variation in the balance of individual and group goals. Some communities may try to raise children who would be willing and able to sacrifice themselves for the group's good. Other communities may try to prevent individuals from harming themselves or others at all costs—for example, by prohibiting individuals to allow themselves or others to die if something could be done about it, even if the resources required to keep one person alive led to great sacrifices in the well-being of others. (Here I am thinking of differences in community feelings about allowing old people to choose their time to die with dignity—or even assisting them in their choice—and of the priority given to preserving the life of a very sick premature infant at great expense to the group and other individuals.)

My aim is to suggest that judgments of good outcomes of development must be defined socially and that they differ according to many aspects of a community's functioning, including its economic surpluses (which provide leeway for making extra allowances for some individuals without jeopardizing the group), its system of subsistence and tools of survival, and its political, economic, and religious systems. (See LeVine, 1977, for a discussion of the relation between resources and cultural goals for child rearing.)

Wolff (1963) provides an engaging account of child rearing in a lower-middle-class Boston Irish family, characterized by bawdy and humorous "consistent inconsistency," illustrating the point that there are a variety of
appropriate avenues through which parents and children achieve mutual regulation. Such varying approaches fit with the cultural and personal traditions of the parents, despite clashing with those of researchers.

Within any community, nonetheless, different families will vary in their success in meeting the goals of the community, because of differences in their genes, their family's position in the community, their material resources, and the chance circumstances of life. Presumably, even families living in the most difficult of circumstances are trying to do the best with what they have, but sometimes the best is just trying to make it to the next day. In hardship such as extreme poverty, poor health, or a history of habits that impede functioning (e.g., drug addiction or abusive relationships), it is unlikely that caregivers will be thinking of the welfare of children as a central priority.

Adults living in difficult circumstances still interact with their children, except in the most extreme cases. The interaction is unlikely to provide the children with guided participation in becoming successful members of the community from which researchers come. Likewise, the researchers' children might have more difficulty surviving hardship circumstances than do children who are socialized to them. The routine interactions and arrangements for children provide them with guided participation in maneuvering the life style in which they are embedded. The value of a particular life style is a matter of judgment, difficult to disentangle from the values of the judges' upbringing.

An irritated whack on the side of a young child's head when the child asks a question is liable to teach a lesson that is very different from language lessons on forming questions in conversations with eager middle-class adults. The whack teaches children about monitoring the mood of an adult before initiating interaction, about forms of initiating interaction that are not permitted under certain circumstances, or about the appropriateness of whacking someone on the side of the head when irritated and big enough to get away with it. Children often do learn their lessons, and as adults they use the same practices in which they participated as children, as seen in intergenerational continuity of parent-child relations, child abuse, and alcoholism (Egeland, Jacobvitz, & Stroufe, 1988; Ricks, 1985). Fraiberg, Adelson, and Shapiro's (1975) title "Ghosts in the Nursery" captures well the notion that the practices of the parents often continue when the children become parents—happily or unhappily.

Whether the parental practices appropriated by children are regarded as valuable or problematic, the process is one of guided participation. The structuring of situations in which children participate and their engagement with other people support children's appropriation of the system of understanding in which they participate in daily life. In guided participation—whether following the middle-class model or any other, culturally sanctioned or not—it is a question of values to determine the appropriateness of the particular model.

If we are interested in understanding the processes by which children grow to be skilled in the activities of their elders, we must take the same approach in interpreting the processes of interaction and children's activities in families whose outcomes do not have our community's approval as with those who do. We must consider the circumstances and goals of the family and the community. If we feel that it is our responsibility to do something about how a family and its children are functioning, we will be better prepared to do so if we understand their reality from the perspective of their goals and constraints.

The aim of this book is not to make prescriptions for intervention or for child rearing, but this coda seems important to explain that in arguing for the universality of guided participation, I am not arguing for the universality of its middle-class form. Understanding cultural as well as individual variation is essential for understanding the process of guided participation and the process of development itself. To learn from variations, we must keep in mind the local goals of socialization. My assumption is that functioning cultural groups have goals and child-rearing methods that are appropriate for them. I return now to the discussion of cultural variation, to consider variation in the means by which caregivers and children communicate.

