

Who we become depends on the company we keep and on what we do and say together

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Abstract

In this commentary, I focus on the construction of identity and the important role of discoursing in this process. Rather than being ‘influenced’ by external institutions, I argue, we form our identities by participating in the practices and discourses of many institutions and communities, appropriating their norms and values and, at the same time, transforming them in the light of those that we have appropriated from other communities. Identity construction can thus be seen as ongoing and as occurring preeminently in the situated actions and discourses in which we engage with particular others; these events mediate the mutually constitutive relationship between individual and society.

What becomes clear from a comparative reading of the papers that make up this special issue is that, together, they constitute a set of complementary perspectives on a central question: Why and how do people differentially construct their identities and the values, knowledge and skills that mediate their participation in the activities of the larger society of which they are members? While the authors of the individual papers explore a variety of different issues that arise from the specific data they investigate and the theoretical perspectives that they are currently exploring, they are, as the editors suggest, engaged in a dialogue with each other about a number of related themes. In my commentary, I want to take up two of them—identity and discourse.

The above question assumes the need to recognize the importance of (at least) three perspectives on activity: the societal, the interactional, and the individual. It also assumes the need to problematize the relationships between them. In several of her recent writings, Rogoff has questioned the appropriateness of the ways in which these relationships are typically represented diagrammatically in the work of developmental psychologists. As she points out, the tendency is to imply a unidirectional causal influence down the hierarchy from macro to micro. As an alternative, [Rogoff \(2003\)](#)

argues that “culture is not an entity that influences individuals. Instead individual and cultural processes are mutually constituting” (p. 51, emphasis in the original). In this light, she proposes that, when investigating an event, such as a school lesson, it should be recognized that it is the ensemble of “the interpersonal, personal and cultural-institutional aspects of the event [that] constitute the activity” (p. 58). All three are always in play. Nevertheless, as she acknowledges,

It is usually necessary to foreground some aspects of phenomena and background others simply because no one can study everything at once. However, the distinctions between what is in the foreground and what is in the background lie in our analysis and are not assumed to be separate entities in reality (p. 58).

This advice is certainly relevant when considering several of the papers in this issue. For example, Black (this issue) rightly argues for taking “teachers’ intentions” into account when trying to understand the ways in which inequalities of participation give rise to “the unequal distribution of educational capital.” However, in invoking the role of “cultural models,” there is a danger of falling into the misguided notion of unidirectional influence of which Rogoff warns. Black carefully avoids this tendency but it is evident where the effect of cultural models or influences of the local community are invoked by Davis (this issue) and Harris and Williams (this issue), respectively.

1. Identity construction IS participating in communities of practice

If we abandon the notion of “influence,” how are we to talk about the trajectories of identity development of individual students and teachers? How do they come to take the forms they do? Here, the appeal by several of the authors in this issue to the construct of “communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991) seems to offer a more “mutually constitutive” account. Like Rogoff, Lave and Wenger conceptualize learning and identity formation as “aspects of increasing participation in communities of practice [which] concerns the whole person acting in the world” (p. 49). On this account, learning is less a matter of individuals being shaped by the influence of more powerful individuals or institutions but rather of agents’ “crafting of identities.” As Lave (1996) explains:

Crafting identities is a social process, and becoming more knowledgeably skilled is an aspect of participation in social practice. By such reasoning, who you are becoming shapes crucially and fundamentally what you “know.” “What you know” may be better thought of as doing rather than having something-“knowing” rather

than acquiring or accumulating knowledge or information. “Knowing” is a relation among communities of practice, participation in practice, and the generation of identities as part of becoming part of ongoing practice and of individuals’ varying patterns of participation. (p. 157)

This way of thinking about learning and identity formation is echoed in Roth’s (this issue) emphasis on the close relationship between identity and action: “Participation in an activity mediates the nature of who a person is,” and the nature of the activity also mediates the sort of identity he or she constructs. As he says of two of the participants in the creek project, they “are not just students, but, through their participation, are environmentalists as well” and, as such, their actions also make visible the “ethico-moral character” of their agentively constructed identities.

