

The Ontology of Schooling

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In both the United States and Mexico our children are faced with challenges which we need to help them overcome. Economic inequality, prejudiced judgments about non-mainstream cultures, restricted access to quality education are just three of the challenges that come to mind.

Developmental psychologists can contribute in various ways. One of these, I believe, is to help educators, politicians, and others who work with children, understand how such challenges impact children's psychological development. I would maintain that there are important, and mutually constituting, linkages here between theory and practice. Practical initiatives will fail if they are undertaken without the knowledge that an adequate theory provides. But it is equally true that practice can contribute to the building of theory. After all, put straightforwardly, theory is what we know. Our knowledge comes from practical engagement, and it can guide practical efforts at change.

At present, theory about children's development is in the midst of significant changes. It is no longer considered that a cognitive developmental or constructivist theory of development is adequate. Such theory—such as that of Piaget—pays insufficient attention to the role played in children's development by such considerations as social relationships and cultural context. And a universalist theory such as Piaget's, which posits a single, normative series of developmental stages, too readily lends itself to 'deficit' and 'deprivation' interpretations of what can more adequately be understood as developmental differences. If there is only a single pathway to development, a difference between two children is most easily interpreted as one of them being more advanced than the other.

In addition, the Piagetian view of development focuses only on children's knowledge, and the processes of construction of knowledge (primarily of the material world, though the theory has been extended into other domains such as social relations and morality).

In this paper I shall sketch a theory of development that examines a deeper level than that of knowledge and processes of knowing. It is not that I think knowledge unimportant, but I suggest that in addition we need to be attentive to changes in a child's *identity* that take place during development.

My suggestions are in general agreement with sociocultural of cultural psychological theories of children's development, such as the work of Cole,

Shweder, Rogoff, Lave and others. I differ in some key respects, however, with such theories and, in particular, I believe I am offering a more detailed examination of what 'identity' is and how it changes.

Much of my research that has been influenced by the theoretical abstractions that I shall sketch here (and that has in turn helped shape these abstractions) has been conducted in schools, and I am particularly interested in the ways that schooling changes the kind of person a child is. It is also the case that all of us, typically, have attended school, so it is a useful rhetorical strategy to build on this familiarity to illustrate the claims that I shall be making, especially since otherwise these may seem rather abstract. But it should not be inferred that what I offer is a theory only of schooling. On the contrary, I propose that the kinds of changes I shall describe, and the processes of change that I shall try to outline, are general ones, apparent in many places.

In this respect the theory of development I am offering might be called a 'universal' one. But it does not follow that I am proposing that there is a universal series of stages, or a single trajectory to development. On the contrary, I will be suggesting that there are many ways in which children can strive to resolve what are, nonetheless, universal aspects of human relatedness and human being. Different social contexts and different cultures offer different solutions; and within a single context and culture children can adopt a variety of stances to these solutions. So this is a theoretical framework in which *difference* is central, not deficit.

When it comes to practical relevance...

Development as Ontological Change

In this paper, then, I propose a way of looking at development as a process that brings about changes in the child that are not only epistemological but also ontological. That is to say, changes in the kind of person the child is; changes in their identity. This way of viewing development highlights the importance of social relationships and interpersonal interaction. I shall propose that ontological change is visible in the details of this everyday interaction.

I shall seek to do this by focusing on one social institution that all of us are familiar with: the school. I will draw upon your familiarity of schooling to draw your attention to the ways that schooling entails ontological changes in the child.

Ontology, of course, is about being. Where epistemology is the systematic consideration, in philosophy and elsewhere, of knowledge, of issues of knowing, truth, meaning, sense; ontology is the consideration of what is, what exists, what it means for something--or somebody--to be.

I'll start with what is surely the unarguable fact that schools are a principal societal institution designed, more or less deliberately, to change the kind of person children become. Schooling is best understood not simply as a place where knowledge is transmitted, or even where knowledge is constructed, nor simply as a new community of practice: it is a major arena for what I and a number of other people are calling the "production of persons." The task, then, is to figure out how this production goes on.

Consider the fact that educational researchers will always refer to children in classrooms as 'students,' but often without pausing to consider what this new title means. What does it mean to **be** a 'student'? How is it that a child **becomes** a student?

'Student' and 'teacher' are new **subject positions**. In most schools, children and adults now relate in an **impersonal** way, distinct from the concrete particularity, the personal ties of family relationships. This is surely no accident. (Nor is it necessarily a bad thing. If we complain that schools are alienating we need to consider carefully just what that accusation is. I'll return to that point later.)

