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Facilitators, teachers, observers, and play partners: Exploring how mothers describe their role in play activities across three communities

ABSTRACT

The present study explored the perspectives of mothers from three communities regarding their role in play activities with their toddlers. The mothers of two-year-old children from Muenster, Germany (n = 34), Chennai, India (n = 36), and New York City, USA (n = 36), participated in the study. Qualitative content analysis was utilized to analyze the mothers' responses to semi-structured interview questions. Four roles were identified as characterizing the mothers' narratives, namely mothers as facilitators, teachers, play partners, or observers. The goal of facilitator was to support children's autonomy; teachers often described educational learning goals; and play partners and observers highlighted the play itself. In the data, two-thirds of the mothers from New York City were identified as facilitators, while half of the Chennai sample were identified as teachers. The Muenster sample recorded the largest variation with regard to the four roles. The findings suggest variations in how the mothers in our samples viewed their role in play situations, both within and across communities.

Keyword: Play; Mother; Toddler; Role; Goal; Cross-community study.

1. Introduction

Play is a cultural activity that enables children to enjoy themselves, be creative, interact, and practice skills for their future (Hännikäinen & Munter, 2018; Hughes, 2009). It is an integral part of child development and socialization and has been found to be vital for children's cognitive, social, motor, and emotional development (Aeri & Verma, 2004; Ginsburg, 2007; Haight, Gaskins & Lancy, 2007; Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001). However, across cultural communities—i.e., “group[s] of people with some common local organization, values, and practices”—there are variations in terms of play activities that are seen as valuable for children's development, including how such activities are structured and scaffolded (Göncü, Mistry, & Mosier, 2000, p. 322). Consequently, ideas about the meaning of play, the significance given to play, and the forms and types of play might differ across communities (Göncü et al., 2000). For parents, play is an important context in which to transmit values and norms to their children (Keller, Borke, Chaudhary, Lamm, & Kleis, 2010). Most parents have positive beliefs about the role of play in their children's development and are willing to participate in play activities with their children (Jiang & Han, 2015; Lancy, 2007; Parmar, Harkness, & Super, 2008). Various strategies and practices used by parents to engage in and facilitate play activities with their children have been identified, with some parents being more active and instructive than others (Ginsburg, 2007; LaForett & Mendez, 2017). The role of the parent in play activities may thus reflect, and is associated with, parents' beliefs regarding the importance and goals of play (Parmar et al., 2008).

Prior research suggests that despite variations in parents' beliefs about play, it is viewed by middle-class families across different communities as an appropriate socialization context, for example, in Dhol-Ki-Patti, India, and Salt Lake City, USA (Göncü et al., 2000). These families

share the view that “play has developmental and educational significance” (Göncü et al., 2000, p. 322). However, differences may exist in parents’ emphasis on play as a context for learning and an opportunity for them to teach their children diverse skills and knowledge, compared to an emphasis on play as a joyful way of supporting their children’s development (e.g., Chang, 2007; Parmar et al., 2008). To date, research has focused primarily on parents’ beliefs about the importance of play for children’s development (Ginsburg, 2007), with less attention being paid to how mothers (often the primary caregiver during the child’s first years of life) from different communities describe their role in play.

In this paper, we explored mothers’ beliefs about their role and goals regarding play activities with their child and examined variations within and across our samples of middle-class families from Muenster, Germany, New York City, USA, and Chennai, India. As suggested in prior work, we referred to our samples from each country as communities so as “to avoid the dangers of generalizing to the nations represented in [the] sample” (Göncü et al., 2000, p. 322). Two research questions guided the present study. First, can we identify common themes (i.e., roles) from the mothers’ narrative descriptions of their behavior in play activities, and if so, what are the characteristic goals of each role? Second, what is the variation in the roles and goals within and across the three communities in our study? In the following sections, we discuss the research literature on play and parents’ role and goals regarding play activities with their toddlers. We use previous findings from cross-cultural studies to discuss variations across cultural communities. We then present the research questions and the methodological and analytical underpinnings of the study. The final sections of the paper present the findings and discuss implications and conclusions drawn from our data.

1.1. Parental roles and goals regarding play

Traditional developmental theories, such as the sociocultural approach to learning, acknowledge that children's thinking and learning develop during interaction with others, usually adults or more advanced peers (Vygotsky, 1978). Children's play occurs in the context of interactions and shared activities between toddlers and their caregivers (Göncü et al., 2000; Hännikäinen & Munter, 2018; LaForett & Menzez, 2017). Consequently, caregivers can influence children's play by how they contribute to and facilitate such shared activities (LaForett & Mendez, 2017; Van Oers, 2012). In particular, during the early childhood years, parents have a vital role in socializing and guiding the process of their child's play (Bulotsky-Shearer et al., 2012). By collaborating in shared activities, parents have diverse opportunities to engage with their child: They can mediate the child's exploration of and learning about the world while observing and learning about how their child experiences and sees the world (Ginsburg, 2007).

