Evolutionary Psychology
human-nature.com/ep – 2006. 4: 215-218

Book Review

A review of William Corsaro *We're Friends, Right?* Washington, DC: Joseph Henry Press, 2003. 264 pp.

Jeremy E. C. Genovese, Cleveland State University, College of Education and Human Services, Email: j.genovese@csuohio.edu

William Corsaro is a sociologist who specializes in the ethnography of children's culture. His book *We're Friends Right?: Inside Kids' Culture* is a popular account of his work with children in American and Italian preschools.

Corsaro's claims that his participant-observer approach to child study is both a theoretical and methodological departure from the more traditional research strategies. He is critical of the clinical interview technique first used by developmental psychologist, Jean Piaget. Piaget interviewed children individually, asking them to solve problems and to explain their understanding of the world. The most famous of these is the conservation of volume problem, where Piaget demonstrated that children under that age of 6 did not understand that the volume of a fluid is conserved when it is poured between containers of different dimensions. Piaget used these data to construct a model of cognitive development where a child moves through a series of stages obtaining at each level a more accurate picture of physical reality.

Corsaro certainly does not reject the importance of Piaget's work, but he argues that this type of child study is dominated by adult concerns and fails to see the child embedded in the context of peer culture. Piaget, for example, was quite explicit in his preference for the study of individual mental processes over group interactions. Here is how Piaget (1962) described his approach:

> Our study of the beginnings of representation in the child will mainly be in the fields where individual processes of mental life dominate the collective factors, and we shall emphasize these individual processes particularly in the case of imitation, which though it leads to inter-individual relationships does not necessarily result from them (p. 2).

According to Corsaro, this failure to study children in their social context can be seen in how developmental psychologists have misconstrued the nature of children's friendships. When children are asked about their concept of friendship it is easy to show that children lack adult knowledge, but as Corsaro points out:

> A big reason that developmental psychologists underestimate the friendship knowledge and skills of young children is that they focus on outcomes. That is, they identify and classify children at various stages in the acquisition of adult friendship knowledge in relation to their age or other developmental abilities. There is an assumption here that kids must acquire or internalize adult concepts of friendships before they can really have complex friendship relations (p. 67).

If, however, instead of the clinical interview of a single child, we examine the actual friendship interactions of children we discover a world of complex social relations.
For Corsaro:

> Children are active agents of their own socialization. In fact, kids creatively take information from the adult world to produce their own unique childhood culture. In this sense, children are always participating in and are part of two cultures – adults and kids' – and these cultures are intricately interwoven (p. 4).

Thus to study children, we must study them in the context of their own peer culture. For Corsaro, this dictates an ethnographic approach. There have been other ethnographic studies of children's culture, such as *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* by Iona and Peter Opie (1959/1970). But the Opies limited themselves to recording the ritual and folkloric aspects of children's culture. However delightful their book, it was short on analysis. There have been, as Corsaro acknowledges, a number of observational studies of children, but he finds fault with this work because "most have been conducted in a limited range of space and time, usually in a single setting over a one-year period at most" (p. x). Corsaro wanted to go deeper; he wanted to become a participant observer in the culture of young children. But how to enter the world of children's culture? Children, according to Corsaro, are highly attuned to the differences between themselves and adults. Not only are adults physically bigger they have certain distinct behaviors that mark them off. Adults monitor and direct children, they have authority over them.

By noting these differences and adjusting his behavior accordingly Corsaro was able to establish himself as an "atypical adult – a sort of big kid" (p.14), one who did not enforce the rules or direct children's games. He spent time in the play areas where adults did not usually go. He waited for children to react to him, rather than initiating interaction. Over time he became accepted into the children's play. His observations have clear implications for our understanding of child development.

Developmental psychologists have often described young children as self-absorbed and their play is frequently called egocentric. Corsaro, however, found something quite different. The children he observed were profoundly social. He criticizes psychologists for focusing solely on the child's concept of friendship and not on the actual friendship processes of children. His descriptions show those processes to be more complex than would be predicted from theories of childhood egocentrism. Indeed, it is difficult to reconcile the morally egocentric child depicted by some developmentalists (e.g. Kohlberg et al, 1987) with Carsaro's report that

> I saw little solitary play in my many years of observation in preschools. And when children did play alone or engaged in parallel play (a type, most common among toddlers, in which children play along side of but not really with each other in coordinated fashion), it seldom lasted for long. They were soon doing things together (p. 36).

It is hard not to see Corsaro's work as support for the arguments of Judith Rich Harris. Harris (1998) created something of a storm when she argued that peers might have a greater effect on children than parents. While Corsaro criticizes Harris for focusing too much on future outcomes, it is Harris (1998) who points out that "children are not incompetent members of the adults' society: they are competent members of their own society, which has its own standards and its own culture" (p. 199). Another area of agreement between Corsaro and Harris is in their description of the oppositional components of children's culture. Corsaro notes that "once kids begin to see themselves as part of a group, the mere doing of something forbidden and getting away with it is valued in peer culture"(p. 142). Harris (1998) makes a similar argument:

> Children see adults as serious and sedentary, so when the salient social categories are *kids* and *grownups* – as they might be, for instance, when the teacher is being particularly bossy – they become sillier and more active. They demonstrate their fealty to their own age group by making faces and running around (p. 175).

