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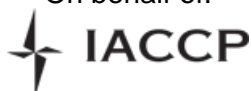The online version of this article can be found at:

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What is This?

Cross-Cultural Research on Children's Development: Deep Roots and New Branches

Rebecca S. New[1]

Abstract

John and Beatrice Whiting took on the ethnocentric assumptions of the fields of child development and child psychiatry and crafted a research agenda that laid the groundwork for half a decade of scholarship. They made culture visible through their study of behavior and relationships, as illustrated in decades of systematic and ethnographic observations of individual children in context. Their research initiatives served to critique and enhance social science discourse, and they routinely engaged others in debating the processes and meanings of their research. Although a bulk of their work has since been incorporated into scholarship on the cultural nature of child development, their theoretical and methodological orientation to the social and environmental bases of children's learning and development has influenced research in other fields as well. This article examines contributions of the Whitings to theory, research, and, increasingly, policy and practices in the applied fields of early care and early childhood education, including the utilization of ethnography to improve minority and multicultural education. Examples of contemporary theory and culturally grounded research are presented as new branches of scholarship that extend far beyond what they might have foreseen, yet with deep roots tracing back to the work of John and Bea Whiting.

Keywords

early childhood education

In this article I explore ways in which John and Beatrice Whiting's work has served as a much-needed reference point for early care and education. As others make clear, their legacy is more than a historic marker in the field of anthropology. The Whitings' orientation to scholarship—especially as represented in what is now known as the Six Cultures Study (Whiting, 1963)—serves as inspiration and model for more contemporary versions of collaborative culturally grounded research in the social sciences.

As noted by others (see LeVine, this issue), the Whitings were not the first to study children in diverse cultural groups. Their work is part of a much larger body of research on childhoods

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around the world, supplemented by reports of travelers, missionaries, and casual students of the exotic (LeVine & New, 2008). Frustrated at anthropology's lack of influence on developmental theory, the Whitings worked throughout their lifetimes to depict cultural practices in ways consistent with prevailing developmental research paradigms. Driven by their own intellectual curiosities as well as abiding issues of the day, they directed their efforts at collecting comparative data to establish and explain variation in human behaviors. In aligning their efforts with social science theories and conundrums, they provided alternatives to ethnocentric beliefs about development. They also anticipated a new kind of research that highlights and strives to *account for* contextual differences.

Even as the Whitings took on the unprecedented challenge of a *standardized* collection of data on children's social behavior in "different parts of the world" (Whiting, 1975, p. vii), they also enjoyed playing the role of anthropologist-as-contrarian. Throughout, they directed their work to two questions of their own making: (a) Are children who are brought up in societies with different customs, beliefs, and values radically different from each other? and (b) Can anything—birth order, sex, age—override these cultural differences? Although they were unable to fund the study of childhood in the 100 societies as planned, they nonetheless operationalized the intellectual challenge set forth by Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and other early anthropologists. The Whitings and their close colleagues and students ultimately collected and analyzed hundreds of hours of observations of children in various cultural groups on every continent (excepting Antarctica). Results of those studies inspired further theorizing of the complex relationship between cultural conditions and observable patterns of child rearing.

Although relatively little of this work found its way into major child development outlets, their research—and the studies that followed—has since informed scholarship across a variety of disciplines concerned with understanding and promoting children's learning and development. In recognizing the need for reliable data on children engaged in family and community life around the world, the Whitings anticipated future theoretical work on child development in context and contributed to what some have called a slow but steady paradigm shift (García Coll & Magnuson, 1999) in the social sciences. The following discussion highlights the foundational work conducted by the Whitings and explores the contributions of these "deep roots"[1] to new forms of scholarship on the role of culture in children's early care and development.