Cultural Variation in Communication with Children

Along with cultural differences in what is being learned go differences in how communication with children is structured. Cultural variations in communication strategies deeply influence the ways in which parents and children collaborate in children's socialization.

There are striking cultural differences in the explicitness and intensity of verbal and nonverbal communication, the interactional status of children and adults, and the company children keep (see Field, Sostek, Vietze, & Leiderman, 1981; Leiderman, Tulkin, & Rosenfeld, 1977; Whiting & Edwards, 1988). I suggest that these cultural differences fit together into patterns that vary in terms of the responsibility that adults take for teaching children in cultures in which children do not participate in adult activities, and the responsibility that children take for learning in cultures in which they have the opportunity to observe and participate in the activities of mature members of the society.

Explicitness of Verbal and Nonverbal Communication

An emphasis on explicit, declarative statements, in contrast to tacit, procedural, and subtle forms of verbal and nonverbal instruction, appears to characterize cultures that promote schooling (Jordan, 1977; Rogoff, 1981b, 1982a; Scribner, 1974; Scribner & Cole, 1973). Differences in the use of explanations may relate to cultural values that define the appropriate use of language, subtlety, and silence, as well as to the adequacy of other forms of communication for most purposes. For example, among the Navajo, who have frequently been characterized as teaching quietly by demonstration.
(e.g., Cazden & John, 1971), talk is regarded as a sacred gift not to be used unnecessarily.

Although researchers have focused on talking as the appropriate means of adult–child interaction, this emphasis may reflect a cultural bias that overlooks the information provided by gaze, postural changes, smells, and touch. Middle-class American infants have been characterized as “packaged” babies who do not have direct skin contact with their caregivers (Whiting, 1981) and often spend more than a third of their time alone, in a room separated from any other people.

Middle-class American infants are held approximately half the time as Gusii (Kenyan) infants. Whereas Gusii infants are held 80% of the time at 3 to 6 months, and about 50% of the time at 9 to 12 months, middle-class U.S. infants are held only 45% and less than 20% of the time at those ages. Significantly, U.S. babies are placed in holding containers (Figure 6.2a) for a proportion of time (39% at 4 months and 29% at 10 months) that, when combined with their being held by caregivers, adds up to almost the total holding time for the Gusii infants (Richman, Miller, & Solomon, 1988). Heath (1983) observes that the working-class U.S. black infants that she studied were almost never alone—they were held and carried day and night—and were seldom in the company of only one other person.

The separation of mainstream middle-class U.S. infants from other people may necessitate the use of distal forms of communication, such as noise. In contrast to U.S. children's use of distal communication, children who are constantly in the company of their caregivers may rely more on nonverbal cues, such as direction of gaze or facial expression. And infants who are in almost constant skin contact with their caregivers may manage effective communication through touch, by squirming and changing position. The availability of tactile and postural forms of communication may facilitate the toilet training reported as early as 4 to 8 months in some cultures where mother and infant have skin contact (and babies wear no diapers). Consistent with the suggestion that vocalization may be less necessary when there is close contact between adults and infants, Freed and Freed (1981) report work by Lewis in 1977 showing that U.S. infants and small children are less likely to vocalize when held on the lap and more likely to vocalize when out of their mothers' arms and off their laps.

**Interactional Status of Adults and Children:**

*Whose Responsibility Is Learning?*

In some societies, young children are not expected to interact with adults as conversational peers, initiating interactions and being treated as equals in discussion (Blount, 1972; Harkness & Super, 1977; Schieffelin & Eisenberg, 1984). Instead, they may speak when spoken to, replying to informational questions or simply carrying out directions.

