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### **Open Attention as a Cultural Tool for Observational Learning**

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## Abstract

Learning through observation in everyday activities is widely recognized in the ethnographic literature as a central way that children learn from others. There are two well-described characteristics of learning through observation: participation in meaningful activities with people who are important in the children's lives and a belief that children are active, motivated learners who take initiative to garner experiences and make meaning from them. Gaskins and Paradise (2010) have proposed that there is a third characteristic central to observational learning: *open attention*, defined as attention that takes in information from the full environmental context (that is, *wide-angled*) and is sustained over time (that is, *abiding*). This paper will describe open attention in some detail, giving examples of how open attention is encouraged in a variety of cultures, its value as a component of observational learning, the role of concentration, and the implications for understanding children's learning (in and out of school) and play. The presentation will conclude that, while learning through observation is present in all cultures, in cultures where open attention is encouraged and expected, and where the responsibility for learning is given to the children, observational learning is both more powerful and more central to children's mastery of the full range of cultural knowledge.

## Introduction

Learning through observation in daily life is a universal learning strategy in childhood and beyond. Observational learning typically occurs in familiar contexts in which one person performs an activity while another person, who knows less, watches them do it. In the case of children, they might intentionally watch because they want to learn, but they might also watch for the fun of watching or just for the pleasure of the company of the person who is working, such that learning then becomes an incidental byproduct of social life.

Learning through observation occurs most centrally in cultures where children are engaged regularly in legitimate peripheral participation in ongoing family work. While children in all cultures (as well as adults) learn some things through observation, in many industrialized societies, children are removed from adult work, and therefore the scope of observational learning is reduced. In those societies, observational learning is often thought of as accidental or unintentional, and it is underemphasized in theories of how children learn best. In contrast, in cultures where children are centrally and regularly engaged in adult work activities, observational learning is highly valued and encouraged.

An emphasis on observational learning has been particularly well documented for Native American groups, where learning through observation takes place in settings where adults and children of all ages are present and can be observed. For example, Don Talayesva, in recalling his own Hopi childhood, reports, “Learning to work was like play. We children tagged around with our elders and copied what they did” (Simmons 1942: 51). Philips (1972) noted that Warm Springs Indian children “are present at many adult interactions as silent but attentive observers... [and] that there are many adult conversations to which children pay a great deal of silent, patient attention” (p. 385). Wilbert (1979) noted that among South American Warao canoe makers, “By the time a child can hold a paddle in his hands, he has observed his elders on so many occasions that paddle shaft and handle slide into the small fists almost naturally” (p. 317). Although observational learning refers to learning that often depends upon using all of the senses (Paradise and Rogoff 2009), it has probably come to be identified as “observational” because of the apparent centrality of the visual aspect of this learning. Children are expected and told to “use their eyes” (e.g. Briggs 1970; Cazden and John 1971; Chisholm 1996). Yet, children are also expected to get “close” to their surroundings with all of their senses (Maurer 1977: 94).

This kind of learning is found in virtually every ethnographic description of children's lives from around the world and their socialization into patterns of cultural meaning and everyday activities. In many of these cultures it is the primary teaching/learning strategy: for example, "No formal instruction is practiced among the [!Kung]...learning...comes from the children's observation of the more experienced" (Marshall 1958: 286). Ethnographic accounts beyond those of indigenous societies in America that point to observation playing an important role in learning span the globe. Even in those cultures where there is a strong commitment to school-based learning, much of what children learn comes from the observation of others in shared, everyday activities (see, for example, Corbett 2004; Harper 1987), although it is often not given much weight in those adults' cultural understanding of learning.

### **Two Recognized Characteristics of Observational Learning**

Before turning to the idea of *open attention*, which is the focus of this paper, I will first quickly describe two other characteristics of observational learning that have long been recognized. The first is that it is embedded in the everyday life of family and community. Observational learning occurs during participation in meaningful activities with people who are important in the children's lives. For observational learning to have its full power, children must not only be present, they must also be involved in the adult world—in other words, they must *belong* there.