Parents' role and participation in play activities are shaped by their goals for their child's development, which likely reflect cultural values, norms, and standards shared within the parents' community (Gaskins, 2006; Parmar et al., 2008; Roopnarine, 2012). Parents' goals for their children are often referred to as socialization goals—shared beliefs within a cultural community about the qualities that parents see as important for their children's development and that they try to teach them as part of the socialization process (e.g., Chao, 2000; Suizzo, 2007). Parents' socialization goals include multiple factors, such as autonomy, relatedness (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008), acquisition of knowledge and diverse skills, and cultural and social norms for behavior (Luo, Tamis-LeMonda, & Song, 2013). Luo and colleagues (2013) noted that some previous studies have distinguished between so-called formal and informal socialization goals. Formal goals refer to parents' academic and cognitive objectives (e.g., numeracy, literacy, and

arts), which emphasize the content of learning, the importance of the child's academic learning, the involvement of teaching, and the strategies used in the teaching process. In contrast, informal socialization goals refer to socio-emotional objectives, which aim to mediate social, cultural, and emotional knowledge and values.

1.2. Variations across cultural communities

Cross-cultural studies suggest that there are no universal rules regarding types of parent-child play and parents' role in play (Lancy, 2007). Differences in the way in which parents or other play partners participate in shared play activities with the child might be related to variations in how cultural communities value play and what play opportunities they provide for children (Farver, Kim, & Lee, 1995; Göncü et al., 2000). For example, parents from cultural communities in the USA are typically found to embrace the importance of their children's play by providing diverse play objects and engaging children in playful activities (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005). Parmar et al. (2008) showed that Caucasian parents from the USA facilitated play by participating in play and highlighted the importance of play itself. Their role in play is more like that of a playmate. Conversely, parents from multiple Asian countries (i.e., China, Korea, Pakistan, Nepal, and India) tended to emphasize and incorporate more academic teaching and learning into play activities. Their role in play might be best described as that of a teacher (Parmar et al., 2008). Importantly, Parmar et al. (2008) argued that these two roles, i.e., playmates and teachers, occurred in all the investigated cultural communities; however, there were differences regarding the extent to which they were emphasized within communities that might depend on parental beliefs and preferences. Consistent with these findings, Göncü et al. (2000) reported that while play is a common activity for 12- through 24-month-old children in

different cultural communities (San Pedro, Guatemala; Kecioren, Turkey; Dhol-Ki-Patti, India; Salt Lake City, USA), the frequency of play and the partners in play activities varied across communities. In Salt Lake City, USA, mothers participated in play more actively compared to mothers in the other three communities where play was viewed more as children's own activity and for their amusement.

Similarly, it has been suggested that variations in maternal socialization goals across cultural communities might be reflected in differences in mothers' participation in and behaviors during play activities, for example, how they structure or scaffold their child's early play (Farver & Howes, 1993; Roopnarine, 2012). With regard to informal socialization goals, previous research has suggested that parents in various Asian cultural communities focus on the group rather than the individual and, thus, foster dedication to their families and group sociality in their children (Rothbaum & Trommsdorff, 2007; Rothbaum & Wang, 2010). Their goal is that their child will learn to act appropriately and respectfully, in particular, in interactions with other people, such as during social play. In cultural communities such as those in the USA, parents tend to socialize their children to become independent and autonomous (Harwood, Leyendecker, Carlson, Asencio, & Miller, 2002). This is reflected in their behaviors during play, for example, encouraging children to be in charge of an activity and to gain control over objects, such as toys (Cote & Bornstein, 2009). Differences between countries and their cultural communities have also been reported in relation to formal socialization goals, which may also relate to differences in play. Parents from Asian communities (e.g., communities in China, Korea, Taiwan, Pakistan, Nepal, and India) tend to consider play as a good and effective way for children to learn and achieve diverse skills and knowledge (e.g., Chang, 2007; Liao, 1994; Parmar et al., 2008). This is reflected, for example, in mothers from Asian communities using more numeric terms or more

often asking a child to name referents, compared to mothers from communities in the USA (Chang, Sandhofer, Adelchanow, & Rottman, 2011; So & Lim, 2012). Consistent with the focus on emerging academic skills, parents from Asian communities prefer an early start to academic learning over the provision of play (Parmar et al., 2008). They consider their children to be ready for school at a relatively young age, whereas Caucasian parents from the USA value play as the most successful medium for teaching and learning (Parmar et al., 2008).

