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RESEARCH ARTICLE

CULTURE WITHIN PLAY AND PLAY WITHIN CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

The interaction between play as a unique phenomenon and culture is one of the controversial issues in Interdisciplinary Sciences. Two broad perspectives, biological and cultural views, have discussed play as an inherent universal aspect of human being or as a socially situated cultural activity. In addition to biological notion, the cultural aspects of play are strong enough to deduce that play is a social and cultural 'pathway' for socialization. Language, values, moral virtues, power, individualistic and collectivistic believes, autonomy, and a sense of community, as cultural components, can be conveyed through this pathway from one generation to newer generation. A simple analysis of the content of new e-gaming has revealed that action, power, speed, aggression, imagination, feminism, masculinism, and terror are just some of cultural concepts that convey through this pathway and form the way of children's socialization. The present paper was focused on the relationship between these cultural components and play. This purpose was followed through the following topics: first, culture and its characteristics, and then cultural and social aspects of play (culture within play or play within culture). These topics were discussed based on current findings in social and cultural studies.

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INTRODUCTION

In the science of logic (classical and modern logic) the definitions of phenomena could be given in different ways. Operational definitions (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009), nominal, stipulative, descriptive, explicative, mathematical, normal form and implicit definitions are some of current types of definitions by which phenomena are recognized (Gupta, 2009, p. 1). Although all these types of definitions describe phenomena and introduce them, each definition takes a look at phenomena through different perspectives and illuminates some aspects of it by eliminating other aspects. Regarding play as a unique action in human and even animal species, there have been different types of definitions which are yet debatable (Malim & Birch, 1998). Psychologists, child and youth experts, and sociologists illustrate play in an integrative way as an "activity" (Valentino, Cicchetti, Toth & Rogosch, 2006., Hughes, 1991 and Taylor, Samuelsson, and Rogers, 2010). Although play as an activity is conditioned by Hughes (1991) to contain some essential characteristics such as "intrinsically motivated" - "freely chosen", "being pleasurable", and "being nonliteral" to be differentiated from other activities, scrutinizing the term 'activity', based on the science of logic, reveals that the social and cultural aspects of play are prominent. Since no activity can be performed in isolation, particularly human activities, play is an activity in which individuals, animals, and objects participate actively. Even when an individual is playing solitarily, she is playing with all of nature's phenomena through their representatives like language, symbols, objects, and schema.

In this regard, play as an activity has a protuberant social aspect because all these things are culturally constructed, socially situated and culturally developed. On the other hand, considering all of the determined aspects of play reveals that there are two broad perspectives in the definition of play: first, play is an activity which is inherently dependent on genetic factors, particularly, when "the stoic German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche [1844-1900] opined that in every human a child is hidden who wants to play" (cited in Thompson & White, 2010, p.54) or when scholars discussed play as an "inherent universal aspect of human being" (Göncü & Gaskins, 2007 cited in Pufall & Pufall, 2008, p. 394). Second, play is defined as a "socially situated cultural activity" (Pufall & Pufall, 2008 p. 390).

In the first perspective, play as a unique phenomenon follows the general pattern of development, that is, at first stage of human development, play is prominent activity. However, through the human growth in following stages, middle age and adulthood, it gradually decreases. In the second perspective, play is either culturally constructed or at least social and cultural issues have effective influences on shaping and developing play. According to this view the adhesiveness of this aspect is strong enough to deduce that play is a social and cultural 'pathway' for socialization. It also is under the influence of cultural and social issues (e.g., language, values, moral virtues, internet, new technology, economy, and a sense of community). This influence is changing most structural components of play as well as its cultural content. Referring to e-gaming (video or internet gaming) reveals that e-gaming includes the new elements or concepts that in last two decades did not. Action, power, speed, aggression, imagination,

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feminism, masculinism, and terror are just some of concepts embedded in new e-games. Reviewing and simple content analysis of 25 top video games ad in YouTube can show that new games consist of new meanings which were result of dramatic change in culture and society. Since play is a flowing context in which all domains of human capacity (e.g., cognitive, emotional social, moral, and physical growth) are generated and developed, it is necessary to study the cultural and social factors or issues that influence play. In this regard, the present paper is focused on major cultural and social factors or issues in play. This purpose will be followed through the following topics: first, culture and its characteristics, and then cultural and social aspects of play (culture within play or play within culture). These topics will be discussed based on current findings in social and cultural studies.