Deep Roots: Far-Reaching Contributions to the Study of Child Development

Concepts of Culture, Behavior, and the Individual

Among the many contributions of the Whitings' work that remain viable today is an understanding of culture *as something that can and should be studied*. In the decades following the Six Cultures study, mainstream developmental literature made scant mention of children's cultural membership. At the height of the Whitings' work in the 1970s to 1980s, culture was considered—if at all—as one of several independent variables of interest to U.S. researchers, along with ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, and age. Some of this neglect was surely because of methodological difficulties of studying something as complex as culture. As Bea explained, culture is "what you carry around in your head" and is no easier to see than the nose on your face. The challenge of translating this mentalist explanation of culture into something that could be *studied* surely discouraged some. For Bea, in particular, this challenge sparked her life-long interest in documenting and describing children's behavior within the context of observable features of their particular environments, in turn part of a larger cultural maintenance system.

This focus on behaviors, although making it more difficult and complex to carry out and fund field research, helped situate empirical evidence from field studies in a position comparable to laboratory studies of behavior done by others. Furthermore, their systematic approach to capturing the multiple layers of children's environments, central to the Six Cultures Study, was theoretically rich and inspired new questions about cultural influences on children's development in diverse ecological contexts.

The Whitings' focus on behavior did not preclude careful attention to those less visible aspects of the child's cultural environment. In one of many conclusions of the Six Cultures study, they acknowledged the significance of "formulas for appropriate behavior [that] are embedded in the value system of the culture" and "apparently transmitted to the child before the age of six" (Whiting & Whiting, 1975, pp. 178-179). And even as they established relationships between patterns of child rearing and child behavior, the Whitings argued against prevailing interpretations of cultural homogeneity, which they described in these terms: "Variations of individuals within the society have been wiped out on the assumption that custom compels consensus" (Whiting & Whiting, 1975, p. 2). The Six Cultures study served as a basis for intracultural as well as cross-cultural hypothesis testing.

On Meanings and Methodology

The Whitings' work was forward-looking and prescient in other ways as well. On one hand, their belief that field work could be sufficiently standardized to produce comparable bodies of data could have led to an eventual demise of investment in ethnography. And yet they insisted on ethnographic explorations along with hypothesis-driven data collection. They acknowledged these methodological tensions as issues emerged over the course of their various projects. They were candid, when preparing research reports and publications, about the challenges of observing in naturalistic, uncontrollable settings. And yet they stuck to their critique of experimental settings as artificial, and many of their decisions about data collection and analysis resonate with current iterative interpretations of research guided by grounded theory.

In developing their orientation to systematic behavioral observations, the Whitings further distinguished themselves from established precedent in culture and personality studies such as those by Mead, Benedict, even Erik Erikson—because none of these scientists systematically observed samples of individuals. Their goal was to integrate the strengths of laboratory studies—with a select and limited set of variables of interest—with the advantages of observing children in their natural settings. By doing so, even with the numerous costs associated with the time and effort expended, they were able to gather sufficient data to establish the frequency of specific practices in specific households of children ages 3 to 11 years with the aim of comparability across cultures. They and their students and colleagues were able to mine this data for decades (e.g., De Guzman, Carlo, & Edwards, 2008; Edwards, 2000).

Asking Good Questions: The Limits and Potentials of Social Science Discourse

The Whitings were keenly aware of researchers' propensity to "invent" rather than actually study children in the context of their own particular childhoods (Kessen, 1979). Even as the Whitings—and especially Bea—aimed to collect data that could be interpretable by Western developmental psychologists, they noted the field's tendency to construct variables of interest and then presume their universal nature. For example, research and theories on the child's same-age peer culture first appeared when Western psychologists began to study children's social relationships within age-graded classrooms. And yet culturally situated research has long documented the mixed-age

communal and family constellations in which children develop, as observed, for example, in the multidisciplinary study (from folklore to cardiology!) of the !Kung San (Konner, 1976; Lee & DeVore, 1976). Thus, the Whitings were cautious and precise in generating the variables or features to be studied comparatively, sometimes adding useful and generative vocabulary for describing the situatedness of children's activities, including family life and community engagement, work and play spaces and choice of playmates, people in charge of physical safety, and opportunities for early learning. The Whitings' notions of "prosocial" and "agonistic" behaviors, for example, invited sophisticated rather than simplistic considerations of children's social encounters.