Draper and Harpending (1987) argue that the conversational distance between adults and children often observed in agricultural societies whose

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*Figure 6.2* Contrasting arrangements for holding and interacting with infants. (a) This 9-week-old American is held in a baby container, engaged in face-to-face conversation with her father. (Photograph © B. Rogoff) (b) This 11-month-old from the Ituri Forest of Zaire, carried on her mother's back, is able to observe what her mother sees and does. (Photograph courtesy of David Wilkie)
members have large families and practice narrow birth spacing is the result of the mothers' attempts to employ child caregivers. In this view, mothers make themselves unavailable to their toddlers and require toddlers to focus on others in the social world as their companions, making mother–child communication infrequent. In such settings, toddlers move in a circle of children whose world overlaps only partially with that of adults. However, I believe that this account is incomplete. In such groups, the children may not act as conversational peers of adults, but they may be very involved in the adult world as participants.

In the Mayan community in which I have worked, children seldom interact with adults as conversational partners, but engage with adults during their participation in adult activities, taught by demonstration (which includes talk) in context. Children are freed from direct supervision by adults by age 3 or 4 and then move around town with a multi-age group of children, amusing themselves by observing ongoing events and imitating their elders in play. Infants were always with adults and interacted with them (not necessarily in conversation) on 50% of the daytime occasions I observed. But by ages 3 to 4, children were less often with adults and interacted with them on fewer than 10% of the occasions, with further drops in adult companionship from age 5 throughout childhood (Rogoff, 1981a). Children participated in household work beginning by age 5, taking responsibility for sweeping, some food preparation, and child care.

When older children did interact with adults, it was in the context of participation in adult work. Adults were as likely as or more likely than peers to be interacting with 9-year-olds when the children were engaged in household or agricultural work, but were almost never involved with them when children were playing. Play was a domain for peer interaction, not adult companionship. Even in play, though, the children emulated adult roles: 66% of their play (excluding sports) involved imitation of adult roles. But of the 1708 observations of 9-year-olds out of school, native observers identified only 6 occasions as teaching situations.

Ochs and Schieffelin (1984) suggest that there may be two cultural patterns of speech between young children and their caregivers. In cultures that adapt situations to children (as in middle-class U.S. families), caregivers simplify their talk, negotiate meaning with children, cooperate with them in building propositions, and respond to their verbal and nonverbal initiations. In cultures that adapt children to the normal situations of the society (as in Kaluli New Guinea and Samoan families), caregivers model unsimplified utterances for children to repeat to a third party, direct them to notice others, and build interaction around circumstances to which the caregivers wish the children to respond.

This contrast is useful for drawing attention to differing strategies of interaction with children, although it does not apply to all cultures. Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo (1986a) report that Kwara’a (Solomon Islands) caregivers speak with children in both of the ways that Ochs and Schieffelin (1984) contrast: on the one hand, they converse with young children, simplify their speech, negotiate meaning, and respond to children’s initiations; on the other, they model statements for children to repeat to others and direct children to notice other people and situations. The goal of Kwara’a caregivers is to adapt children to the situation, but they argue that it is most effective to do so by starting from where the child is—although they do not go to the extent of entering into pretend play: this is children’s domain (Watson-Gegeo & Gegeo, 1986b).

In all these patterns, the child participates in activities of the society, but the patterns vary in terms of the child’s or the caregiver’s responsibility to adapt in the process of learning or teaching the more mature forms of speech and action.

The adaptation of caregivers to children may be necessary in societies
that segregate children from adult activities, thus requiring them to practice skills or learn information outside the mature context of use (Rogoff, 1981a). In the U.S. middle class, many school-age children do not even know what their parents' occupations are, much less how their parents carry out adult work and adult interaction. They are segregated from the occupational and recreational world of adults, and learn about skills they may eventually need in order to participate in their society as adults in a separate context specialized for the purpose—school. (In an age-segregated society, such lessons in development continue in adulthood, with classes in childbirth, handling toddlers, and adjusting to various phases of adulthood, since individuals face new phases of development without much opportunity to observe others at different phases and thereby to pick up examples and ideas of the next step directly.)