Children's ongoing presence and integration in adult activities is related to the society's mode of economic production. If adults are engaged in work that is organized at the level of the home or community, rather than at the level of an institutionalized workplace outside the home, then children are likely to be around, helping out and learning effectively through observation. In the family-centered economic systems typical of most nonindustrialized societies, children are highly valued as current and potential labor. Thus, family-based activities seem relevant and interesting to children, and they are motivated to pay attention to them.

Equally important, as they learn to do the activities that surround them, those activities become a constitutive part of their own way of seeing the world. Even when children separate themselves off from adults they continue to share the same world. Paradise and Rogoff (2009) also point to how identifying with others—wanting to belong and be like them—is an integral part of observational learning.

The second characteristic of observational learning that has been regularly described in previous work is that it requires children to be active learners who want to learn, take initiative to garner experiences and make meaning from them. Observational learning is sometimes dismissed as insignificant because of a common-sense understanding that it is basically a passive activity—“just looking”—in contrast to the “hands-on participation” that is valued by many educational perspectives (including the constructivist approach based on Piagetian theory). Although observational learning is a meaningful way of engaging with the immediate social and physical environment, intentional physical action that is directly related to that learning often is absent. So it is especially important to recognize that observational learning is in fact an active learning strategy. There are three distinct but interrelated ways that demonstrate how observational learning is an active learning process: children are intrinsically motivated to learn, they take initiative to learn by putting themselves in the center of the action and paying attention, and they take primary responsibility to organize information and make sense of what is going on around them. Fiske (1997: 11) has captured the child agency involved in observational learning in his observation that “there is less child-rearing than there is ‘culture-seeking.’”

While children in all cultures actively make meaning from their experiences, there is cultural variation in how much responsibility children are given for organizing the details of their everyday world (Gaskins 1999). In those societies where adult mediation of activities is highly valued, children receive much more input about structuring and assigning meaning to their experiences (see Vygotsky 1978) compared to those where they are allowed to operate more as individual agents. In the latter case, in the absence of adult guidance, children are more likely to be consistently active learners when they observe in the sense that they are intrinsically motivated to learn, taking initiative, organizing their observing, and making sense of it.

### **A Third Characteristic of Observational Learning: Open Attention**

Recently, Gaskins and Paradise (2010) have proposed that there is a third characteristic central to observational learning that has been given less attention. We call this characteristic *open attention*. In our view, open attention is a distinct, habitual way of taking in information from the present environment that is strikingly different from the common Euroamerican way of observing. Based on our own ethnographic research and a reading of other accounts, we believe that this pattern of attention is regularly found in many cultures that highly value observation as a

more general source of knowledge for everyone in the community, but that it has been overlooked or underreported in the past.

We define open attention as attention that takes in information from the full environmental context (that is, it is *wide-angled*) and is sustainable over time (that is, it is *abiding*). In open attention, the scope of attention is distributed across a wide field, in contrast to most models of attention that presume a narrow focus applied sequentially to a number of objects or events. This way of “openly” attending to what is happening in the immediate environment is not commonly valued in Euroamerican culture. For example, a student in a US classroom whose gaze travels around the room is likely to be accused of not paying attention. Just this sort of cultural difference in the scope of attention is reported by Chavajay and Rogoff (1999) in their study of European-American and Guatemalan Maya mothers and infants. The European-American mothers and infants attended to multiple objects and events serially, in short but discrete time segments, while the Guatemalan Mayan mothers and infants distributed their attention across multiple objects/events simultaneously. This wide-angled, distributed attentional stance has several advantages for learning through observation, including event detection, awareness of contextual information, and a broader range of information processed.

In addition to being wide-angled, open attention is *abiding*; that is, it is sustainable over time. Most models of attention presume that attention will be applied selectively and sporadically, brought to bear when there is something specific to be attended to. However, in culturally amplified observation during familiar everyday activities, children and adults apply their wide-angled, distributed attention skills consistently across time, whether or not they are intentionally observing something specific in order to learn.