There is also significant variation across cultural communities within countries. LaForett and Mendez (2017) studied low-income African-American and Latino parents' views about their children's play. Compared to African-American parents, Latino parents were found to highlight the value of play for their children's social skills and school readiness. The study also showed that both groups of parents in the USA preferred academic activities over play for their children's development, which is similar to the preferences of parents from Asian countries, though in contrast with Caucasian parents in the USA. Such findings highlight substantial within-country cultural variations and between-country similarities (Taras, Steel, & Kirkham, 2016). This is because "culture is an inherently group level phenomenon [with] values [being] shared in a group to form a culture" (Taras et al., 2016, p. 460). Consequently, one's country of residence should not be used as a proxy of culture, as multiple cultural groups can coexist in one country (Taras et al., 2016). To avoid equating cultures with countries, we refer to our samples as communities from the three different countries.

1.3. Rationale for selecting communities from Germany, India, and the USA

For our study, we chose the mothers of toddlers from three cultural communities (Muenster, Germany; Chennai, India; New York City, USA). It is important to acknowledge that

there is cultural variability within each of these three countries, and as such, the selection of communities and the samples within them cannot be considered representative of the nations represented in our sample. In addition, there is a danger of conflating differences in play between cultural groups with social-class differences (Farver & Howes, 1993; Göncü et al., 2000). In this study, all mothers represented educated middle-class families within their communities. Previous studies have reported variation in the family structure. For example, while middle-class families from urban areas in Germany and the USA are of the nuclear-family type, usually in their own home, the dominant family structure of urban middle-class families in India is cohabitation of the extended family (Göncü et al., 2000; Kärtner, Crafa, Chaudhary, & Keller, 2016).

The selected communities shared commonalities in, for example, how children's play is viewed, but there were also dissimilarities with regard to socialization goals and the roles of children and parents in play activities. Previous findings have suggested that middle-class parents in German, Indian, and US communities share a positive attitude toward play (Göncü et al., 2000; Keller, 2007; Roopnarine, 2012; Roopnarine, Hooper, Ahmeduzzaman, & Pollack, 1993). They are likely to participate in play activities with their children and encourage play because of its value in children's development and learning. They also use such activities to model appropriate behavior and socialize their children into important cultural scripts (Kärtner et al., 2016). However, the communities also varied, for example, with regard to socialization goal preferences. Middle-class parents from communities in Germany and the USA focus on supporting their children's individuality and independent functioning (Kärtner et al., 2016; Keller et al., 2006; Keller & Lamm, 2005). By contrast, previous research on middle-class families from urban centers in India showed that mothers highlight the importance of relatedness and social responsiveness (i.e., interpersonal responsibilities associated with social roles and

proper demeanor) for their children's development (Kärtner, Crafa, Keller & Chaudhary, 2010; Schröder, Kärtner, Keller, & Chaudhary, 2012).

1.4. Aims of the study

Our interest in examining similarities and community-specific differences in mothers' beliefs about their role in play activities and related goals for their child's development was driven by the need for a more differentiated view of children's play in different communities. There is growing evidence that play opportunities for children and how parents structure and scaffold their children's play activities vary according to the cultural community in which children grow up (Göncü et al., 2000; Roopnarine, 2012). However, comparisons of how mothers view their role in play are scarce. Our goal was to explore mothers' beliefs about their role and goals in relation to play activities with their children within and across three cultural communities. The study employed a qualitative analysis of mothers' responses to a semi-structured interview. The specific research questions were:

1. What common themes are used by mothers to describe their behavior in play activities with their toddlers, and what goals are characteristic of each theme?
2. How do mothers vary in their emphasis on specific themes during play activities within and across the three cultural communities?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample included 34 mothers of toddlers from the Muenster community (Germany) and 36 mothers of toddlers from each of the other two communities (Chennai, India; New York

City, USA. In each community, the children's gender was balanced, with approximately half of them being girls. According to the mothers' reports, all children were typically developing. As with prior research on children's play (Cote & Bornstein, 2009), the families were recruited through different strategies, depending on the specific situation in each community. We mainly used flyers to contact families with children of the targeted age (i.e., around their second birthday). In Chennai and New York City, flyers were distributed in early education centers (in each city, three centers serving middle-class families were contacted, which granted permission to distribute flyers). In Muenster, flyers were sent home to families whose mailing address was retrieved from a database provided by the Residents' Registration Office. In addition, snowball sampling was used in all three communities until the targeted sample size was reached. Families who indicated their interest in participating in the study were informed about the study, and written consent was provided. The participants were largely representative of middle-class mothers in the city where the data was collected (with regard to education, living situation, and employment/job status of family members). Prior to recruitment, the study protocol and materials were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Boards at New York University, New York University Abu Dhabi, University of Muenster, and a local university in Chennai. The majority of the mothers in the New York City community identified as Caucasian (82%), nine percent identified as Asian American, and three percent each as African American and Hispanic. All but one mother reported English as the family's primary home language. The mothers in the Muenster community were all German nationals; they all spoke German at home. All the mothers in the Chennai community were Indian nationals. The families' dominant home language was Tamil (74%), though several other home languages were also reported (including Urdu, Gujarati, Marwadi, Malayalam, Saurashtra, and Sindi). In all three communities, the

mothers were the primary caregiver of the child. They were highly educated, and the majority of them lived with the child's father in the household (see Table 1 for the demographic background information of the sample).