The Whitings did more than add to the list of carefully defined behaviors that might be observed in diverse cultural settings. They also put forth cautions on how to pick the *what* of scientific inquiry. Bea's (1976) provocative research on "the problem of the packaged variable" warned of the use of measures conceptualized at the cultural level and thus inadequate to the task of measuring differences across groups of children. Furthermore, she rejected the notion of "culture-free" projective tests such as the Rorschach or doll play, asking, in the case of the latter, what it could usefully provide in settings where children do not play with dolls.

The Importance of Collaboration and Multivocality

Although it is difficult to imagine the Whitings endorsing postmodern perspectives on developmental theory and research, they anticipated a number of contemporary criticisms, among them the notion that any theory or approach can be considered definitive in explaining human behavior. They were persistent and insistent on seeking out alternatives to their research hypotheses and data analyses. Perhaps because they wanted to do more than *describe* children's behavior and experiences, they remained throughout their lifetimes open to multiple and sometimes competing approaches to child development research. Turning often to the work of others, the Whitings acted on their belief that the point of a good research question is to find good ways to answer it—and to use that new information to generate even better research questions. This model of collaboration and inter- (as well as multi-) disciplinarity is yet another way in which they anticipated many of the challenges and possibilities of social sciences of the 21st century and influenced contemporary scholarship.

New Branches: Contemporary Examples of the Whitings' Legacy in Theory, Research, and Practice

These features of the Whitings' work—their interpretation of culture as visible through behavior and relationships, a commitment to systematic *and* ethnographic observations of individual children in context, their careful critique and enhancement of social science discourse, and their willingness to engage others in debating the processes and meanings of their research—have contributed to major advances in research on the broadly defined field of early care and education. The next part of the discussion considers new advances in (a) theoretical interpretations of child development, (b) cultural interpretations of early childhood education and child care, and (c) the utilization of ethnography to improve minority and multicultural education.

Culture and Child Development

The Whitings were instrumental in promoting a body of scholarship that could be built on by others in the continuing evolution of a theory of culture and human development. In fact, it is tempting to give the Whitings major credit for much of the subsequent research on child

development in cultural contexts if for no other reason than their persistence in emphasizing the necessity of such inquiry and their equally adamant commitment to developing methodologies to do so. Their observations and analyses of child behavior in context have been followed by five decades of research conducted by scholars with interests and expertise in such wide-ranging areas as attachment, cognition, emotional expression, language, and moral and motor development.

By the time I became one of their students, there was a "voluminous and growing comparative literature" starting to appear in the developmental literature, suggesting that perhaps, finally, "developmental psychologists had discovered the world" (LeVine, 1980, p. 72). Although this discovery may have been enhanced by increasingly affordable air travel (and the optimism a bit premature), it is also the case that the Whitings and their students were winning over converts.

Consistent with the Whitings' general strategies of linking their work to prevailing assumptions, research they inspired during the past three decades of the 20th century also paralleled the foci of developmental psychology and other social sciences. Thus, for example, cross-cultural research during the Piagetian era of the cognitive revolution focused on culture and cognitive growth (Greenfield & Bruner, 1966) and some—although not all—researchers became more mindful of the need for culturally relevant research tools and activities. When developmental psychologists, pediatricians, and psychiatrists (e.g., Brazelton, Robey, & Collier, 1969; Liederman, Tulkin & Rosenfeld, 1977; Lozoff & Brittenham, 1979) discovered infants as richly complex participants for their research, they joined a small but growing group of culturally curious investigators.

