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ASPECTS OF MAORI AND PAKEHA MOTHERS' INTERACTIONS
WITH THEIR PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN: ETHNICITY,
EDUCATION, INTERACTIVE BEHAVIOUR, AND
CHILD ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

An observational approach to the study of parent-child relations and children's early experiences has been recommended for some time. Observations of family members' behaviour are useful because they can add to knowledge about child rearing and child development.

More recently, the need to extend the study of mother-child interaction beyond the confines of middle-class Anglo-American families also has been recognized, and within cross-cultural contexts, the use of naturalistic observational procedures has been advocated.

This study was concerned with observing the interactive behaviours used by Maori and Pakeha mother-child pairs during spontaneous play. One intention was to identify some variables related to the mothers' interactions. On the basis of previous research it was proposed that maternal ethnicity, maternal education level, and child gender would be associated with differences in mothers' interactive behaviour.

A second major intention was to examine the relationships among interactive behaviour and children's competence and self-esteem. It was proposed that mothers' interactions and children's self-concept, cognition, and language scores would show some specified interrelationships.

The sample design included Maori and Pakeha mothers from higher and lower education-level backgrounds, and their 3-year-old sons and daughters. Each of the 75 mother-child dyads was videotaped during playcentre sessions. Subsequently, maternal interactive behaviours were coded, and satisfactory inter-observer reliability correlations were obtained. The children completed the Brown IDS Self-Concept Referents Test, and their cognitive, language, social, and physical development was assessed using the Keele Pre-school Assessment Guide (KPAG).

The maternal verbal behaviours observed most frequently were Direct Commands and Questions, and the incidence of maternal initiations in command form was high. The non-verbal behaviour

observed for the longest duration was the mothers' Attentive Observation of their children. Within the ethnic and education groups, individual variations in behaviour were noted.

Some important group differences in behaviour also were found. For example, Maori pairs spent more time Playing Interactively (with mutual play involvement) than Pakeha pairs, and this probably reflected a practice among Maoris to learn by mutual participation. Marked education-level differences were evident on the maternal verbal behaviours, but child gender was not associated with major differences in maternal interactions.

Some possible Maori-Pakeha variations in the correlates of children's cognitive and language assessments were suggested by the data. However, both Maori and Pakeha mothers' Direct Commands were associated strongly and inversely with their children's KPAG-Cognition and KPAG-Language scores, and this result was consistent with Piagetian and other theoretical perspectives. Fewer important relationships were found between maternal interaction and children's self-esteem, although children's self-concept, cognition, and language scores were strongly interrelated.

This study extended the maternal interactive behaviour research both across cultures and within New Zealand. Furthermore the results affirmed, in the New Zealand context, the association between mothers' education levels and their verbal interactions, and between directive maternal speech and children's lower performance on a cognitive and language measure. Some implications for research and early educational practice were identified from the Maori and Pakeha observational and child assessment data.

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