

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JONATHAN TUDGE, *The Everyday Lives of Young Children: Culture, Class, and Child Rearing in Diverse Societies*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 281 p., index.

This book by Jonathan Tudge, who teaches in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of North Carolina, summarizes his extensive research about the activities of children across various cultures, classes, and hours of the day. “Somewhat surprisingly,” he states, “we don’t have very good answers” to questions about how children are engaged throughout the day. For example, what sorts of activities do they participate in? How do these activities come about? In the first chapter of *The Everyday Lives of Young Children*, Tudge introduces readers to his research questions and to the broader reasons why academic disciplines in the social sciences have not been able to answer such questions. The reasons include the positivist ideologies prevailing in the social sciences, and the limited scope of previous research. He emphasizes contextual approaches to the study of children by highlighting how cultures and environments shape their activities. At the same time he acknowledges that children themselves are active agents in the negotiation of play. This is not a new concept. Rhonda Oliver found that children – even at young ages – were able to negotiate their own meanings in conversations during play, thus ensuring that there is mutual understanding (“Negotiations in Meaning in Child Interactions,” *The Modern Language Journal*, 1998).

In his literature review, Tudge explains why this research is so crucial to understanding what sorts of activities children engage in and the importance of variables such as class, culture, ethnicity and time. He regrets that previous researchers have frequently relied on parental reports of child activity and on quantitative summaries of such data. That information does not provide us with a good framework to build upon. As he mentions, when researchers generalize, they often make the mistake of giving insufficient attention to the diversity within a single ethnic category. Tudge’s response is to look at a range of societies, with varying cultures, and to provide an observational account of child activities. He cannot do this, of course, without a theoretical orientation and a systematic methodology, which he explains in the next section of his book.

Lev Semenovich Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development and Urie Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory are the contextualist basis for Tudge’s version of cultural-ecological theory. Contextualism delves into the meanings of taken-for-granted actions and interactions. An example would be the meanings of an empty aluminum can: for one child it could mean a meal eaten while for another child it could be a source of entertainment, an opportunity to be creative. One source of frustrations in this particular chapter is the author’s assumption

that his readers are already knowledgeable about Vygotsky and Bronfenbrenner. Thus he summarizes their ideas rather superficially and concentrates on the ideas he has borrowed from them.

Nonetheless, Tudge reiterates the importance of exploring not only socio-economic backgrounds but also the cultural and social differences among groups of children. He accomplishes this task by studying children in various regions of the world: Greensboro, North Carolina, United States; Kisumu, Kenya; Obninsk, Russia; Tartu, Estonia; Oulu, Finland; and Porto Alegre, Brazil. Tudge also discusses some of the potential criticisms surrounding his observational accounts. He trained individuals from each of these locations to conduct observations of activities such as lessons, work, play, and conversation. He acknowledges that there are weaknesses in doing this but concludes by stating “I do not believe that any of [the challenges] are sufficient to discredit this method...” (109).

There are two important aspects to cultural-ecological theory, setting and time, which influence the way Tudge approaches his methodology. First, he makes a concerted effort to establish the setting of each place of observation, paying meticulous attention to the history and geography of each city. He elaborates more fully on the temporal context towards the end of the book: “Cultural-ecological theory’s concern with context should not be interpreted to mean simply the geographical, social, or cultural context but also the temporal context” (110). Second, he devotes an entire chapter to describing the settings in which the children were situated and the partners with whom they were involved in activities. These could include friends and family during play, teachers during work, etc. After distinguishing between non-focal and focal activities, he divides focal activities into more specific categories: play, lessons, conversations, and work. His general observations then provide a rich summary of the data. For example, he reports that “middle-class children were involved in more lessons overall, than were working-class children” (157); the children in Greensboro “were much more likely to play with toys than be engaged in other types of play” (149).

In his last chapter of observations, the author depicts the everyday lives of a few children and organizes these observations into the categories of morning, afternoon, evening, and the time leading to sleep. This reflects the importance of time. He reports that there were only two criteria for choosing specific children. “The first is that I should draw equally on children from each city.... The second was that ... the observations had to cover a minimum of two hours” (221). He presents readers with a daily account of various children participating in his study to ensure the sort of fluidity which should accompany ethnographic literature. In essence, this section of his study resembles Annette Lareau’s *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* and provides readers with a richer sense of what his researchers encountered daily. For instance, take his account of Andy in Greensboro: “...It’s almost 9 when they get there, and while Andy takes off his coat his mother talks to the teacher, and Andy wanders around the room, apparently looking for something to do or someone to play with....” Contrast that with his account of Peeter in Tartu, Estonia: “By 8:30 Peeter is playing with a large beach ball, and his mother cautions him that if the ball goes into the ocean, it’s not safe to go after it.... Shortly after, Peeter is playing with some jars in the

kitchen cabinets...” (222-225). It is such rich observations that allow readers to see similar but sharp contrasts between the lives of children across cultures.

In his concluding remarks Tudge restates the original purpose of his study, exploring the various paradigms which govern the understanding of children’s everyday lives. Here he emphasizes that his goal was to incorporate psychological, sociological, and anthropological perspectives in explaining children’s lived experiences. He also reiterates the importance of using cultural-ecological theory in establishing the link between all three disciplines and emphasizes the necessity of a holistic perspective. Surprisingly, he alerts readers to his forthcoming book which will continue his analysis of these same children through their early years of schooling and for some time afterwards. This will undoubtedly be an invaluable resource.

It is obvious that this volume is an essential study not only for sociologists but for all social scientists who are interested in ethnographic and observational research. The author offers an insightful cross-cultural analysis to Annette Lareau’s intensive look at children’s everyday lives. His discussion shows that culture not only influences individuals in their choice of activities but that the reverse is also true. Individuals influence culture. Overall, this is a useful book for classes about qualitative methods, ethnographic techniques, child development, and social psychology. It is an invaluable resource for scholars acknowledging the reflexive nature of culture on the choices and actions of individuals.

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