Culture and its characteristics

The definition of culture in scholarly perspectives has created many debates (Ayman & Korabik, 2010). Culture is defined as “a set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people, but different for each individual, communicated from one generation to the next” (Matsumoto, 1996, cited in Savicki, 1999, p. 241). In a similar way, it is described as “an acquired and transmitted pattern of shared meaning, feeling, and behavior that constitutes a distinctive human group” (Kluckhohn’s, 1951., cited in Ayman & Korabik, 2010, p. 158). The comparison of these definitions reveals that culture implies on a set of (different or similar) attitudes, values, ethics, meaningful collective behaviors, traditions, rituals that all differentiate the group of people who possess them and transfer them to next own generations. Although these definitions are very broad, researchers who study cultures tend to operationalize the characteristics of cultures in order to distinguish them from one another. Some of culture’s characteristics are hidden and located in the deeper layer of individual and collective style of life; even though, they are discussed in science or philosophy obviously such as values, feelings, individualism and collectivism. These characteristics are constructed by a set of patterns which are “beyond everything”, but more influential in people interactions, like “the air we breathe” (Savicki, 1999, p. 241). This aspect of cultures indicates that we are born in culture, living and die within culture. This dynamic aspect is streaming in our interactions, but people are unconscious of the content of this stream most of time. Fortunately, the visible aspects of culture, which help distinguish cultures and societies, are diagnosable such as skin color, eye shape, hair texture, religion, and rituals. Amongst all these hidden and visible characteristics there are some key components by which theorists try to categorize cultures. For example, based on values (as a key element in culture) Hofstede (2001) cited in Ayman & Korabik (2010) categorized cultures in five levels: “individualism-collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity-femininity” (p. 158). These levels can be observed in different cultural elements, like language, family relation, values, and social play. Since play is culturally constructed (Pufall & Pufall, 2008), it can be assumed that these levels are embedded in play. Thus, the elements of play (e.g., speed, theme, materials, arena, rules, competition, and simplicity-complexity) can display the values and levels of cultures (Yaoying, 2010). Considering competition as an essential ingredient in play, for instance,

Hughes (1991) demonstrated that there is a relationship between cultural complexity and the types of competitive play, as individuals in complex culture (culture with diversity) tend to play the most complex competitive games (p. 32).

Culture within play or play within culture

Concentrating on some key cultural and social elements or characteristics, the interaction between play and culture will be discussed under the following issues:

- Individualism and collectivism
- Power
- Acculturation through play (bilateral transferring values)
- Play beyond the culture (universal play)
- Autonomy
- Internet and new technology
- Economy
- Sense of community

Individualism and collectivism

One of the distinguishing features of cultures is the extent to which group action or individual action is valued. Some cultures accentuate the fundamental terms like group work, cooperation, association, group-directed goals, and group responsibility; whereas, other cultures emphasize individual responsibility, self-directed goals, self-autonomy and others. Savicki (1999) demonstrates that in collectivistic cultures people are dependent on some values such as obligation and fidelity to other people, and behaving in this manner will account as a moral virtue. Additionally, language and education in those cultures rather concentrated on the terms (e.g., devotedness, allegiance, social adherence, and commitment) through which collectivistic values are emphasized. Regarding play and these types of values, cooperative play and competitive play are two samples that reveal the degree to which these values are implanted in play. Of the cultures in which collectivism is encouraged, cooperative play is valued rather than competitive play (Taylor, Samuelsson, & Rogers, 2010). It was also demonstrated that in Japanese education teachers “offered children play in classroom environments that reflected an orientation to the needs of the group, while their American counterparts did not” (Taylor, Samuelsson, & Rogers, 2010 p. 4). These different views of play have been rooted in both cultures: American culture as an individualistic one and Japanese culture as a collectivistic one.

Power

Considering power as a key component in all cultures, it is supposed that all culture should value that similarly. Although power, per se, is valued in all cultures, different cultures have various perspectives about the power, its role and its roots. Similar to other elements in collectivistic cultures, power is originated from group’s commitment, group work and it should be directed to all people. The term ‘patriotism’ displays that power in those cultures is directed and valued based on collectivism. Since a sense of power can be acquired by play and shaped by the power relations in play (Frost, Worthman,