Table 1

Participant demographics with mean scores and standard deviations

Characteristics	Germany n = 34	India n = 36	USA n = 36
Mother' age (in years)	34.71 (SD = 4.02)	29.91 (SD = 5.12)	33.60 (SD = 3.77)
Education (in years)	17.9 (SD = 2.67)	14.34 (SD = 4.86)	18.11 (SD = 2.92)
Cohabiting parents	100% (n = 35)	91.2% (n = 31)	97.1% (n = 34)
Mother as primary caregiver	89.2% (n = 33)	88.9% (n = 32)	87.9% (n = 29)
Child's age (in months)	24.17 (SD = 3.67)	23.50 (SD = 2.93)	25.42 (SD = 3.52)
Child is first born	54.3% (n = 19)	82.4% (n = 28)	60.5% (n = 23)

2.2. Procedure and measures

Families who gave their written consent were visited at home by two female researchers, at least one of whom was a native speaker or was fluently bilingual, i.e., in the dominant language of the community and English. At the beginning of the home visit, the mother and child were asked to engage in a 10-minute play activity using age-appropriate toys provided by the researcher (the same toys were used in all three communities, including stuffed animals, wheeled

toys, and a wooden puzzle). The play activity was followed by a semi-structured interview related to the mothers' beliefs about their role in play and their goals for their child's development. After the interview, the mothers completed a questionnaire on the demographic background information of the family and child. At the end of the home visit, the family received monetary compensation or a gift voucher for a local toy store for their participation.

In response to four open-ended questions asked during the semi-structured interviews, we asked the mothers to share their thoughts about their role as a parent in play situations and the importance of play for their child's development. Two questions focused on play activities in general (e.g., "*How do you usually arrange play situations like this with your child?*") and the mothers' goals for play activities ("*If you think of what you were doing in 2-3 sentences, can you please tell me your goals for play activities?*"). Two questions referred to the role of the mother and child in play activities ("*What is the importance of your role as a parent during play activities?*" and "*What role does each of you have? Who has the lead in play activities?*"). The mothers' responses were audio-recorded and transcribed by trained research assistants who were fluent in the language spoken by the mother and English. All audio-recordings were transcribed into English for content analysis. To minimize potential loss of meaning through translation, this step was completed by the person who transcribed the original interviews and was fluent in both languages. Although we sought to maximize specificity in the choice of words used for the translation by having the same person complete the transcript and translation, we acknowledge that the translations might have impacted the content analysis. Nevertheless, we decided to use the translated narratives so that all transcripts would be analyzed by the same person, thereby avoiding the introduction of potential bias from different coders. The transcripts were de-

identified (i.e., the mothers' and children's names and other identifying information were hidden) to maintain the participants' anonymity.

2.3. Data analysis

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the mothers' responses during the semi-structured interview in order to reveal predominant concepts, expressions, and meanings (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Patton, 2002). The goals of the qualitative content analysis was to identify groups of mothers who shared specific beliefs about their role during play situations and to describe these different roles with regard to the mothers' goals for their child and their beliefs about the importance of play in development. In order to identify specific patterns, profiles, or orientations, each transcript was read several times. Units of analysis were defined as segments of the transcript in which meaningful information was described. The mothers' responses underwent a two-step analysis based on their content. First, the focus was on the mothers' descriptions of their role in play situations. Special attention was paid to verbs and nouns that the mothers used to describe their actions and themselves (e.g., *I am a playmate; I'm mostly the audience; I'll help him*). Based on the predominant content of these descriptions (several remarks of the same type of description), each mother was given a specific play role.

After identifying the role of the mother, the same transcript was analyzed again, but this time, the analysis focused on the mothers' descriptions of their goals for their child and the importance of play for development. The transmission of knowledge and skills was emphasized, either in terms of concreteness (e.g., now we're practicing colors) or as more general and abstract (e.g., respect when handling toys or toward the play partner; to have a happy child). When multiple goals were mentioned, the predominant content (several remarks of the same type of

goal) was identified for each mother. Finally, the findings were tabulated for each community with respect to identified roles and sets of beliefs and goals. The role frequency differences between the three communities were also tested with the Pearson chi-square test.