At home, young children in an age-segregated community such as the U.S. middle class seldom have much chance to participate in the functioning of the household, and may be segregated from human company by the provision of separate bedrooms, security objects, and attractive toys. Middle-class infants are in the unusual situation (speaking in worldwide terms) of being entirely alone for as much as 10 hours of a 24-hour day, managing as best they can to handle their hunger or thirst with a bottle and their need for comforting with a pacifier or blanky or teddy, and working, as Margaret Mead put it, to establish their independence in the transitions to sleep and waking in the night and at naptime (Morelli, et al., 1988; Ward, 1971; Whiting, 1981). During waking hours, their involvement with adults is focused on entertaining themselves while their parents get some work done or on parental interaction that is focused at the children's level, with adjustment of speech and activities to their skill and understanding.

In societies in which children are integrated in adult activities, the children are ensured a role in the action, at least as close observers. Children are present at most events of interest in the community, from work to recreation to church. They are able to observe and eavesdrop on the ongoing processes of life and death, work and play, that are important in their community. As infants, they are often carried wherever their mothers or older siblings go, and as young children they may do errands and roam the town in their free time, watching whatever is going on. As nonparticipants in ordinary adult conversation, they may be free to eavesdrop on important adult activities from which nonparticipant adults may be excluded.

Mayan children, for example, are present at all adult activities except for the birth of a baby. (Sleeping in the same room as the rest of the family, they are present for earlier phases of the baby's development, but were believed by adults "not to hear.") Once, when a Mayan friend was telling me about his marital unhappiness with great secrecy and requesting me to tell no one, an unrelated 10-year-old hung around in the room during the whole conversation, without my friend showing any concern about the child's presence.

In a Mayan community in Mexico, Gaskins and Lucy (1987) noted the

![Figure 6.4](image_url) Figure 6.4 Contrasting sleeping arrangements. (a) This 9-month-old American is placed in a crib to sleep in a room by himself. (Photograph courtesy of Oscar Magarian) (b) This 15-month-old naps on a relative's back while she harvests peanuts in the Ituri Forest of Zaire. The baby is not strapped on. (Photograph courtesy of Gilda Morelli)
importance of children as providing extra eyes and ears for their mothers, who stay at home and extract information about village events from the children. Because children are exempted from many adult social norms, they have access to information unavailable to adults:

Children can observe or enter a yard or home without causing anyone to take any special note. A child can linger to watch an ongoing activity without requiring any social engagement. Children are everywhere and little cognizance is taken of their presence. An adult watching in the same way would require the initiation of social interaction. By contrast the child is a “nonperson.” (p. 6)

Hence children can be sent to spy on someone for their mothers’ interest. Mothers’ questions about the events serve to focus children’s attention on the relevant features of ongoing activities, guiding the children in determining what aspects of events are significant. And, I would presume, children can use their prerogative to come and go and observe in order to gain access to informative situations for their own learning.

Ward (1971) offers an account of eavesdropping as a means of language learning in her description of a black community in Louisiana, in which children are expected to be seen and not heard:

At any age a child visiting someone not seen daily will remain very quiet, perhaps observing and listening. At the first disturbance, he will be sent outside immediately. . . . Within the extended circle of relatives and very close friends, however, this structure on speech is broken. The silent absorption in community life, the participation in the daily social rituals, and the hours spent apparently overhearing adults’ conversations should not be underestimated in their impact on a child’s language growth. (p. 37)

Nothing is censored for children’s ears; youngsters go everywhere in the community, except to Saturday-night parties. Heath (1983) provides a similar account of a working-class black community in the Piedmont Carolinas.

Small children in the Louisiana community that Ward (1971) studied are not the conversational partners of adults, people with whom to “engage in dialogue.” If children have something important to say, mothers will listen, and the children had better listen if their mothers speak to them. But for conversation, mothers talk to adults or, if desperate, to a child older than 8 years. A mother “will never find herself politely trapped, as will [a] middle-class . . . mother, by the verbal precocity of a three year old, with whom one cannot honestly discuss an interesting issue” (Ward, 1971, p. 46). These children are not encouraged to learn skills in initiating and monopolizing conversation with adults on topics of their own choosing (skills that are useful in middle-class schooling); they hold their parents’ attention longer if they say nothing. Toddlers learn to amuse themselves, to sit very still and listen to adults talk—as long as 3 hours—and to amuse themselves with siblings and other children. With infants, adults play some language games involving questions of family structure. Questions between older children and adults involve straightforward requests for information; they are not asked for the sake of conversation or for parents to drill children on topics to which the parents already know the answers.

