Chapter 14

Play and Toys as Cultural Tools and Practices:
A Comparative Study

İşık Kamaraj
Marmara University, Turkey

Ozana Ural
Marmara University, Turkey

Fethiye Esra Molu
Marmara University, Turkey

ABSTRACT

Culture can be defined as the set of beliefs, traditions, values, customs, and norms specific to a group of people; it is acquired through the socialization process and is dominant and effective in all of our daily practices. Culture refers to the traditions and values of our communities, and through play, children explore and learn the rules and symbols of their communities. People of each generation, as they engage in sociocultural endeavors with other people, make use of and extend cultural tools and practices inherited from previous generations. This chapter aims to compare the use of two historical toys in two different cultures as cultural tools (“Eyüp Toys” and “Nuremberg Toys”); two activities in two different cities as cultural practices (“World Play Day” activities in Istanbul and the Toys Fair in Nuremberg); and finally, two institutions in two different cities as cultural institutions (Ataşehir Municipality Düştepe [Dreamhill] Game Museum in Istanbul and Toy Collection at Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg).

INTRODUCTION

Culture can be defined as the set of beliefs, traditions, values, customs and norms specific to a group of people; it is acquired through the socialization process and is dominant and effective in all of our daily practices (Macionis & Plummer, 2008; Giddens, 2009; Aronson, Wilson & Akert, 2010). Culture refers
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to the traditions and values of our communities and through play, children explore and learn the rules and symbols of their communities.

Through play and use of toys, children recreate roles and situations that reflect their sociocultural world, where they learn how to subordinate to desires to social rules, cooperate with others willingly and engage in socially appropriate behavior. Over time, these competences are transferred into children’s daily behavior (Molu, 2014).

This study aims to compare the use of two historical toys in two different cultures as cultural tools: ‘Eyüp Toys’ and ‘Nuremberg Toys’, two activities in two different cities as cultural practices; “World Play Day” activities in İstanbul and the Toys Fair in Nuremberg and finally two institutions in two different cities as cultural institutions; Ataşehir Municipality Düştepe (Dreamhill) Play Museum in İstanbul and Toy Collection at Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg, respectively.

TOYS AS CULTURAL TOOLS

Cultural tools can be defined as the tools which shape cognitive development and can include both technical tools, which act on the environment and psychological tools, which are tools for thinking.

Cultural tools are needed to transfer culture qualifications to everyday life. Learning to play and toys in the social-cultural context in everyday practices is very important for cultural learning and language is one of the cultural tools to which Vygotsky attaches importance for use in a socio-cultural context. According to Vygotsky, games, toys, and language are all tools for the learning and transmission of culture. Tomasello, Kruger and Rather (1993) noted that cultural learning takes place in three ways in the following order:

1. **Imitative Learning:** The first type of cultural learning is clearly imitative learning, in which the learner internalizes something of the demonstrator’s behavioral strategies (Tomasello, Kruger & Ratner, 1993).

2. **Instructed Learning:** The second type of learning, that is essentially Vygotskian, is the learning in which learners internalize the instructions of the teacher and use them subsequently to self-regulate their own attentional, mnemonic, or other cognitive functions (Tomasello, Kruger & Ratner, 1993).

3. **Collaborative Learning:** The third type of learning; that is collaborative learning, does not involve transmission from mature to immature organism in the classic sense because, by definition, the situation consists of peers collaborating to construct something new that neither had before the interaction began (Tomasello, Kruger & Ratner, 1993)

Figure 1 presents the three basic interactional situations just described: 1) imitative learning, with the single arrow depicting the learner’s efforts at perspective-taking and learning; 2) instructed learning, with the reciprocal and asymmetrical arrows depicting the instructor’s efforts at perspective-taking and instruction and the learner’s efforts at perspective and learning (together leading to an asymmetrical form of intersubjectivity); and 3) collaborative learning, with the reciprocal and symmetrical arrows depicting each of the collaborator’s efforts to take the perspective of and to learn through the other (in this case in a symmetrical intersubjective fashion) (Tomasello, Kruger & Ratner, 1993).