As interest in parental behavior and belief systems grew, the Whitings (especially Bea) and their students and other scholars soon enough embarked on their own investigations of the ideological components of cultural influences on development. The 1970s was a heyday for this work. Bea's exploration of folk wisdom and child rearing (Whiting, 1974) and LeVine's (1974) conceptual framework linking cultural values and parental goals provided useful frameworks for studies of parenting. Subsequent comparative research further delineated the relationship among cultural values, parental belief systems, child care practices, and child development outcomes. Some of this work included more focused analyses on particular developmental processes, for example, Snow, deBlauw, and Van Roosmalen's (1979) study on maternal ideologies of child rearing in the form of "talking and playing with babies" as a foundation for language acquisition. Related work focused on minority populations within the United States and furthered the claim that parental belief systems, caregiving behaviors, and child outcomes are wed to particular sociocultural contexts (Field, Sostek, Vietze, & Leiderman, 1981).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, studies on childhood and culture increased in number and type. These studies—but most importantly, the living and breathing model of the Six Cultures project—served as backdrop for a technologically enhanced comparative study on infant care conducted by several of us fortunate enough to be part of the learning environment created by the Whitings.[2] Under their watchful eyes and LeVine's guidance, the Comparative Human Infancy Project (aka CHIP) was launched in an effort to add the period of infancy and several new cultural groups—including Yucatec Mayans of Mexico as well as Italians, Swedes, and another sample of Americans—to the comparative data (LeVine, Miller, & West, 1988). Results of the CHIP studies were used, along with a growing corpus of ethological, comparative, and cross-cultural research on infant behavior and development (e.g., Chisholm, 1983; Richman et al., 1988), to challenge a new onslaught of universal developmental theories.

Other extensions of the Whitings' work included the use of research findings to refute ethnocentric judgments about necessary and optimal parental behavior. For example, as noted in their study of attachment relationships in German mother–infant dyads, concepts

such as "security of attachment" can be seen as "not simply a behavioral category" but rather "a moral ideal," such that "maternal sensitivity is not simply a causal influence in the development of attachment, it is a judgment on the adequacy of a mother" (LeVine & Norman, 2001, p. 100).

Even as others moved ahead with their research agenda, the Whitings were not standing still. Bea continued to refine her interpretations of culture and how to study it, as illustrated in her 1980 model of culture and social behavior. Charles Super and Sara Harkness came to share this interest, and they integrated lessons from the Whitings with their own work on African children's motor, linguistic, and socioemotional development, the result of which is the methodologically straightforward construct of the "developmental niche" (Harkness & Super, 1996; Super & Harkness, 1986; Raghavan, Harkness, & Super, 2010). All the while the Six Cultures data continued to serve Bea and her students, as demonstrated in new analyses pointing to the critical role of children's everyday social experiences and companions (Whiting & Edwards, 1988).

The wealth of observational data collected and inspired by the Whitings coupled with the expanding number of social scientists pursuing cultural and cross-cultural investigations eventually converged in the form of ever more compelling challenges to monocultural theories of development. Ethnographic descriptions of "everyday sentiments on a Micronesian Atoll" challenged Western theories of healthy emotional development (Lutz, 1988). Equally detailed observations of children's participation in culturally relevant rites, rituals, and routines in cultures as diverse as that of the Kwara'ae of Solomon Islands, Lesotho (a small mountainous country in Southern Africa), Japan, and the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea had a profound influence on understandings of language socialization across cultures (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). Soon enough, linguists added to the cumulative understanding that most cross-cultural differences turn out to be "differences in context and/or frequency of occurrence*"* (Ochs, 1986, p. 10).

Some of this subsequent work was connected to Vygotskian approaches to studying development (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). For example, observations and analyses of children's presence in cultural "communities of practice" began to be interpreted by scholars as contexts within which children themselves construct "acts of meaning" (Bruner, 1990). Notions of children's cognition as the result of culturally mediated "apprenticeship in thinking" (Rogoff, 1990) were joined by analyses of children's on-the-sidelines engagement in community practices as "legitimate" features of children's peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The Whitings' early work had already demonstrated that environmental conditions could promote children's learning beyond "what the elders were trying to teach." It also helped set the stage for this theory building.

