Commentary

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Accounting for Change: Priming, Power, and Plot

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Developmental psychology has taken a cultural turn, away from a focus solely on individual cognitive structures and processes, towards a new recognition of the role of culture. As it does so, a new task for researchers has become apparent: that of articulating in detail the way that children’s development is located in social context. What kind of influence does the culture in which a child lives have on their development? How does the organization of society define the trajectory of development? Questions such as these are intellectual, but they also have important practical, political, and ethical dimensions: today on a shrinking planet very different societies have come into close and extended contact, diverse cultural groups struggle to learn how to get along, and their children are increasingly living and learning side by side.

A central aim of the paper by Corsaro, Molinari and Rosier is to explore an interpretive understanding of children’s development [c.f. Corsaro, 1996]. Specifically, it is ‘to demonstrate the power of interpretive reproduction as a theory of human development’, where interpretive reproduction is a concept that Corsaro, Molinari and Rosier employ to acknowledge at the same time several important aspects of development in context: the ‘innovative and creative aspects of children’s participation in society’, the consequent fact that children are ‘contributing to cultural production and change’, and at the same time that children are ‘constrained by the existing social structure’.

For a quarter of a century William Corsaro has conducted sensitive ethnographies of young children’s lives, with a participant-observation component that one might not expect from an adult researcher working with children. I became aware of his work when I literally followed in his footsteps onto the playground of the U.C. Berkeley Harold Jones Child Study Center, where he had conducted an insightful study of friendships in nursery school [Corsaro, 1979, 1981, 1985]. (I was working on a project directed by Norma Haan, of the Institute for Human Development.)

That Corsaro is a sociologist rather than a developmental psychologist means that he has always brought things to the study of children’s development that the typical psychological investigation has not. His recognition of the importance of
peer culture is one of these things; another is his appreciation of the value of careful ethnography. Since those early days in Berkeley his interests have grown to encompass the influence on development of larger social structures, an interest that complements rather than replaces the ‘microsociolinguistic analysis’ [Corsaro, 1985, p. 47] that has been present throughout, and it is this interest that is central to the study reported here, conducted with Luisa Molinari and Katherine Brown Rosier.

Corsaro, Molinari and Rosier compare and contrast the experiences of two children, Zena and Carlotta, in early childhood education settings in the United States and Italy, respectively. They argue that the very different policies underlying these children’s educational experiences define ‘priming events’ that prepare them very differently for the institution of formal schooling.

In my commentary on this paper I shall attend to three points where I applaud the focus that Corsaro, Molinari and Rosier have adopted, but where at the same time I have questions about their treatment. These points are, first, attention to the way social context both enables and constrains development; second, the operation of power; and, third, the importance of narrative.

**How Context Works**

Unlike many sociologists, Corsaro has never assumed either that children are already little adults, or that becoming an adult is a simple matter of ‘socialization’: the individual child unproblematically internalizing the norms and roles of the surrounding social order. Corsaro, Molinari and Rosier compare their approach with that of sociocultural theory, which they describe as sharing their assumption that children are active agents in their own development, but often not acknowledging, as they do, the ‘constraining nature of society’. I would say, though, that there is a general consonance between the approach Corsaro, Molinari and Rosier have adopted and that of sociocultural theory (and support for this interpretation would seem to be provided by the fact that their paper ends with a claim that the Italian kindergarten uses ‘zone of proximal development’ notions).

And I expect that Corsaro, Molinari and Rosier would agree with the statement Mark Tappan and I made recently: ‘The task, as we understand it, is to characterize and study the reciprocal relationship between child and society with particular attention to temporality and transformation over time, at two scales, those of psychological development and historical change’ [Packer & Tappan, 2001, p. 29]. The social context in which children participate and change ‘is not static but dynamically both a precondition and a product of human development’ [p. 30]. The explication of development in context will need to avoid the twin errors of describing students either as merely appropriating the cultural tools of their elders, or as active agents but in a static, unchanging social world.

If it is the case that the approach adopted by Corsaro and his colleagues is consonant with a sociocultural approach, then some comments I have made about sociocultural theory may be relevant here. I have proposed that if sociocultural theory is to make good on the project of describing development in social context, there are a couple of steps that must be taken. First, sociocultural researchers must better articulate a conception of the larger society. Notions of culture as ‘intentional world’, as ‘community of practice’, as ‘medium of mediational means’ are important, but they don’t readily extend to enable us to grasp the complexity of the political and
economic organization of modern society. Second, we must articulate a more detailed conception of the person, in order to get beyond a notion of development as solely epistemological change [Packer, 2001b; Packer & Goicoechea, 2000].