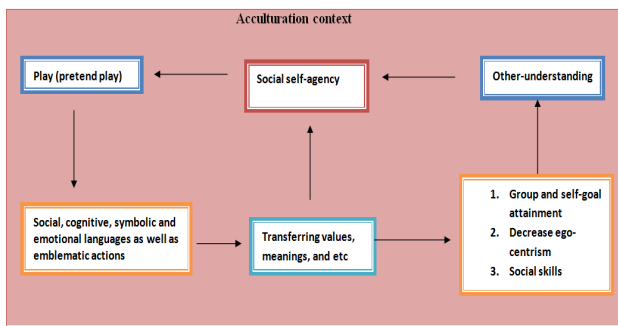


Figure 1: Acculturation through play

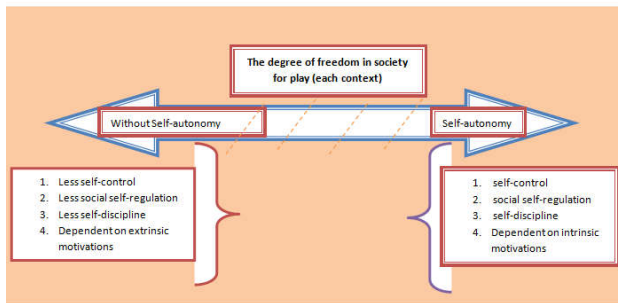


Figure 2: The continuum of autonomy

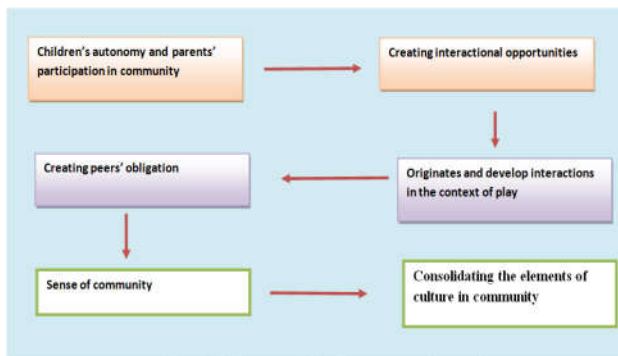


Figure 3: The process of developing a sense of community

& Reifel, 2001, p. 267), it is not surprising to believe that power is symbolized in the individualistic cultures (e.g., one perfect player) differently from the collectivistic cultures (e.g., group power). Additionally, in collectivistic cultures play can reflect “the power of living” (Taylor et al, 2010, p. 4), that is, play is viewed as an activity to show individuals how to live collaboratively.

Acculturation through play (bilateral transferring values)

One of the important roles or aspects of play in cultures is that play acts as a pathway for culture through which the cultural values are transferred to individuals (acculturation). Similarly, culture receives new values from the shaped play to reconstruct itself. By assuming that play is a form of “cultural expression” (Goncu et al. 2007 cited in Pufall & Pufall, 2008, p. 396), this process occurs as following. First, play, particularly pretend play, activates social, cognitive, symbolic and emotional languages as well as emblematic actions and through these language and action individuals learn and represent the meaning of their roles, the roles given by culture as values (Frost, Worthman, & Reifel, 2001). Second, this representation prepares a pathway to transfer all cultural values to the player as new generation through the play's elements (e.g., themes, language, and content). And then,

individuals share cultural values, and virtues as well as their motives, desire, emotions, thoughts and resolutions with each other. This contribution does not simply occur just at one level or at one side, that is, through this sharing, culture is transferring its values to the new generation. Meanwhile, culture is receiving new concepts, roles or elements that are created by newer generations. The changes which occur in social play through the history confirm that this contribution is bilateral. These changes that materialized in all elements of play like speed, themes, objects, simplicity and complexity of play will generate different versions of one play historically. Through this processes two important consequences occur in children, adolescents and young adults: first this transference provides individuals with socialization skills (e.g., group and self-goal attainment, decrease ego-centrism, and social skills mastery) that are called here as ‘other-understanding’. ‘Other’ is the all cultural and social issues which are streaming in one specific play. And then, self-agency or subjectivity is established by play. Although the last consequence can be result of nonsocial play, the self-agency in the social play, which contained rather cultural elements, transform self-agency to social self-agency (figure: 1).

Play beyond the culture (universal play)

It is assumed that play is not only cultural, but also it is universal. In this perspective play is not considered as a pathway, rather, it is assumed to be a worldwide phenomenon that crystallizes parallel aspects of cultures. Due to common constructs within different cultures like ‘social competence’ and ‘social achievement’, or common values such as fidelity and commitment, it is assumed that some major cultural phenomena are universal. These common constructs also make cross-cultural research possible methodologically (Rubin & Menzer, 2010). The degree to which these prototypes are found in cultural phenomena, determines whether they are global or not. Apart from social or cultural diffusions that make global issues, even when cultures are not in interaction with each other, those common constructs can be found. However, common human desires and similar nature make universal phenomena reasonable. Amongst different play, pretend play is “culture-friendly universal tool” (Pufall & Pufall, 2008, p. 395). Pufall et al. (2008) demonstrates that Turkish, African, and Euro-American children all play with sounds and rhythms that are universal. Playing church is another example that Goncu et al. (2007 cited in Pufall & Pufall, 2008, p. 395) mentioned.