3. Results

3.1. Mothers' beliefs about their role during play activities with their toddlers

The qualitative content analysis showed variation in how the mothers described and emphasized their role in play situations. Four roles were identified in the data: 1) facilitator (40%, n = 42); 2) teacher (32%, n = 34); 3) play partner (14%, n = 15); and 4) observer (13%, n = 14). Each mother was categorized into one of the four play roles (Table 2), except for one mother from the Muenster community whose answers could not be categorized due to the lack of clarity in her responses. The findings from cross-community comparisons of the mothers' beliefs about their role during play activities suggest community-specific patterns. However, it is important to note that a high degree of variation within each community was found. In fact, all four roles were identified in each of the three communities, although the frequency varied (Table 2). Two-thirds of the mothers from the New York City community (24/36) described their role as that of a facilitator. About half of the mothers from the Chennai community (19/36) described their role as that of a teacher. The largest variation was found in the Muenster community: 15 out of 34 mothers were categorized as facilitators, 9 out of 34 as teachers, 7 out of 34 as play partners, and 2 out of 34 as observers. The Pearson chi-square test showed that the role frequency differences between the three communities were statistically significant, $\chi^2(8, N = 106) = 33.317, p = .000$.

Table 2

Mothers' roles in each community

Role	Community			Mothers in total
	Muenster	Chennai	New York City	
Facilitator	15	3	24	42
Teacher	9	19	6	34
Play partner	7	5	3	15
Observer	2	9	3	14
N/A	1	-	-	1

The four roles will now be presented in greater detail, including example excerpts of the mothers' responses, first describing the nature of the role and then the predominant role-related goals.

3.1.1. *Facilitator*

A large group of mothers described their role during play activities as facilitating and supporting their child's interests and learning. Their aim was to support their child's autonomy by letting him or her figure things out independently and providing support when the child could not proceed independently. If the child struggled to get started with play activities, the mother would make suggestions to the child. Instead of providing direct instructions, however, facilitator-mothers preferred to encourage their child to solve problems, be creative, and make their own decisions.

Mother, New York City (#32):

Umm, I guess it's to be there to assist when things are difficult, or when she can't do something, and to suggest things she might find interesting, or wanna do, or suggest connections to her.

Mother, Muenster (#23):

I would say providing support and generating impulses. Like, I don't think it would make sense to give instructions all the time or to tell her how things work or how to do things. She is supposed to decide herself what she wants to do and how she wants to do it. For me, it makes sense to generate impulses from time to time or to make an offer that she can accept or not.

Mother, Muenster (#13):

...to somehow help her find a solution when she does a puzzle or something. Yeah, something like that. And other than that, to pursue her ideas in a creative way and maybe also, umm, to incorporate new ideas sometimes.

In their descriptions regarding the goals of play activities with their children, the facilitator-mothers generally highlighted the development of their child's autonomy, independence, and self-esteem. They also emphasized the joy of play, having fun, and being engaged in the activity. While the role of facilitator was identified as relatively common among the mothers from the Muenster (n = 15) and New York City (n = 24) communities, some noteworthy differences emerged between these communities. Facilitator-mothers from the Muenster community mainly emphasized the importance of autonomy and creativity in their

child's play, whereas those from the New York City community emphasized and named specific educational skills, such as knowledge of shapes, colors, and the ability to count. Facilitator-mothers from the New York City community also highlighted the importance of facilitating the safety of their child during play activities. In contrast, those from the Chennai community were rarely identified as facilitators ($n = 3$).

Mother, New York City (#7):

Umm, just to try to get her to learn new things. She's not talking very much, so I try to push that and, umm, just to try to get her to do things on her own.

Mother, Muenster (#8):

That initially she enjoys exploring the toys by herself and develops her own thoughts and then, umm... I also like when she interacts with me and accepts my ideas.

Mother, Muenster (#33):

So that she can inspect and explore these new things independently and gets an idea of what to do with them.

3.1.2. Teacher

Those mothers who were identified as teachers described their role as providing the child with information by telling, explaining, and modeling. They viewed themselves as the ultimate source of information for their child's learning of specific skills or behaviors. The teacher-

mothers also frequently expected their child to utilize this information independently in play contexts.

Mother, Chennai (#1):

From the beginning onwards, we can teach them everything because, afterwards, it will be too late to teach them. You have to teach them from early on.

Mother Muenster (#28):

I try to give her an understanding of the world, and I try to focus on her not learning nonsense. That is important for me... to explain and show things to her, like a teacher.

Mother, Muenster (#7):

...I prefer to show him more. Whether he can already do it or not, I don't know, but you can tell, if you teach him, whether he can cognitively make use of it...

While approximately half of the mothers from Chennai were identified as teachers (n = 19), this role was less frequently encountered in the New York City (n = 6) and Muenster (n = 9) communities. The teacher-mothers across all three communities highlighted the importance of the child acquiring skills and knowledge. They emphasized educational goals, such as learning words, names, colors, animals, and shapes. While mothers from Chennai focused exclusively on educational goals, those from Muenster and New York City also described the importance of higher-order skills, such as concentration, polite manners, appropriate behaviors, and interaction.