Back in 1968, Robert Dreeben recognized these new relationships in the school, how 'student' and 'teacher' are positions distinct from the persons who occupy them. In his book "On What is Learned in School," Dreeben asserted that the schools' "prime function is to bring about developmental changes in individuals," and he suggested that "the traditional notion of learning as a function of teaching, of engagement in instructional activities, may be an overly restricted view of what happens during the schooling process" (p. 20). But Dreeben tried to explain what happens when child becomes student in terms of role theory, as the internalization of new norms and values. That approach is unsatisfactory, in part because it tries to explain concrete behavior in terms of something ideal. The task is really to do the opposite: to explain how people become able to 'do' a role successfully and appropriately – to live an ideal – **in** and **with** their concrete behavior.

For example, there are forms of discourse associated with the position of student, and one can readily observe interactions in which the teacher leads children introduces these forms. I don't have time for detail here, but in a paper in the *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, David Greco-Brooks and I analyze interactions on the first day of first grade, where the teacher worked to establish an impersonal "you"--a subject who must raise a hand to be recognized as speaker, who must follow the classroom rules, pay attention, put a thinking cap on--where the students are indexed as a class instead of as individuals. The teacher worked, too, to shift the topic from the family – where the children had taken it, bragging about what made them special – to the way "first graders" talk about family in the classroom. Discourse moved from the family dog to

'animals,'--academic subject matter. Changes, then, in context, in topic, and in turn-taking devices.

The shift from 'family member' to 'student' is already an ontological transformation. The new kind of subject doesn't replace the old—the children return home at the end of each day—but nor is it simply added on. The child assumes different modes of subjectivity in the two different contexts. Where the family is lived as natural necessity, in relationships among particular concrete individuals, in school the child becomes one of a type.

Second. I've mentioned the classroom rules. The classroom is a new community of practice in which 'student' and 'teacher' are governed by apparently objective constraints, and in which people engage with apparent abstractions. The first day of first grade, again, found the teacher introducing the classroom rules: "Do Your Work; Talk Softly; Line up Quietly; No Running ." They were presented as an objective disciplinary order. "Learn the rules," said the teacher, "so that we can get along together... this year."

At the same time, the classroom becomes populated with abstractions: entities understood in terms of apparently independent, decontextualized properties. These abstractions can't exist in their own right. They must be continually reproduced in the practices of the community. Brian Rotman, in his wonderful book "Ad Infinitum" (subtitled "The Ghost in Turing's Machine: Taking God out of Mathematics and Putting the Body Back In") suggests that abstraction can be seen as a matter of forgetting--forgetting indexicality, forgetting sense and meaning. Consider for example three girls working on a pizza problem, combining toppings. One girl rejects another's choice of toppings, saying, "We might actually have to **eat** this pizza!" But the third talks in a way that makes it clear the **actual** toppings chosen are totally irrelevant to the task. She has successfully forgotten sense and meaning.

How do schools introduce these abstractions, these abstract entities of modern life? The answer surely lies in part in the way school demands that 'good students' become skilled in the use of the symbolic media of reading, writing and arithmetic. These forms of representation permit a variety of new modes of engagement, (Scribner, 1968/1997), but typically, in the traditional classroom, they are used to foster a mediated, objectifying attitude to what has to this point been grasped with immediacy (Serpell & Hatano, 1997). Participation is transformed into inspection. When children--as students--write essays about their family, use the calendar to render time abstract and organized, and so on, each of these practices involves a new manner of relating to the world, to self, and to others, an attitude of objectification and abstraction. Ontological changes.

Third point. As long ago as 1959, Talcott Parsons noted how a single 'axis of achievement' operates in elementary school. Children are sorted along this axis; a process Parsons viewed approvingly as a functional preparation for the

different tasks and strata of adult life. Particularly in the early grades, little distinction is made between the cognitive and ethical aspects of classroom work; the major criterion of recognition is achievement-motivation--crudely put, the child's willingness to work. It seems to me that this evaluation of students' academic work and their conduct is a crucial form of **recognition** of children by the adult who teaches them. And that this is transformative; ontologically transformative.