Autonomy: This is defined as “a state of independence and self-determinism” (Corsini, 1999, p. 86) or the degree to which individuals feels free to act (Prezza, & Giuseppina Pacilli, 2007). With regards to play, autonomy can be defined as the degree of freedom by which a person can partake in an activity independently. Considering two major components of autonomy, participation and independence, cultures can be placed different points in a spectrum (figure 2). Some cultures provide people more freedom individually or collectively, and others do not. In Europe, studies have shown that children “are less free in their autonomous movements and outdoor play in public places” (Hillman, 1993 cited in Prezza et al. 2007, p. 152). Amongst European countries Italy is perceived as the least autonomous in outdoor play. Although autonomy is a rather social phenomenon, different cultures value autonomy

differently. In individualistic cultures autonomy is valued and children, adolescents and young adults are encouraged to become independent. Therefore, this notion is crystallized in various areas like play.

Socially less autonomy, particularly in problematic communities, has two opposite consequences: first, it prevents children from outdoor crimes, but it also restricts their mental health development and other domains of psychological development (Prezza et al. 2007). One of the important consequences of cultural or social restriction of autonomy for children's play is its effects on children's self-regulation. Providing children and adolescents with less self-autonomy makes them rather dependent on external regulation and extrinsic motivation. Since these factors (extrinsic motivation) are not strong enough to activate, direct and maintain behaviors to reach goals, children and adolescents become unmotivated in their achievements (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Internet and new technology

Lusk (2010), estimated that adolescents' use of internet has increased from 75% in 2000 to 93% in 2009 (p. 3). Amongst different types of internet usage, e-gaming is one which is at the top rank. In 2008, Kahne et al. (cited in Farmer, 2011) reported that almost 97 percent of adolescents play video games in different time frequency, weekly, daily, socially as well as alone (p. 16). This type of play shows that technology makes a variety of games available; such a thing that was not in past decades. Another reason of this high percentage of use video games or e-gaming is that they do not require other individuals, many equipments or materials to be prepared. Apart from its developmental effects, positive and negative (Wen-Bin, 2008), this issue shows that e-technology has remarkable influence on children's and adolescents' play.

Economy

It is assumed that socio-economic status determines the degree to which children and youth participate in play, and also characterizes the patterns of play. Researchers demonstrate that children from low income families participate in social play less than children from middle or high income families (Yaoying, 2010). Considering "socio-dramatic play" (Yaoying, 2010 p.495) as a type of social play, Dyer and Moneta (2006 cited in Yaoying, 2010) pointed out that children from low-income classes in Britain participate less in this type of play. The economy and its changes first affect families and consequently children negatively. Based on this notion that play is one of the contexts of communication, it is supposed that a poor economy status changes the quality and even the quantity of children's interactions and communications with peers (observed in social play) that prevent children from learning social skills. It is also stressed that a poor economy affects the quality of child care settings and this effects penetrate in peer relations as well as social play because these setting face difficulties to provide good quality programs to engage children in social skills training (Yaoying, 2010).

Sense of community

Play per se can affect cultural and social aspects such as a sense of community in children and adolescents. A sense of community is defined as "a feeling that members have of

belonging and being important to each other, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met by their commitment together" (McMillan, 1976 cited in Prezza, & Giuseppina Pacilli, 2007, p. 153). This sense is affected by human natural development (e.g., its decrease during adolescence), location, and "years of residence" (ibid. p. 165). It is also affected by play and related factors that mentioned above like autonomy. The process of this effect can be assumed as following: Having more autonomy and parents participation in community first give children an opportunity to create, develop and enhance their interactions with the community in the context of play. And then, play provides children with a positive sense of belonging to their peers (Kernan, 2007) which assumed to be effective in sense of community increasingly. Consequently a sense of community consolidates the values, virtues, meanings, respects, beliefs, and other elements of culture in community (figure 3).

Conclusion

By portraying the relationships between cultural issues and play in this article, some important aspects of the interaction were discussed. Although in some parts linear effects between these phenomena (culture, society and play) are observed (e.g., play and social autonomy and sense of community), most types of interactions can follow nonlinear relationships like acculturation through play. These relationships reveal that the interaction between culture, society and play is more complicated when different factors are considered.

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