In conversations between mothers and young children undertaken at Ward’s request, fewer than 5% of utterances were expansions of either partner’s speech, contrasting with this common form of interaction in conversations between middle-class mothers and their children. However, the mothers did provide their children with language models involving expansion of their own simplified speech, varying the tonal pattern and choice of words to fill slots in sentences over series of statements that, Ward (1971) argues, offer a graphic presentation of syntactic choices for constructing statements. A mother’s questions to little Scott provide an example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What</th>
<th>Scott ate today for dinner?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What</td>
<td>you ate for dinner?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did</td>
<td>you eat for dinner?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you and</td>
<td>Warren have for dinner?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(p. 49)

Mothers’ speech to children, while not taking the form of a dialogue, is carefully regularized, providing precise, workable models of the language used in the community.

Heath (1983) reports that working-class black Carolina adults do not see young children as conversational partners. However, the toddlers are always surrounded by others and move through phases of echoing and experimenting with variation on the speech around them—at first ignored but gradually participating by making themselves part of the ongoing discourse, by breaking into adult conversation. Adults attempt to understand these comments and correct errors of fact or babbletalk. Adults also encourage verbal facility by instigating and appreciating children’s involvement in assertive challenging and in scolding exchanges by preschoolers with adults and other children.

Since children are not regarded as information givers, however, they are not asked questions for which adults already have an answer, such as questions of fact or detail. The questions that adults ask children most often encourage children to seek similarities across situations, based on the children’s experience. Heath suggests that these analogy questions point to the significance adults give to metaphorical thinking and speaking. Flexible use of language, adapted to shifting roles and situations, characterizes skilled language use in this community. Heath (1983) quotes a woman speaking about how she expects her toddler grandson, Teegie, to learn to know and to talk:

He gotta learn to know ’bout dis world, can’t nobody tell ’im. Now just how crazy is dat? White folks uh hear dey kids say sumpr’, dey say it back to ’em, dey arks ’em ‘gain in ‘gain’ bout things, like they ’posed to be born knowin’. You think I kin tell Teegie all he gotta know to get along? He just gotta be keen, keep his eyes open, don’t he be sorry. Gotta watch his- self by watchin’ other folks. Ain’t no use me tellin’ ’im: “Learn dis, learn dat. What’s dis? What’s dat?” He just gotta learn, gotta know—be see one
thing one place one time, he know how it go, see sump'n like it again, maybe it be same, maybe it won't. He hafta try it out. If he don't he be in trouble; he get lef' out. Gotta keep yo' eyes open, gotta feel to know. (p. 84)

In communities in which children are not conversational partners, children may be poorly prepared for the pattern of discourse used in school, but they become proficient in the language and other skills of their community. They are able to learn from observing and eavesdropping as ever-present members of the community, from their growing participation in daily activities from an early age, from the questions and directives and demonstrations of adults, and from their play talk with other children. Children can do most of the work of socialization themselves, by watching their elders and gradually becoming more centrally involved, in a process that Benedict (1955) called "continuity of cultural conditioning."

With such opportunities to observe ongoing activity and to lend a hand when necessary, children from many cultures begin to participate in chores and other cultural activities from age 3 or 4, when they begin to see what to do, and assume responsibilities for child, animal, and house care by age 5 or 7 (Rogoff, Sellers, Pirotta, Fox, & White, 1975; Ward, 1971; Whiting & Edwards, 1988). Their role grows and their opportunities to practice are amplified by their interest in participation and by their caregivers' setting them tasks within their capabilities and guiding their contributions in the context of joint activity.