In addition to being wide-angled and abiding, open attention has a third and final characteristic that has often been noted in cases of observational learning, especially among American indigenous people: the learner’s ability to sustain a high level of concentration while observing over long periods of time. Maurer (1977) describes such concentration in the case of Tseltal Mayan children: “Even a young child can stay for long periods of time in almost absolute immobility, watching attentively what the adults are doing” (p. 94). This characteristic has been referred to as “keen” or “intense” observation by Rogoff and her colleagues (2003). *Concentrated open attention* is seen most often in cases where learners intentionally direct their attention toward an activity in order to learn. While observational learning in general includes

both intentional and unintentional observation, *highly focused concentration* comes into play only during intentional observation. While it is not a defining characteristic of open attention, it is a compelling one when it is present, and it is often the key behavior that causes ethnographers to notice the existence of open attention.

Intentional open attention shares the quality of concentration with other models of attention. Concentration is central to the ideal attention aimed for in school-like learning where children are encouraged to focus on discrete, narrow building-block lessons one at a time, and to filter out other information from the environment. Concentration is also found in Csíkszentmihályi's (1990) notion of "flow," a state in which people become so absorbed in a specific activity that they lose track of time and the surrounding environment, for example a writer at work on a manuscript or a rock climber during an ascent. While intentional open attention shares the quality of concentration with these other models of attention, the quality of that concentration differs in that it is always contextually grounded rather than detached from the setting. It appears doubtful that children and adults engaged in open attention ever lose track of time or place, even when they are concentrating intently. In this sense, the focus found in open attention has intriguing similarities to the Buddhist practice of *mindfulness* (Thich 1987). The continuous openness and full awareness of the here and now promoted by mindfulness seems closely related to the wide-angled, abiding attention that I am describing here as open attention.

One significant implication of this abiding, open attentional stance, is that children are expected to always be observing and to keep their attention in the "here and now." This allows them to observe something in the course of participating in social life and process it even before they know exactly why they need to understand it. Their attention is "on duty" by default, but in a manner that requires minimal effort. In contrast, in cultures where learning depends in large part on others' directing children's attention to specific objects and events, short-term, focused attention is more common and more valued, but harder to sustain. As a result, children learning with this kind of attention more often "tune out" and sometimes fail to notice even the most obvious events occurring around them if their attention is not directed to them.

### The Integration of Open Attention with Other Activities

Observational learning supported through open attention is rarely practiced in isolation. While children can and do learn many things through observation alone, in the course of children's daily lives, observational learning is often coordinated with caregivers' explicit teaching strategies, such as direct instruction, apprenticeship, use of narrative to transmit cultural values, and positive and negative feedback. It is also coordinated with other, child-directed learning strategies. As Howell (1988) says about Chewong children, "It is up to each individual to absorb knowledge of all kinds from watching, listening, participating, and by asking questions" (p. 162).

In addition to explicit seeking of additional information, children often partner observation with a *reproduction of a behavior as practice*. This reproduction can take three different forms. First, it sometimes occurs *during an activity*, in which case what is practiced is usually a specific component of what they have just observed and the switching between observing and practicing can become very frequent. Children may be discouraged or ignored; they may receive timely feedback as correction, or if their attempt is good enough, they may even be allowed to enter into the activity as a legitimate participant.

Second, discrete skills also get individual or social *practice outside the original context*. Sometimes, children practice and explore a specific physical component of a previously observed activity with no evidence of playfulness. "[In the Andes,] they learn by copying their parents or whomever else they are in contact with, watching them work, and then practicing by trying out the task or some aspect of it for themselves. Sometimes, this practice may be a useful act in itself, such as sweeping the floor or grinding some food" (Sillar 1994: 50). Specific components of social or cultural performance, however, can also be practiced out of context, for example, Göncü and colleagues' (1999) description of preschool-aged African-American boys working to perfect their performances of the extreme intonations of a popular radio disk jockey.

