Game Involvement and Sex-Role Socialization in Arab Children*

MUWAffAK AL-HAMDANI
University of Baghdad, Baghdad, Iraq

and

BAHA ABU-LABAN
University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada

The social psychological and anthropological literature shows that games are not regarded merely as pastime activities, but as modes of symbolic expression involving the exchange of roles and attitudes among the participants (Piaget, 1948; Strauss, 1956, p. 228). A recurrent theme in this literature is the important influence of games on the formation of individual and social character (Maccoby, Modiano, & Lander, 1964). Viewed in this way, play activities assume an important role in child socialization, even in the absence of close adult supervision. With the help of games, say Anderson and Moore (1960), “members of a society learn about and ‘play at’ the workings of their society.”

Some studies have attempted to relate games to child-rearing practices. The results of a recent cross-cultural investigation of fifty-six societies reveal a definite relationship between games of strategy and obedience; between games of chance and responsibility; and between games of physical skill and achievement (Roberts & Sutton-Smith, 1962). Sex differences in game involvement are clearly along the lines of responsibility and achievement, with girls tending to participate in games which reflect responsibility training and boys tending to prefer games which reflect achievement training (Roberts & Sutton-Smith, 1962). Also, in a recent study of games in a Mexican village, Maccoby, Modiano, and Lander (1964) have noted that girls tended to be less violent than boys and that sex differences in gaming were congruent with sex differences in the larger social system.

What this suggests is that different types of games may aid children in coping with different types of life problems. Further, games function to adjust the child not only to his peer group environment but also to the environment...

* The authors wish to thank Donald E. Larsen and William A. Meloff for their constructive criticism of an earlier draft of this paper.
of his (her) prospective adult group. Thus in a society which maintains a sharp role differentiation, there are likely to be important sex role differences in game involvement and a low degree of overlap in the games preferred by boys and girls. In contrast, in a society where sex roles are blurred, as in the United States in recent years, there is likely to be a high degree of overlap in the games preferred by boys and girls (Rosenberg & Sutton-Smith, 1960; Maccoby, Modiano, & Lander, 1964).

This paper attempts to examine the enculturative effects of games on the sex roles of Arab children and, where possible, to compare the results of this study with those derived from contemporary research in other societies. The general hypothesis being investigated is that games play an important role in the differentiation of sex roles among Arab children. Beyond this no other hypotheses were formulated for lack of relevant evidence on the Arab Near East to guide the formulation of a detailed research problem.

METHOD

Research Site

The study was conducted in the summer of 1967 in a small, predominantly lower-class neighborhood in the city of Baghdad—the capital of Iraq. The choice of this site was particularly relevant to the study for two reasons. First, the traditional sex role distinctions are highly pronounced in the Arab society; second, sex role distinctions in Iraq, as in the United States, tend to be more visible among the lower rather than the middle classes (Berger, 1962; Rabban, 1950).

The area under study lies on the western bank of the Tigris River, southwest of the city center. Although some middle and upper class families live in this area, the majority of the residents may be classified as lower-class. Fishing, janitorial work, gardening, railway and construction work, carpentry, and plumbing are but a few of the characteristic occupations of this lower-class group. Unlike certain other neighborhoods in Baghdad, the one under investigation is characterized by stability, as evidenced by the presence of some middle and upper class families and by the long tenure of its residents.

Subjects

Children between the ages of six and thirteen served as subjects for the present study. For the most part of the summer most of these children, who were relatively free from school and other responsibilities, played outdoors in

---

1 This statement assumes the transferability of conceptual or cognitive learning which occurs during childhood (Roberts & Sutton-Smith, 1962, p. 183).