Mayan mothers, for example, report that 1- to 2-year-olds observe their mothers making tortillas and attempt to follow suit. Mothers give children a small piece of dough to use and facilitate their efforts by rolling the dough into a ball and starting to flatten it. The toddler's "tortilla," if it is not dropped in the dirt, is cooked by the mother with the other tortillas and eaten by the toddler or another family member. (It goes to the chickens if it is dropped in the dirt.) As the child gains skill in shaping tortillas, the mother adds pointers and demonstrates how to hold the dough in a position that facilitates smooth flattening, and the child can both witness the outcome of his or her own efforts and contribute to making meals. The child observes carefully and participates, and the mother, usually good-naturedly, supports the child's efforts by simplifying the task to make it commensurate with the child's level of skill and by demonstrating and giving suggestions in the process of joint activity. Five- and 6-year-old children are able to make some tortillas for dinner, and girls of 9 or 10 can handle the process from grinding the corn to rolling and patting the tortilla to turning it on the hot griddle with their fingers, preparing the family's dinner when necessary.

Pueblo Indian children have access to many aspects of adult life and the freedom to choose how and with whom to participate (John-Steiner, 1984). Their reports of their own learning stress their role as "apprentice" to more experienced members of the community, with observation and verbal explanation in the context of involvement in the task being learned. John-Steiner contrasts this sort of verbal explanation with the verbal instruction that occurs in the classroom, out of the context of productive activity. One woman describes an episode in teaching her daughter to make bread that demonstrates how verbal explanation is embedded in the process of carrying out the task:

I told her, you forgot to put in your baking powder. And she said, how do you know? Because the bread is too hard and it won't rise. It was so dry and it is kind of shiny, that is how you can tell if you don't have baking powder. Then she said, she did put in some, but maybe she didn't put in enough of the baking powder. (p. 60)

In other communities that emphasize children's observation and participation, guided participation may involve adjustments by adults or more skilled children to facilitate children's efforts, sometimes with less emphasis on verbal explanation. Howard (1970) reports that Rotuman children have great opportunities to observe how essential tasks are performed, since they are frequently with working adults. The children are subtly encouraged to imitate, and if a child experiences difficulty, an adult may physically adjust the child's body position to correct an error or refine a movement, seldom offering verbal instruction. If children ask for verbal instruction, "they are likely to be told to watch a skilled adult in action" (p. 116).

Questions by children to adults may be rare in some communities (Heath, 1983). Learners' questions to a teacher may be regarded as impolite challenges, in that they involve a subordinate obliging a superior to respond. This implies that the subordinate has the right to hold the superior responsible for the information requested, as Goody (1978) observed in the apprenticeship of Gonja youths learning to weave.

Rather than relying on questions and explanations to organize their learning, observers may be skilled at picking up information through watching, on some occasions even without actually participating in the performance of a task. Nash (1967) reports that the method of learning to use the footloom in a weaving factory in Guatemala is for the learner (an adult) to sit beside a skilled weaver for some weeks, simply observing, asking no questions, and receiving no explanations. The learner may fetch a spool of thread from time to time for the weaver, but does not begin to weave until, after weeks of observation, the learner feels competent to begin. At that point, the apprentice becomes a skilled weaver simply by watching and by attending to whatever demonstrations the experienced weaver has provided.

This example points out the power of active observation by skilled observers. Mainstream middle-class researchers, who rely less on observation, tend to think of it as passive. However, it is clear that children and skilled adult observers are very active in attending to what they watch. In the guided participation of children in cultures that stress children's responsibility for learning, children may have the opportunity to observe and participate where ready in the skills of the community and may develop impressive skills in observation, with less explicit child-centered interaction to integrate the children into the activities of society. (At the same time, I should note that they
are also often involved in talk; theirs is not generally a silent, nonverbal world. The talk may involve directions to them rather than conversations, and explanations are likely to occur in the context of participation rather than as discursive lessons. Verbal activities as well as nonverbal skills are available for children's observation and participation.)