Adopting this perspective, it becomes clear that it is not only students who are continually constructing and reconstructing their identities through their participation in community practices. This is very much the point of Williams, Corbin and McNamara’s (this issue) interpretation of the reflective discourses and narratives of the teachers they studied, as they tried to make sense of the contradictory activities of enacting the requirements of the externally imposed reform and of coordinating and supporting the mathematics teaching of colleagues in their schools. As the authors make clear, these teachers experienced conflicted identities because of the ethico-moral conflict between the different kinds of actions that they felt were called for by their different roles.

A similar conflict is experienced by the preservice teachers I work with. In their coursework they are encouraged to form a community of inquiry, in which they work on shared topics of their own choosing and considerable time is given to exploring ways in which they can create similar communities in their own future classrooms. However, they are also simultaneously spending time in “real” classrooms, where the pressure of standardized tests has led, in some school districts, to a restricted curriculum of basic literacy and numeracy that is required to be taught from the provided scripts. As many of these prospective teachers make clear, they are experiencing considerable difficulty in constructing their identities as teachers (cf. Oakes & Lipton, 2003). It seems very plausible, therefore, to hear the conflicting intentions that Black’s teacher expresses as arising from a similar conflict of identity as a teacher.

What is highlighted by all these accounts is the complex, multi-faceted nature of identity. In their exposition of communities of practice, Lave and Wenger (1991) focus, in each of their examples, on a single community. In our experienced lives, however, we all participate in multiple communities—in the home, at work, in leisure activities, and so on. In one sense, therefore, we have multiple identities, with the possibility of conflict between the values, beliefs and norms of action that each involves (cf. Solomon, this issue). But

the obverse of this individual “multiculturalism” is that each of the various communities in which we participate consists of members whose varied trajectories of identity construction enable them to contribute in ways that enrich and potentially transform the practices of the community, which, simultaneously, transform the possibilities for the identity construction of each of its members.

2. The mediating function of discoursing

As Roth (this issue) makes clear, identity is formed in action and action is almost always undertaken in conjunction with others. Discoursing is thus at the heart of the identity construction project, both as we plan and coordinate our joint actions, and as we reflect on their goals and outcomes in the narrative conversations in which we position ourselves and are positioned by others. This process begins at birth, as infants are included in the conversations that accompany the basic activities that sustain their own and their families’ survival and quality of life. For it is through the appropriation of the linguistic signs of his or her community that the infant becomes able to make sense of his or her experience in a manner that is in conformity with the society of which he or she is a member. As [Voloshinov \(1973\)](#) explains,

The reality of the inner psyche is the same reality as that of the sign. Psychic experience is the semiotic expression of the contact between the organism and the outside environment (p. 26).

Furthermore, because the sign is an “ideological” artifact, that is to say a carrier of cultural meaning, it is through the appropriation and use of the different “linguistic codes” of their immediate communities—and particularly the class-based codes, which, [Bernstein \(1975\)](#) argued, derive from their caregivers’ differential modes of involvement in material or symbolic production—that children develop the different cultural semiotic orientations that [Hasan \(2002\)](#) refers to as “mental dispositions.” As Harris and Williams (this issue) illustrate, these different dispositions tend to evoke differential treatment in school, with lower class and minority children often being assumed to have less developed language. However, as these authors point out, all children are capable of responding to open questions with extended answers when the classroom ethos is one of a community of inquiry and the topics under discussion are ones to which they can relate with interest on the basis of relevant experience ([Wells, 2002](#)). These are the conditions that give rise to discoursing that is cohesive. Roth’s study of cleaning up the creek is an excellent example of such a community.