Judged in these terms, it seems to me that questions can be raised about the claims Corsaro, Molinari and Rosier make about the impact of the context in which the American and Italian children they study are situated, and the way they represent the children’s development. They do attend to the organization of the preschool and school settings the children attend. They do write of the educational and developmental philosophies – of Headstart on the one hand, Reggio Emilia on the other – that have defined the policies these settings instantiate. They consider briefly how these have changed historically. But they locate these settings in their larger national contexts only very minimally. Elsewhere Corsaro has described – offering what he calls an ‘ethnohistorical context’ – how preschool programs in Italy ‘were caught up in labor militancy, youth movements, the women’s movement, and other urban protest movements [Corsaro, 1996, p. 427; cf. Corsaro & Emiliani, 1992]. But those of us unfamiliar with the political and economic institutions of modern Italy are left wondering how the Reggio Emilia system is to be viewed: as preparing citizens, workers? As serving a middle class, or poorer workers’ I don’t mean to suggest there are simple answers to these questions. But they need to be asked, if we are to understand how ‘Schools are caught in the middle of competing agendas. On the one hand, (US public) schools are asked to ensure that all students achieve to the best of their ability. On the other hand, schools are asked to ensure that all students gain access to the same educational opportunities ... [and] teachers and students mutually adapt to the organizational and pedagogical dilemmas that educational policies and practices pose for them’ [Mehan, 1998, p. 254–255].

As it stands, Corsaro, Molinari and Rosier draw a somewhat tenuous connection between the policies behind these early childhood education programs, the organization of academic tasks, especially those they consider to be ‘priming events’, and individual children’s outcomes. For example, one priming event in Zena’s Headstart Program is a scripted questioning strategy that Corsaro, Molinari and Rosier trace back to an underlying philosophy of providing drills to compensate for deficiencies, and trace forward to Zena’s anxiety and perfectionism in elementary school. At the same time, they write of the ‘social and communicative skills’ that Zena and Carlotta ‘acquired’ in their respective programs. Whether it is ‘skill’ or ‘perfectionism’, these outcomes seem couched still in individualistic terms. Although Corsaro, Molinari and Rosier insist that ‘the development of humans is always collective and transitions are always collectively produced and shared with significant others’, this collective character isn’t strongly conveyed by their analysis.

And is it fair to say that the Headstart program ‘falls far short of the Italian system?’ Is there a truly cross-cultural criterion we can apply to make such a judgment? Corsaro, Molinari and Rosier place emphasis on a ‘smooth transition’ from preschool to elementary school, and on ‘continuity’ in transition. But they don’t explain why these are to be valued, and they offer no critique of formal schooling. Is ‘preparation’ for formal schooling an unmitigated good? It depends, surely, on what the schools are doing. And this typically changes over a nation’s history. When Corsaro, Molinari and Rosier state that Zena experienced problems that ‘are in many ways directly related to structural features and power relations that underlie early education policy in the United States’ it is not entirely clear what the evidentiary basis is for this claim.
Effects of Power

Corsaro, Molinari and Rosier wish to correct the general failure or reluctance on the part of child development researchers to explore the role of power, and its consequent inequities. They are especially interested in how power relations lead to social policies that 'support and constrain' children's development. Again I applaud their aim. Yet when Corsaro, Molinari and Rosier draw our attention to power in this paper, it is primarily at the 'macro' level. They point out that in the case of US public schooling, the system of primarily local financial support 'is directly related to social class and power relations', and that adoption of the Italian Reggio Emilia schools was hampered by the power of the Catholic Church in southern Italy.

One wishes they had extended this attention to power into the classroom. Foucault [1982, p. 208] suggests that 'what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead it acts upon their actions: an action on an action, on existing actions or on those which might arise in the present or future'. My own recent analyses of the classroom as a context to development has paid some attention to power by borrowing from Hegel the notions of a dialectic of desire and recognition. The action on another's actions that Foucault emphasizes is conducted through pragmatic moves that impact the other's prestige, standing, reputation, and so on, and in the attitude a child adopts [Packer & Greco-Brooks, 1999; Packer & Goicoechea, 2000].

Attention to the effects of power in adult-child interaction is growing – for example, Leavitt [2001], also looking at preschool, shows that even very young children adopt a political position in the social world. Power relations can be seen in the everyday interactions between caregivers and children, and Leavitt shows, somewhat surprisingly, that these relations flow both ways – the children are not powerless. And Debold [2001] explores the relations of power that are operating in fundamental cultural distinctions such as that between the sexes. Debold describes how gender differences become inscribed on the child's body. Indeed, culture can be viewed as fundamentally the operation of power, its play, a place and process of domination, exclusion, and division [c.f. Packer & Tappan, 2001, p. 9].