Skilled observation may allow skilled participation by young children. Sorenson (1979) notes that Fore (New Guinea) infants, whose caregivers are always accessible to them, have the responsibility of regulating contact, returning to "base" when they desire. They have access to all aspects of the environment, for both observation and involvement, and develop a realistic self-reliance. Adults intervene infrequently in their activities, to the point that the children handle knives and fire safely by the time they are able to walk. Sorenson states that he "continued to be surprised that the unsupervised Fore toddlers did not recklessly thrust themselves into unappreciated dangers, the way our own children tend to do" (p. 301).

Efforts to aid children in learning may thus vary in terms of the children's responsibility to observe and analyze tasks or the caregivers' responsibility to decompose the task and motivate the children. Dixon, LeVine, Richman, and Brazelton (1984) noted that Gusii (Kenyan) mothers gave their 6- to 36-month-old infants the responsibility for learning. They used clear "advance organizers" in instruction, often modeling the expected performance in its entirety, and appeared to expect the task to be completed exactly as specified if the children attended to it. This contrasted with the efforts of American mothers, who took the responsibility for teaching and making their babies learn. They concentrated on arousing the children's interest and shaping their behavior step by step, providing constant encouragement and re-focusing.

There are provocative suggestions of cultural differences in children's efforts to observe. Gullinet (1979) reports that Navajo children quietly observed teachers more than twice as often as Caucasian children in the same classroom. Preliminary analyses suggest that Mayan toddlers are especially alert to the events going on around them (Rogoff, Mosier, Mistry, & Gönçü, in press). For example, it was difficult for mothers and other adults to surreptitiously handle an object or communicate with one another without toddlers attending to the event.

One 12-month-old was sitting on his mother's lap when she gestured behind him to an older sister to fetch a rag, indicating with her gesture where the rag was. The baby, who was engaged with another activity at the time, turned and looked in the direction of her point, behind him, without having been able to see her gesture.

Postural cues and changes in the attention and direction of gaze of others were used by the Mayan toddlers to keep themselves informed about what was going on around them. Preliminary analyses suggest that such sensitivity to social events at the periphery of their attention did not appear as frequently in a sample of middle-class toddlers in the United States (Rogoff et al., in press).

Different Social Partners of Children

In the previous section, variation in children's social partners was mentioned in passing. However, it is essential to recognize that along with differences in the roles of parents in varying cultures are differences in the roles of siblings and other children, grandparents, and the community in general.
In settings where mothers and fathers do not see themselves as conversational partners of children, other people do converse with children. The nuclear family, with one or two parents living in a separate dwelling perhaps hundreds of miles from kin, is a quite different child-rearing environment than that experienced by children who are surrounded by siblings, cousins, grandparents, and other related and unrelated familiar people (Mistry, Gönül, & Rogoff, 1988; Watson-Gegeo & Gegeo, 1989; Whiting & Edwards, 1988).

Whereas middle-class American mothers consider it part of their role to play with their children, mothers in other cultures laugh with embarrassment at the idea of playing with their children, as this is the role of other children and occasionally grandparents (Rogoff et al., in preparation). When a toddler is playing, reported the Mayan mothers in our sample, it is time for a mother to get her work done. In our study, we brought novel objects for the toddlers to explore, and when we handed them to the mothers, they often demonstrated the use of the objects for an older sibling, with directions to play with them with the toddler.

Such a separation of roles has been noted by Ward (1971), in her description of the social partners of black children in the Louisiana community described earlier. The children watch and listen to adults; they play and talk with younger children, and teach social and intellectual skills: “Alphabets, colors, numbers, rhymes, word games, pen and pencil games are learned, if at all, from older children. No child, even the firstborn, is without such tuteelage, since cousins, aunts, and uncles of their own age and older are always on hand” (p. 25). Similar observations have been made by Farran and Mistry (personal communication) regarding to siblings’ and other relatives’ roles with native Hawaiian preschoolers.

The supervision of the child cohort may be the responsibility of the whole community, without the need for any particular adult to be devoting attention to the pack of children. Ward (1971) states that caretaking and disciplinary duties belong to anyone who is near the child. Mistry and colleagues (1988) have made similar observations in a tribal village in India, where neighbors, related to the family by kinship but by long association, make their opinions known concerning anyone’s treatment of a child and take over with rights usually reserved for parents in the American middle class.