However, it is not only children who learn through interaction with others. As the examples discussed in the previous section make clear, throughout our lives, it is in large part through the discoursing in which we

engage as participants in the various communities of practice of which we are members that we appropriate the cultural values and normative scripts that define our identities. It is not so much that these are imposed on us by external dominant institutions as that, by entering into the practices and discourses of these institutions, we come to assimilate them and make them our own—or, alternatively, to resist them with those that we have appropriated from other communities in which we participate.

3. Jointly undertaken action: the nexus of activity theory

Returning to the initial question in the light of my reflection on the papers that make up this issue, I should like to suggest that it can be productive to seek an answer by bringing Rogoff's three foci of analytic focus to bear on the three strata of [Leontiev's \(1981\)](#) model of activity. As [Rogoff \(2003\)](#) argues, all three foci are always relevant for the interpretation of any event; similarly, Roth (this issue) emphasizes the presuppositional relationships between the three strata in the situated realization of activity. Treating these two perspectives as orthogonal yields the following array ([Fig. 1](#)).

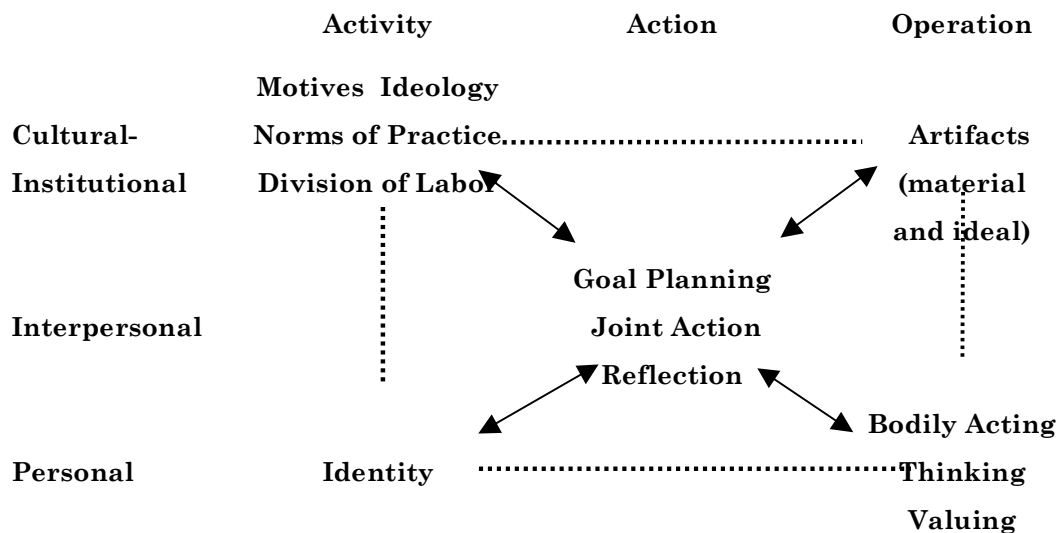


Figure 1. The Centrality of Interpersonal Action

What is highlighted by this display is the pivotal position of the intersection of the interpersonal focus with the stratum of action. Individual persons appropriate the normative values and practices of society and the tools (including language) that mediate their acting, thinking and valuing through their participation in interpersonally performed actions ([Vygotsky, 1981](#)). At the same time, since action transforms not only its object but also the persons and artifacts involved, it is through participation in such jointly undertaken actions that individuals instantiate society's normative practices

and to some degree transform them. Equally, it is in these actions performed with others that the identity construction project goes forward and is calibrated with societal ideological standards.

The implications that follow from bringing this perspective to bear on education are familiar but often ignored. Learning and teaching mediate between society and individual students in the joint actions (classroom activities) in which meanings are made through the interplay of the thinking and valuing of all participants, as these are enacted in bodily acting and discoursing. It is on how these actions are jointly carried out and personally experienced that the kind of identity that is constructed depends. It was perhaps for this reason that, in his last novel (about education), *Island*, Aldous Huxley had the ubiquitous mynah birds constantly repeat the cry, “Attention” (to the here and now).

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