Such practice away from the original context, and often away from adults in general, helps explain how children can learn without their caregivers knowing it. De Leon (2005) describes a young Tzotzil Maya boy's efforts to practice surreptitiously things he has observed: "[he is observed] 'stealing' his Grampa's knife to peel fruit and putting it back surreptitiously... embroidering his sister's appliqués [while] hiding under beds... 'heating up' tortillas in a cold *comal* (pan), or experimenting with the waist loom..." (p. 3-4).



Finally, children might engage in yet another kind of practice, a more *global reenactment of activities*, focusing on roles and scripts. Global reenactments can occur when children adopt an adult interactional stance as they work alongside adults. Watson-Gegeo (2001) explains Samoan children who at times take on adult roles in ongoing activities: “Like collages, children’s dramatic scripts in adult mode are strips from interactions they have heard or heard about. They often build their performances on historically real events and interactions, creatively linking them together with explanatory or interpretive detail of their own” (p. 145).

But global reenactments are more often accomplished through pretend play. Reality-based pretend play scripts appear to be found in some form in all cultures (Schwartzman 1978), and as they pretend to process and prepare food, go to the store, get married, etc., children both practice and interpret what they have observed. Bock and Johnson (2004) have demonstrated that the more frequently Botswana children are exposed to a daily activity, the more frequently it appears in their pretend reenactments. This kind of reality-based pretend play is complementary to learning through observation because it gives an opportunity to practice culturally organized activities that children have seen. From this vantage point, such pretense is more about understanding and interpretation than imagination, and it is often cited as evidence of observational learning in the ethnographic literature.

It should be noted that even when children concentrate on practicing particular activities or get caught up in co-constructing a world of real-world inspired pretend, open attention is not set aside. An open attentional stance maintained during practice or play derives not only from a general cultural expectation to always pay attention to the world or from children’s just being in the habit of doing so; it also stems from the immediate practical demands of children’s everyday lives that are not suspended during these activities. Even during practice or pretend play, children are not free of responsibilities (e.g., the care of younger siblings) in the here-and-now. Under these circumstances, they know they do not have *permission* to leave the here-and-now and enter into an absorbed focus like “flow” or an inner world of imagination and fantasy, nor do they appear to have the *inclination* to do so.

### **Parental Ethnotheories of Learning**

In cultures throughout the world that emphasize and amplify learning through observation and expect children to practice open attention, parents have confidence in the effectiveness of observational learning, and they therefore leave much of the initiative to the children as learners, relying on their observation of ongoing activities and events to be a central mechanism for cultural transmission. For example, among the Inuit: “[There] is remarkably little meddling by older people in this learning process. Parents do not presume to teach their children what they can as easily learn on their own” (Guemple 1979: 50). Their confidence appears to be well placed. When observation in daily life co-occurs with other complementary learning strategies, failure to learn is rarely reported. Virtually all children seem to master a wide range of specific cultural content along the way as they strive to become competent and confident participants in their social world (Spindler and Spindler 1989).

When observational learning is culturally amplified—through caregivers’ commitment to children’s regular presence during daily activities, their assumption of an active learning stance on the part of the child, and the value they place on open attention—learning through observation is a powerful learning strategy. When caregivers do not share these commitments, then children are often not involved in adult activities, or, if present, their attention is guided by the caregivers, then the effectiveness of learning through observation is substantially reduced.

### **Conclusion**

Learning through observation in daily life is a universal human capacity. However, the effectiveness of learning through observation of daily life depends in large measure on the quality of children’s involvement with and commitment to be part of broader cultural activities and settings, based on an identification with others who are engaged in those activities. When the quality of involvement and commitment is high, then children actively seek, organize, and digest information and experiences. They also bring to these activities an open attentional stance, anchored in the present. When its importance and potential is culturally *amplified* through these three characteristics, observational learning matures into an *expert* skill that has remarkable power.

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