Mother, Chennai (#36):

...he should learn something like... either he should learn the colors of what uh...he is playing with. Uh uh...how to open it, how to close it. Umm...how to arrange it. How to sort out the colors separately.

Mother, New York City (#9):

My goal is for him to, uh, learn something, whether it's like colors or shapes or sharing, umm, so just to build social interaction but also kind of verbal skills and knowledge.

Mother, Muenster (#16):

To teach my child something I would like him to learn. Umm yeah, respect when handling toys, respect toward the play partner, not only during play, but generally, how you behave, um to be patient, to learn new things, to not always be the one who decides everything, but also to follow others, and such things.

3.1.3. *Play partner*

Those mothers identified as play partners concentrated on the play itself. They described their role as that of a partner, participating in with their child's play. They highlighted the importance of enjoying the play and the time spent with their child. In all three communities, however, the role of play partner was less frequently identified (Muenster $n = 7$, Chennai $n = 5$, New York City $n = 3$).

Mother, Muenster (#34):

So, in the end, I am a playmate. And, just when it comes to things like cleaning up, I need to act like a parent and be like, “Now we clean up.”

Mother, Muenster (#27):

It was just about having a good time. Concentrating on what comes up in that very situation and, yeah, just playing nicely...to be a partner, an interaction partner. Yeah, to direct sometimes or to repeat and show her like “Yes, I understand you,” or “I will have a look at what you give to me.”

Mother, Chennai (#30):

Something that the child is interested in, not what the parents are interested in. So if the child is interested in the books or toys or whatever it is, we have to do that with the child...any adult while playing, they're kids again and play with the child.

Those mothers identified as play partners described their goals for play activities very similarly in all three communities, all emphasizing the joy of play. They believed that by having fun together, their child would learn something new during play activities. They also described the importance of play for their relationship with their child, for example, through opportunities to bond and show love and attention to each other while playing together.

Mother, Muenster (#34):

The goal actually always is to have a happy child. Okay, he is also supposed to learn something. And uh, I try like to name everything because he just started talking, right,

and I repeat like “What kind of animal is this?” or similar. But in the end, he is supposed to have fun.

Mother, New York City (#24):

Creating that bond and being... having the child be able to direct the play time and have that...interaction with the parent and that bond is important. So, I feel like I’m more of a secondary role to their directing the play.

Mother, Chennai (#22):

At this age, I... really I don’t want to put anything on her...or make her learn something. I just want to have her engaged with the toys. Also, I don’t want to force her to learn from this activity, just to arrange the toys, play with them, throwing, seeing the colors, and she is excited about the new toys. That’s all I see at this stage.

3.1.4. Observer

Those mothers identified as observers described their role in terms of being in the background of the play situation, observing the child’s interests and his or her play, and ensuring the safety of the situation. Mothers representing the observer role were identified rather infrequently (Chennai n = 9, Muenster n = 2, and New York City n = 3), and the role of observer was not dominant in any of the communities.

Mother, New York City (#26):

I don't think I have a big role, umm, I mean, my role is to keep him safe and to be an observer...

Mother, Muenster (#24):

I, umm, just to pay a little more attention, basically, concerning what he... the things he pays attention to. I just noticed how strange that sounds, but yeah, to pay more attention to what he is interested in, basically.

The observer-mothers emphasized the actual play itself as their goal. Additional goals for play activities included paying attention to their child and supporting the child's joy in and engagement with play. Those from the New York City community also highlighted the development of autonomy and the child's safety. The observer-mothers rarely mentioned educational learning goals for play.

Mother, New York City (#26):

I do like him to, umm, take kind of ownership and control over what we're doing and for him to show his interest.

Mother, Chennai (#27):

...so that I can observe and see what she is actually thinking, what and all she is doing with those toys.

Mother, Chennai (#34)

Goals uh...she's playing...she's playing happily.

4. Discussion

The study explored mothers' beliefs about their role and goals regarding play activities with their children. Our findings regarding communities of middle-class families from Muenster (Germany), Chennai (India), and New York City (USA) indicate that all the mothers in our sample saw themselves as assuming a role in their child's play, suggesting that they viewed play as an important context in which to socialize their children (Göncü et al., 2000). Based on the mothers' narratives, we identified four roles: 1) facilitator; 2) teacher; 3) play partner; and 4) observer, with different socialization goals characterizing each role. The facilitator-mothers highlighted the goal of autonomy and independence for their child. The teacher-mothers most often referred to educational goals, while the observer- and play partner-mothers emphasized the goal of play itself. We also found substantial variation in the mothers' roles within each community and across communities, such that not all roles were equally likely.