By the end of the 20th century, Bea and John Whiting's model of culture and social behavior had been transformed, through a good deal of empirical and theoretical work, into a theoretical perspective that integrates cultural context and children's development. Indeed, Rogoff's (2003) careful synthesis, *The Cultural Nature of Human Development*, has become a standard text in child development courses across the United States. It is unlikely, in my view, that we would have such widespread acceptance of neither its importance nor such sophisticated theorizing and means of studying culture and child development without the contributions and impetus provided by the Whitings.

Culture and Early Care and Education

Cultural interpretations of what is desirable and appropriate are not limited to patterns of child rearing and children's social lives. Recently, these interpretations have been recognized in the policies and practices associated with early care and education in diverse cultural contexts.

Although the body of work is smaller, research on culture and early care and education parallels new understandings in the larger body of empirical literature on culture and child development. On the heels of national interest in maternal employment and child care, some scholars reached out to colleagues in other nations to examine nonmaternal child care in diverse contexts (cf. Lamb, Sternberg, Hwang, & Broberg, 1992), whereas others analyzed child care policies in relation to specific features of the larger sociocultural setting (Cochran, 1993). As increasing numbers of young children were served in U.S. preschool programs, interests shifted from child care services per se to programs providing an early childhood education. These, too, were subject to cultural study and analysis.

It is no accident that many of the researchers who have conducted this work studied directly with the Whitings and/or their students, especially Robert LeVine. LeVine and colleagues' 1994 cultural model of child care resonates with analyses of national educational policies and practices in cultures across the globe. Consistent with the Whiting tradition, LeVine's model requires "ethnographic reconstruction" to delineate and distinguish among three dimensions of a given culture: the *moral direction* (normative assumptions and goals), a *pragmatic design* (strategies, schedules, behavioral devices), and a *conventional script for action* (those sociocultural activities deemed appropriate by the larger community). Sally Lubeck's (1985) ethnographic study of Head Start children and teachers illustrated how this theoretical orientation could be used to further examine and understand what takes place in our own backyard (sandboxes). Variations of cultural analysis can be found in many contemporary studies of early education, one of the more innovative of which was Joseph Tobin and colleagues' first video-ethnographic study of preschool in China, Japan, and the United States (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1987), Catherine Lewis's (1995) single-focus ethnographic study of Japanese primary school, Daniel Wagner's (1993) depiction of "becoming literate in Morocco," and my own and others' continuing work in Italy (Corsaro & Molinari, 2005; Gandini & Edwards, 2001; New, 2001). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (2001) commissioned study of early care and education in industrial nations required the articulation of cultural values as distinct from but linked to national policies, which were also described independent of specified socioeducational policies and their local implementation.

In all of these studies, observable differences in interpretations of high-quality care and education and developmentally appropriate practices do more than substantiate claims of the cultural embeddedness of children's learning and development (New, 1993, 2005). In challenging universal standards of quality and optimal development, such studies also remind us—as do diverse patterns of family life and parenting across cultures—that "we have choices" in what and how we decide to study (Kagitcibasi, 1996) and support children's early care, development, and education (New, 2003).

Joining ethnographic research on early care and education practices across cultures are comparative observational studies of early care and educational practices *within* cultures. Shirley Brice Heath (1983) used ethnographic methods to illustrate profound differences in the patterns and expectations of children's discourse in the homes and schools of distinct subcultural communities. This work was joined by other studies conducted on the premise that classrooms are, themselves, functional cultural contexts (Kantor, Elgas, & Fernie, 1993). Courtney Cazden's (1972, 1988) repeated examination of classroom discourse extends the literature on child language to include the nature of schooling and teacher–child interactions. Such work helps to illustrate the potentials of what Bruner (1996) wishes there were more of—studies on the culture of education—and reinforces the Whitings' call for systematic ethnographic observations of child and adult behavior in natural settings.