Telling Stories

In these pages, I have applauded the attention that Corsaro, Molinari and Rosier give to understanding the complex enabling and constraining factors that social context contributes to human development. I have applauded also their insistence that the impact of power relations on development must be attended to. The third point of agreement I want to discuss here is the emphasis Corsaro, Molinari and Rosier place on the importance of narrative. However, the precise locus of their emphasis remains somewhat unclear to me. There are (at least) three distinct ways in which narrative is important to those of us interested in understanding children's development in context – and Corsaro, Molinari and Rosier give some attention to each of them. I think it is helpful to distinguish them clearly.

First is the 'narrative construal' of reality that Corsaro, Molinari and Rosier write of, citing Bruner's work [c.f. Bruner, 1987]. This is illustrated in their paper by the analysis of a segment of discourse from an exchange between Zena and her peers. They interpret the details of this interaction as evidence that the children, far
from being ‘deficient’ and in need of remedial, behaviorist training, have sophisticated abilities to construct and maintain a shared topic. Exploring this role of narrative, then, would involve attention to the narratives told by children and their caretakers as the everyday world of the kindergarten classroom is reproduced.

The second contribution of narrative is that it is used as a device by the ethnographer. This point has been much emphasized recently, with its implications for the ‘truth’ of a research report, and for the use of alternative genres of writing [Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Geertz, 1988]. So Corsaro, Molinari and Rosier offer two ‘case reports’ that tell the stories of Zena and Carlotta.

Third, there is ‘narrative analysis’ as one approach to the qualitative analysis of texts and text-analogs. In an earlier draft of this paper, Corsaro, Molinari and Rosier described what they are doing as narrative analysis; they still describe each of their ethnographic reports as a ‘narrative case analysis’. I would agree with the suggestion that all three of these functions of narrative is worthy of further exploration, but I think it is important to keep them distinct. People do use narrative in quotidian interactions to sustain a shared reality and their identity in that reality [Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1984]. The analysis of these narratives in terms of levels of both plot and discourse and their elements [Martin, 1986; Wortham, 2001] can be very illuminating.

I too believe that a research report can profitably take narrative form, though I think there are some difficulties to be overcome here. I have indeed argued that:

Narrative suits both the logic of interpretive analysis and the aims of sociocultural inquire ... Narrative is uniquely suited to a particular kind of descriptive and explanatory account, one shaped by the benefits of hindsight but capturing events unfolding in time. There is a sense of the whole informed by an understanding, achieved in retrospect, of the larger social and historical contexts in which people acted but knew little about. A narrator can rightly employ a certain omniscience in exposition, looking back ... But narrative can also reconstruct events unfolding in time, their twists and turns, people’s surprises and disappointments. Juxtaposing the partial viewpoint of the participant with larger forces not clearly visible at the time is narrative’s special potency. The same twofold approach – partial understanding of actor; larger social/historical system – that a sociocultural analysis of human development seeks [Packer, 2001a, p. 8].

But the two case reports offered by Corsaro, Molinari and Rosier are not true narratives, I think. They contain devices that the typical narrative does not – excerpts from fieldnotes; lists; meta-instructions such as ‘see below’ – and they omit elements the typical narrative does contain [Prince, 1987].

The broader problem is that the use of narrative is just not something that most academic readers, even those of journals like Human Development, are prepared for. I recently decided to write an account of school children’s development in economic and political context in the genre of creative nonfiction [Gerard, 1996], arguing that ‘this narrative is my analysis, designed for performative effect rather than expository content’ [Packer, 2001a, p. 9]. However, we are not trained to see the analysis in a narrative, to find the theory embedded in a story. I don’t know quite what the solution is here, other than simply persisting, and I applaud Corsaro, Molinari and Rosier for their effort at bringing a narrative approach to the study of young children. That they did not fully succeed, in my opinion, says more about the comparatively unexplored status of interpretive inquiry in child development research than it does about any deficiencies on the part of the authors.
Conclusions

In short I find much in this article that is interesting and worth reading. Attention to context as both constraining and enabling, to power and its complex consequences, to narrative as a way of being and a way of knowing—each of these is an important matter, and it is impressive to see all three brought together in a single paper. Hopefully this report will encourage others to further explore these lines of inquiry.

References