We often think that self-consciousness is the result of a person reflecting on him- or herself, but suppose instead that it emerges in relationship with other people. Alexandre Kojève proposed that **desire**, especially desire for **recognition**, creates a lack, an absence, a hole, in the human subject. "The man who attentively contemplates a thing, who wants to see it as it is without changing anything... forgets himself... [But] when man experiences a desire... he necessarily becomes aware of himself" (1947/1969, p. 37, original emphasis). Each of us is a "greedy emptiness," and desire directed towards another person, another "greedy emptiness" (p. 40) leads not just to consciousness of self but to self-consciousness. Shoshana Felman, along the same lines, suggests that "[T]eaching is not a purely cognitive, informative experience, it is also an emotional, erotic experience... [and] cognition is always both motivated and obscured by love" (Felman, 1987, p. 86)

Participation in the classroom community of practice is motivated by desire for recognition by and connection with the teacher. I could show you how children make conversational bids for attention and admiration in their teacher's eyes, as early as the first day of first grade. Evaluating student work is the **institutionalized** way the teacher gratifies the children's desire for connection and recognition, not meeting these needs directly however, but transmuting them. These evaluations offer a basis for the child's identity as student; it is in relationship with their teacher that the children become students, drawn into the classroom community of practice and its new way of being.

The **power** of evaluation becomes evident here, I think. To really reform what happens in the classroom, one must change the kind of evaluation that takes place. It is no accident that major reform initiatives--the market-place reforms now underway in many U.S. states, for example--center around demands for new tests, new measures of "outcome," not only for students but also for teachers and schools. Recognition in the eyes of others defines--for all of us, not just for school-children--**who** we are. Ontology again.

But this offer of a basis for identity is not always accepted by the children.

It might seem that identity is just a matter of membership of a community. To quote Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, "in societies with very simple division of labor... everyone pretty much is what he is supposed to be... identities are easily recognizable" (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 164). But in

more complex societies membership is the start of a **struggle** for identity, an attempt to overcome division and achieve wholeness, unity—to become self-same. There are **costs** to membership and participation in a community of practice, as well as benefits.

The costs are paid in the form of binary divisions that become lived: dualisms of mind and body, reason and emotion, thought and action (Martin, 1993). Mind itself, as we typically understand it, is a product of this kind of social relation and culture: disembodied and cerebral, quietly reflective, dispassionate and deliberate.

Of course the oppositions of thought and action, conscious and unconscious, self and other, subject and object are produced, not natural. Are these divisions avoidable, then? If they have their origins in the division of labor, perhaps in some utopia they can be escaped. Or perhaps to be human is to be split; to become a participant in culture is to be divided. There is what Jean Hyppolite called a “double movement” to culture (Hyppolite, 1946/1974, p. 378): our activity produces a social world that defines who we are, but that world also confronts us as something alien. Hyppolite said, “To cultivate oneself is not to develop harmoniously, as in organic growth, but to oppose oneself and rediscover oneself through a rending and separation” (Hyppolite, 1946/1974, p. 385). We become divided from ourselves, so that we need for us to find ourselves again.

These costs of schooling are ones most of us, here, considered worth paying, I suspect. The benefit is full membership of the abstract, albeit alienated, world of modern society. But not all school children would agree with us. For various reasons, some reject the classroom community.

People actively strive to come to terms with the practices of their community, adopting a stance or attitude, taking a stand on the way membership of a community has defined them. As they do this their activity acts upon that community, reproducing it or transforming it—the relationship between person and community is a dynamic one, each acting upon the other.

Fifth, it is important to insist that students are active participants in these arrangements, not passive recipients. Contrary to the formulations of some critical pedagogists, the classroom is a site of actual cultural production, not just a site of exchange. As students, children are actively engaged in the ongoing reproduction of the classroom community of practice--and sometimes its transformation. Particular kinds of discourse are associated with the subject position of student in the traditional classroom.

For example, I visited a middle school class where the teacher attempted to combine project-based science with a authoritarian disciplinary style. Teamwork rapidly degenerated into acrimony and sullenness, as the children struggled--and failed--to reconcile the demand that they “do their job,” (as the

teacher put it) with the lack of any opportunity to build the social bonds teamwork is based on.

Some children rejected their peers, saying bitterly “I can’t work with him,”--and this was true, for the conditions for collaboration hadn’t been established. Others rejected school and the teacher. “She’s a bitch; I hate school,” one told me.