Prior research suggests that parents differ in the way they structure and scaffold play activities, which might be based on how they view their role in these activities (Ginsburg, 2007). In our study, we used the semi-structured interview to learn more about what mothers think about their role during play activities with their toddlers. An advantage of the qualitative approach in our study was that the mothers were allowed sufficient latitude to elaborate on their opinion, instead of choosing from a set of predetermined options from previous research, for example, playmate or teacher (Parmar et al., 2008). Thus, the roles were identified from the mothers' narratives in a content-driven manner. However, it is important to note that these roles were specific to the sample of mothers who participated in the study and might not generalize to

other populations. Nevertheless, there are similarities with previous studies that have used more quantitative research approaches. For instance, the study by Parmar et al. (2008) showed variation in parents' role in play and identified some parents as more likely to take on the role of teacher, while others were more likely to concentrate on the play itself, acting more as a play partner.

Interestingly, to our knowledge, the two other roles identified in our sample—facilitator and observer—have not been found in prior research on play. One could argue that these two roles are specific to our study (qualitative approach) and sample (urban middle-class families). Thus, future research might wish to explore whether these additional roles can also be found in other populations of mothers (and fathers). However, the literature on parental socialization goals might provide some support for our findings. Various socialization goals have been found to be relevant to mothers, such as autonomy and relatedness (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008), acquisition of different types of knowledge and skills, and cultural and social behavioral norms (Luo et al., 2013). In our study, those mothers who were identified with the role of facilitator highlighted the goal of supporting their children's autonomy and independence in play, providing assistance only when needed. Furthermore, facilitator-mothers maintained that they intentionally let their child make choices, explore the world, and play. Similarly, observer-mothers affirmed that they allowed their child to act and play independently in play situations. However, their goal was the joy of play, time spent together, and the chance to learn about their child, rather than supporting independence in and of itself. It may be possible that the two additional roles reflect subtle differences in the mothers' socialization goals for their child. Thus, more research is needed to investigate variations in maternal roles in play activity and how roles differ, for example, with regard to the parental goals involved in engaging in play activities with children.

The present findings may also be used to generate new hypotheses regarding the distinction between formal and informal socialization goals (Luo et al., 2013) and how such goals might be differentially reflected in play activities. It may be possible that the mothers who described their role in play under the theme of teaching place greater emphasis on formal goals, i.e., academic and cognitive objectives, such as numeracy, literacy, and arts, and the importance of the child's academic learning. When such goals are factored in play activities, these mothers might use play as an opportunity to teach their child academic concepts and skills. Conversely, mothers who identified with the roles of facilitator, observer, and play partner might place greater emphasis on informal socialization goals, including socio-emotional objectives to mediate social, cultural, and emotional knowledge and values.

While the four roles emerging from the mothers' narratives featured in each of the three communities, there was cross-community variation in the number of mothers who were categorized in a given role. Parents' beliefs and goals regarding play are likely to reflect the values of their specific country or cultural community (Gaskins, 2006). However, a meta-analysis of cross-cultural research showed that most value-based differences are found within countries, not between countries (Taras et al., 2016). Similar to other studies on children's play (Cote & Bornstein, 2009), we recognize the great variation in the mothers' play roles within each of the communities examined. However, we cannot rule out that the mothers thought of different aspects of play, such as pretend play, structured play, storybook time, etc., each of which might require them to take on a different role. Importantly, the findings only apply to the participants of this study and cannot be generalized to the entire community or countries involved.

Consequently, the variations across the study communities have to be interpreted with caution, and we can only speculate about the explanations behind the cross-community

variations. Prior research suggests that middle-class parents from Germany and the USA focus on supporting their children's individuality and independent functioning (Kärtner et al., 2016; Keller et al., 2006; Keller & Lamm, 2005). The tendency toward a preference for the role of facilitator in the New York City (24/36) and, to a lesser extent, Muenster (15/34) samples suggests an emphasis on the importance of children's autonomy. The mothers from Chennai (19/34) tended to emphasize the role of teacher. Parents from India hold high expectations about their children's education (Raghavan, 2015), similar to parents from other Asian communities (e.g., in China and Taiwan) who also place a high value on their children's academic achievement and, as a consequence, engage their children in academic activities from a very early age (Pearson & Rao, 2003; Rao, McHale, & Pearson, 2003; Wang & Tamis-LeMonda, 2003). In our data, the mothers from Chennai emphasized the importance of providing information such as names of objects, colors, animals, and shapes to the child during play. They also expected their child to learn such constructs from play. However, cultural variation in play roles and how such variation might be reflected in play activities between mothers and their children (e.g., how mothers structure and scaffold play) requires further research before conclusions can be drawn regarding mothers' emphasis on certain roles and goals for play activities.