Hence one would expect cultural differences in the orientation of young children toward their parents as primary social partners (as in the American middle class) or toward the larger group. The sort of intimate face-to-face mother–infant interaction that is the subject of research on infant social interaction may be very unusual in cultural settings where infants are not being brought up as conversational partners of their mothers but as less individually and dyadically focused members of the community. Whiting and Edwards (1988) note that of the 12 cultural groups they studied, the U.S. middle-class mothers ranked highest in sociability with children—interacting in a friendly, playful, or conversational way, treating children at times as status equals—whereas mothers in the other communities stressed training c nurturing involvement with children and dominance with respect to children.

Face-to-face interaction may be a prototype of parent–infant interaction in research on mother–child communication because of the didactic and dyadic role assumed by American middle-class parents, who rely on their own efforts to motivate children to learn, in contrast to caregivers and children in cultures in which children have the responsibility to learn and are involved with many other social partners in the process. There appears to be great cultural variation in the extent to which mothers rely on the face-to-face position for communication. Mothers in many cultures commonly hold the infants facing away from them (Heath, 1983; Martini & Kirkpatrick, 1981; Sostek et al., 1981).

Variation in infant positioning from facing the mother to facing the same way as the mother may reflect cultural values about the social world in which the child is becoming embedded, as well as the means of communication between parents and children. Martini and Kirkpatrick (1981) note that Marquesan mothers (in the South Pacific) appeared strained and awkward when they asked to interact with their babies face to face. In everyday activities, babies are usually held facing outward and encouraged to interact with and attend to others (especially slightly older siblings) instead of interacting with their mothers. Martini and Kirkpatrick report that this is consistent with a genre cultural value of embeddedness in a complex social world. Marquesan infants learn different lessons in their interactions from those learned by U.S. infants engaged in face-to-face interaction, but mothers in both societies provide guidance in developing culturally appropriate skills and values. Marquesan mothers actively arrange infants’ social interactions with others; if a child appears to get self-absorbed, mothers interrupt and urge attention to broader social environment:

[Mothers] consistently provided the infant with an interactively stimulating world, first by interacting, next by encouraging and making effective attempts to make contact, and finally by directing others to interact with the infant. Caregivers . . . shaped the infants’ attention towards objects and objects, and shaped their movements towards effective contact and locomotion. By the end of the first year, infants were becoming interactively able to accompany and learn from older children in an environment supervised by adults. (p. 209)

Like middle-class American children, children in other cultures tend to develop in situations of joint involvement with more experienced peer groups in culturally important activities. Caregivers collaborate in children’s socialization as they determine the nature of children’s activities and their responsibilities in participation. They work together and in the process adapt children’s knowledge to new situations, structure problem-solving attempts, and regulate children’s assumption of responsibility for managing the performance of tasks. This guided participation includes tacit forms of commun
tion and distal arrangements of children's learning environments, as well as explicit verbal interaction. The mutual roles played by caregivers and children in children's development rely both on the caregivers' interest in fostering mature skills and on the children's own eagerness to participate in adult activities and push their own development. Guided participation involves participation of children in skilled cultural activities with other people of varying levels of skill and status.

These joint socialization roles may be universal, although communities vary in the goals of socialization and in the means of communication. Observations of variations in guided participation across cultures draws our attention to

1. How the goals of mature contribution to the community organize the skills and values that children learn
2. The opportunities available to children for learning in the arrangements made for children's activities and companions
3. The responsibility that children take for learning from whatever activities they participate in, and the rich opportunities for observing and eavesdropping
4. The tacit but ubiquitous nature of children's guided participation
5. The unself-conscious nature of the roles of children as well as of their social partners in day-to-day arrangements and interactions

Observations in cultures other than those of the researchers may make such aspects of guided participation more apparent. However, I propose that these are features of guided participation that are common for U.S. middle-class children as well. They may be more common, in fact, than the explicit, didactic, self-conscious instruction and learning that has been the focus of research.