Students always actively align with, or against, the power and authority of their teacher. They accept, or reject, the terms of the classroom community of practice, embracing, or seeking to avoid or to overcome, the splitting that participation demands of them. We’ve all heard teachers talk, if we’ve not done so ourselves, of students with “attitude.” When a student takes an oppositional stance their ‘attitude’ becomes salient and problematic, but in a real sense attitude’ is **always** an important outcome of schooling.

Indeed, it is likely that John Dewey, had this in mind when he wrote that “character and mind... are attitudes of participative response in social affairs” (1916, p. 316-317; cf. Packer, 2001).

Six Ontological Tropes

Without making it explicit, I’ve woven this presentation around six themes, six different “ontological tropes” that any account of development as a change of the person, not just a change of the structure of knowledge, might profitably consider. I call them tropes because they can be found, in different forms, in the writings of a whole range of post-Hegelian thinkers--Marx and subsequent dialectical materialists, including Vygotsky and Ilyenkov, as well as phenomenologists, including Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, such post-modernists as Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze and Lacan, and post-structuralists such as Bourdieu and Latour. The significance of these names is that they each represent work to explore the *non-dualistic* ontology that Hegel offered, and I would argue that their writing offers a way to trace the roots of contemporary sociocultural or cultural developmental theory. (Packer & Goicheaia (2000) explores each of these tropes, and their relevance to both constructivism and sociocultural theory, in more detail.) The six tropes are these:

- 1. The Person is Constructed.** The ‘individual’ is not a natural entity. Indeed what we call ‘mind’ is not something natural. These are both human products, the bitter-sweet fruits, of social and historical productions. This is a constructivism, even a social constructivism, but notice that what is constructed is not just knowledge. The person, the knowing subject, is constructed. ‘Mind’ is not from the outset a distinct ontological realm, but a cultural and historical product of particular social arrangements. Again, we’re talking ontology, not just

epistemology. The mental schemata and processes of cognitive activity that constructivism emphasizes are formed in and through participation in specific social practices, themselves culturally and historically situated. The very formation of an 'inner' mental realm of deliberation and cognition is a product of specific practices and forms of relationship.

2. ...in a Social Context. The communities of practice in which we participate have a "constitutive causality"--they provide the backgrounds against which we understand what things are--and who we are. The classroom is one such social context, a community of practice in which abstractions take on reality.

3. ...Formed through Practical Activity. The child becomes 'student' in and through the everyday practical activity of classroom life; through the mundane everyday exchanges of the classroom community of practice.

4. ...and Formed in Relationships of Desire and Recognition. School works only if children recognize the teacher's authority, and if she recognizes them, typically through systematic forms of evaluation. This affective dimension of teaching and learning, its erotic component if you will, is greatly under-appreciated.

5. ...that can Split the Person. The community of practice of the classroom, and the relationship of student and teacher, has costs, for it makes contradictory demands of its participants.

6. ...Motivating the Search for Identity. And the child responds to these costs with a stance of either alignment or opposition, seeking to overcome this splitting. What we call "attitude" is the active stance the child adopts within the classroom community of practice. It's an ontologically determinative stance. And schooling is, I've proposed, always about "attitude."

Conclusions

I have proposed that we need a way of thinking about children's development as involving ontological change: change in who they are, in their identity, not simply in what and how they know. I have offered six "tropes": developmental processes of ontological change that I have suggested are at work everywhere. I have illustrated these tropes by drawing examples from school—a social institutions which certainly we expect to change our children, even if we developmental psychologists perhaps don't think explicitly about this expectation often enough, or as often as parents do.

But, as I said in the introduction to this paper, it should not be inferred that these ontological processes occur only in school. Anywhere that children participate in social practices, these processes will be seen. And insofar as the theme of this conference is "children's participation," I would be so bold as to suggest that we are all interested in these ontological changes. When we seek to have an influence on children's participation, in whatever setting, we are going to have an effect not just on what the child knows, but on how they are. That is why influencing children's participation is such an important matter, but at the same time why it is controversial and sometimes dangerous. When we influence the participation of a community's children, we change who these children are and who they will become. And when we change who the children become, we are altering their community, perhaps in ways we cannot anticipate. This is why influencing children's participation is a political matter, and why on occasions, I would predict, it will sometimes be met with strong opposition.

I said at the beginning that I believe that theory must, and can, have practical relevance. The prediction I have just made is one example of the relevance for practice of the theory I have proposed here, interpreting children's development in terms of ontological change. Are there other examples?

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