5. Implications, future directions, and limitations of the study

The present study applied a qualitative, content-driven research approach to examine semi-structured interviews with mothers about their role in play activities. Most studies on parenting use quantitative research; however, interviewing parents (and giving them the freedom to elaborate on their thoughts and beliefs about parenting and their role in their child's

development) might add another important perspective to the study of parents' role in play. Qualitative research can be useful when examining more sensitive or complex research topics and to inform quantitative data (Fielding & Thomas, 2008; Price & Nicholl, 2013). Interviews offer a way of understanding the world from another person's unique point of view, instead of providing predetermined questionnaire options that can narrow or even modify the actual thoughts of the person. In qualitative research, interviews are a widely accepted and commonly used data collection method (Darlington & Scott, 2002), but the data also require an appropriate method of analysis. Words can have multiple meanings. They can be open to interpretation and may only be understood in the context of other words. Therefore, they should not necessarily be translated into numbers; they should be analyzed in their own meaningful form (Miles & Huberman, 1984). The method of qualitative content analysis applied in the present study revealed predominant concepts, expressions, and main meanings in forms such as profiles, patterns, and orientations (Patton, 2002). In our data, we found four common roles from the mothers' narratives and the specific goals that characterized each of these roles. The qualitative content analysis allowed us to identify two new roles—facilitator and observer—thus adding to the literature on maternal roles in children's play. In future, more qualitative research in the field of parenting will be needed to obtain more in-depth information and to unravel complex and sensitive phenomena and their combinations. Such research might be particularly informative for understanding intra- and intercultural variation in values and parenting practices and how this relates to mother-child play.

In line with prior research (Göncü et al., 2000; Keller, 2007; Roopnarine, 2012; Roopnarine et al., 1993), all the mothers in our sample had a positive attitude toward play, describing it as meaningful and important. Several goals regarding play activities (i.e., academic,

social, emotional, and behavioral) were mentioned. It is likely that, in all three communities, the mothers were aware of the diverse possibilities of play for their child's development and of their own role in supporting and scaffolding play. Mothers have a crucial role in guiding the substance and direction of their children's development (Parmar et al., 2008). Therefore, it might be beneficial for future research to obtain data on children's performance and outcomes in order to examine the effect of different maternal roles on children's skills and development.

It is important to note that several limitations warrant caution in interpreting the results of this study. First, the sample size was small, and all the mothers were highly educated and from middle-class families. Participation in the study was voluntary, resulting in a nonrandom sample. Moreover, the convenience sampling and recruitment might have resulted in additional selection bias. In particular, in Chennai and New York City, the recruitment was conducted through flyers distributed at early education centers. It is important to acknowledge that the views of the mothers may have been influenced by the educational philosophies of the early education centers. Furthermore, the communities represented in the study are only examples of the German, Indian, and American societies and were each recruited in urban areas; they cannot be considered as representative of the three countries. Within our samples, ethnic diversity was larger among the mothers from Chennai and New York City than among those from Muenster. Thus, we acknowledge that the findings apply only to the participants of this research and that future research should include larger samples of mothers from all socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds and from urban and rural areas.

Second, the sample consisted only of mothers. Although mothers are typically the primary caregivers of young children, the important role of fathers has been widely acknowledged. Consequently, fathers' roles and goals regarding play should be included in

future research on play. Third, the data consisted of participants' self-reported answers to a semi-structured interview. The findings reflected the mothers' views but did not show whether they actually incorporated these views and goals into play situations with their children. To verify the findings, there is a need for observational data and analyses of play situations between mothers and children. Fourth, the qualitative content analysis was conducted by a single researcher. Including a second interpreter would have strengthened the reliability of the analysis, especially in cases where the mothers' narrative included remarks regarding different types of roles or goals in play. Finally, the sample consisted only of mothers of two-year-old children. It is possible that mothers' roles and goals change as the child gets older. Therefore, future studies might wish to replicate the study with mothers of children of different ages and use longitudinal designs to study possible shifts in mothers' roles in play due to their child's age.

6. Conclusions

This study explored how mothers describe their role in play activities with their toddlers. Mothers from three different communities (Muenster, Germany; Chennai, India; New York City, USA) participated. We identified four roles from their narratives, which we labeled facilitator, teacher, observer, and play partner. Specific goals characterized each of these roles. The majority of mothers viewed their role in play either as a facilitator of their child's independent learning or as a teacher giving more guided instruction. Building on prior research, our data revealed two previously unidentified roles (facilitator and observer). We also found variability in how the mothers described their role in play activities with their child, both within each of the three communities and across communities, which is consistent with prior research on play (Cote & Bornstein, 2009; Göncü et al., 2000). In our sample, two-thirds of the mothers from New York

City were identified as facilitators, half of those from Chennai were identified as teachers, and the largest variation with regard to the four roles was found among the mothers from Muenster. Importantly, all the mothers in our sample valued play as an important activity for their children's development and were aware of the diverse developmental opportunities of play and the joy of play itself.

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