Corsaro observes that:

> once kids begin to see themselves as part of a group, the mere doing of something forbidden and getting away with it is valued in peer culture. Making faces behind the teacher's back and leaving one's seat or talking during "quiet time" when the teacher leaves the room becomes commonplace over the course of a school term (p. 142).

Given that many of Corsaro's observations seem to support Harris' model, indeed Harris sites Corsaro's work as supporting evidence for her thesis, it seems fair to ask why he gives her work such short shrift; a single ambiguous paragraph. I can not help but locating this near dismissal in Corsaro's studious avoidance of any evolutionary explanation or context for children's behavior. While he is very attuned to ethnic, class, and national differences in children's peer culture, he completely ignores the vast literature on animal play. For example, while his book includes descriptions of approach-avoidance play in children, no mention is made of similar behaviors in other mammals. Even pretend play is not unique to humans; it has been observed in both wild and human reared apes (Parker & McKinney, 1999).

Play is deeply linked to our evolution, as Konner (1982) observed:

> Not surprisingly, it turns out that, broadly speaking, the most intelligent mammals – the primates, the Cetacea or whales and porpoises, and the terrestrial and aquatic carnivores – are the most playful; these two characteristics of complex mammals probably have evolved in concert, each strengthening the other (p. 246).

It would be tempting to forgive Corsaro for ignoring this evolutionary context. His book is engaging and contains many important insights about children's social behavior. Yet evolutionary theory holds the promise of a much richer understanding of child development. Bowlby (1982) proposed that human behavior must be seen in the context of our environment of evolutionary adaptation. That is to understand ourselves we must understand the selective pressures that acted on our ancestors. For humans these selective pressures include negotiating the demands of primate dominance hierarchy (Byrne, 1995; Dunbar, R., 1996). Dominance hierarchy, according to Wilson (1975), is "the set of aggressive submissive relations among animals" (p. 279). These hierarchies have been observed in many animal species and there is an extensive body of literature describing dominance relations in pre-school children (e.g. Abramovitch & Strayer, 1978; Hawley, 2002; Strayer & Strayer, 1976). Corsaro notes that conflict "is a natural element of children's culture and peer relations" (p. 161) yet he does not acknowledge the existence of dominance hierarchies in children's interactions. The point here is not to counter pose social science and evolutionary accounts; rather the goal should be unification. Evolutionary accounts of human behavior have long embraced this goal (Gallup & Suarez, 1983), while Corsaro is completely silent.

Corsaro ignores many studies of children conducted using an ethological approach (e.g. Smith, 1984). Thus in some respects, Piaget, who did try to relate his work to ethological and evolutionary concerns, stands in advance of Corsaro's sociological approach. More over, the assumption that child social behavior must be studied outside of developmental concerns seems overly limiting. The anthropologists would describe this approach as synchronic, viewing a culture at one instant in time. There is no denying that a detailed synchronic picture is useful, but it is unclear why this would preclude embedding the description into a developmental framework.

Thus, while Corsaro's book does contribute to our understanding of children's culture its self imposed narrowing of theoretical perspective limits its usefulness.

Corsaro closes his book with a passionate plea for improving the quality of children's life. His advocacy on behalf of children is both appropriate and admirable. It deserves the close attention of all readers.

References

Abramovich, R., & Strayer, F. (1978). Preschool social organization: Agnostic, spacing, and attentional behaviors. In L. Krames, P. Pliner, & T. Alloway (Eds.), *Aggression, dominance, and individual spacing* (pp. 107 – 128). New York: Plenum Press.

Bowlby, J. (1982). *Attachment and loss*: Attachment (Vol. 1, 2nd ed.). New York: Basic Books.

Byrne, R. W. (1995). *The thinking ape: Evolutionary origins of intelligence.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Corsaro, W. A. (2003). *We're friends right?: Inside kids' culture.* Washington, DC: Joseph Henry Press.

Dunbar, R. I. M. (1996). *Grooming, gossip, and the evolution of language.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Gallup, G. G., & Suarez, S. D. (1983). Overcoming our resistance to animal research: Man in comparative perspective. In D. W. Rajecki (Ed.), *Comparing behavior: Studying man studying animals* (pp. 5 – 26). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Harris, J. R. (1998). *The nurture assumption: Why children turn out the way they do.* New York: The Free Press.

Hawley, P. H. (2002). Social dominance and prosocial and coercive strategies of resource control in preschoolers. *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 26,* 167 – 176.

Kohlberg, L., DeVries, R., Fein, G., Hart, D., Mayer, R., Noam, G., Snarey, J., & Wertsch, J. (1987). *Child psychology and childhood education: A cognitive-developmental view.* New York: Longman

Konner, M. (1982). *The tangled wing: Biological constraints on the human spirit.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Opie, I., & Opie, P. (1959/1970). *The lore and language of schoolchildren.* London: Oxford University Press.

Parker, S. T., & McKinney, M. L. (1999). *Origins of intelligence: The evolution of cognitive development in monkeys, apes, and humans.* Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.

Piaget, J. (1962). *Play, dreams and imitation in childhood.* (G. Gattegno & F. M. Hodgson, Trans.) New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Smith, P. K. (Ed.). (1984). *Play in animals and humans.* New York. Basil Blackwell.

Strayer, F. F., & Strayer, J. (1976). An ethological analysis of social antagonism and dominance relations among preschool children. *Child Development, 47,* 980 – 989.

Wilson, E. O. (1975). *Sociobiology: The new synthesis.* Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press