Cultures in Conflict

Cumulatively, ethnographic work in educational settings within and across cultures has helped educators to conceptualize schooling as a cultural project and classrooms as small but powerful cultural communities. One of the newest and most promising bodies of research on minority populations illustrates the nature and extent of this challenge of cultural adaptation and appropriation. Research on minority parent responses to Western-style high-quality child care suggests patterns of resistance among some populations of families if the cultural contrasts are too extreme (Fuller, Eggers-Pierola, Holloway, Liang, & Rambaud, 1996). Parallel research, focused on teachers rather than parents, reports similar patterns of resistance among indigenous teachers when recommended strategies of teaching and classroom management are inconsistent with local cultural norms and priorities (Lipka, 1998). The methodology of video ethnography continues to be used and refined by Tobin and colleagues to explore cross-cultural differences in preschool education and to consider the influence of globalization and sweeping social transformation in observable patterns of child and adult behavior (Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009).

In addition to helping uncover cultural differences in educational priorities and practices, ethnographic studies are also helping to address those differences. Ethnographically focused research on the dynamics of teaching and learning as they take place *outside* the classroom helped to demonstrate the importance of bringing cultural patterns of social interactions *into* the classroom (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Studies of diverse minority and immigrant populations (e.g., C. Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; M. Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Qin-Hillard, 2005), including those with ethnographic observations in children's home and school environments (Greenfield & Cocking, 1994), have much to offer the beleaguered U.S. educational system as people attempt to create new contexts within which multiple cultural groups can function and flourish. A small but important portion of this research on minority cultures goes beyond previous accounts of how children establish and maintain bicultural identities as they move between the home and school settings and articulates the nature of change in the dynamics of culture and human development as they intersect in relation to educational practice (e.g., see the study of a Hmong population by Trueba, Jacobs, & Kirton, 1990). Such researchers, among with a long line of others in the post-Whiting era, share in the conviction that the explanatory power of research is a function of the researcher's ability to reveal and clarify relationships between cultural communities and cross-cultural forces. This work has not only helped to reveal human behavior and development within changing and complex contexts. The work—and those who have conducted it—also highlights the critical role of methodological match. In these cases, ethnography is a singularly important method in the study of human development (Weisner, 1996; also see Jessor, Colby, & Shweder, 1996).

Conclusion

Although the Whitings were strongly committed to empirical social science, their legacy offers a much needed counter to prevailing positivist and empirical-analytic paradigms in the study of young children (cf. Bloch, 2000), especially those that assume the social world is little more (or less) than a system of distinct and measurable variables (New, 2003). This legacy offers continued promise for the challenges of the 21st century as social scientists, educators, and policy makers look to research for increased understanding of the complex nature of child development in (multiple and changing) contexts.

The Whitings' legacy also has much to offer to the debate on the nature and means of scientific inquiry and is apparent in (some) contemporary scholarship. Their openness to multiple perspectives, interdisciplinary interpretations, and collaborative approaches to scholarship is

echoed, for example, in the authorship and subtitle of a recent iteration of a theory of cultural psychology: "One Mind, Many Mentalities" (Shweder et al., 1998). With John and Bea, there were always at least two active minds at work, and their individual and combined efforts contributed to a sophisticated cultural theory of development that continues to grow new branches supported by an approach to research that will keep theory as dynamic and vibrant as the children being studied.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. In his article, LeVine uses the notion of roots to refer to the intellectual and disciplinary origins of the Six Cultures Study. In this article the metaphor of roots extends into other disciplinary playgrounds, sometimes sprouting into new branches of scholarship on children in diverse cultural contexts.
2. For the naturalistic observations in Boston and Italy, we used the MORE—a micro-operated event recorder—that allowed the simultaneous collection and coding of approximately 100 behavioral units.

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