

Language and Culture: Socialization through Personal Story-Telling Practice

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Key Words

Conversational story-telling • Genre theory • Language socialization • Personal story-telling

Miller, Cho, and Bracey provide a synthesis of a long-term program of research examining conversational personal story-telling practices in two working-class communities, South Baltimore (the more economically disadvantaged of the two), and 'Daly Park.' The authors proposed to: (1) 'characterize the working-class slant on its own terms, not simply as a departure from a middle-class standard'; (2) 'use new developments in genre theory as a platform from which to revisit and synthesize our previous empirical work'; and (3) include comparisons from a middle-class community, 'using the working-class stories to cast the middle-class stories in relief', thereby helping 'to illuminate both more clearly.'

The focus on the two communities was useful. Personal story-telling in these communities is 'highly valued and avidly practiced,' and children grow up with conversational narratives told around them by adults and older children all the time. Adult narrators were observed to engage in 'sustained and artful narrative performances,' often involving 'replayed conversational exchange(s).' 'Ordinary experiences become a little more vivid-funnier, scarier, more infuriating, more surprising (...) when people seize the stage as narrators and actors in their own multi-modal dramas.' Negative story content was 'privileged.' The themes of the stories were important – they were felt to carry a message for the children that challenging life experiences lay ahead. In addition, many stories could be 'recast as triumphs' over adversity, celebrating 'clever, manly, hell-raising' behavior, hell-raising by women, standing up to authority, and the general message that life's challenges had potential to be transformed to 'energy, hope, and humor.' Finally, the fact that adults challenged children on their story versions was felt to communicate a cultural message about the necessity of standing up for oneself and that the 'right to be heard and to have one's point of view accepted cannot be taken for granted.' Of particular

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interest from a developmental perspective was that children as young as two-and-a-half to three-years-old in Miller et al.'s data were able to produce dramatic effects in their stories (e.g., produce a dramatic enactment of choking), bring up stories in conversationally occasioned ways, include orienting information and conclude stories with codas and statements of moral positions. These are sophisticated narrative skills [Ervin-Tripp & Kuntay, 1997; Peterson & McCabe, 1983].

The overall research program has made significant contributions to our understanding of language and culture, and of how beliefs and values are passed on to children through language practices. Moreover, there are very few studies of the influence of social class on the socialization and development of children in the United States, where socioeconomic status is so often conflated with culture and ethnicity. Miller et al.'s research program has contributed significantly to this area of knowledge. In my comments, I first point to ways in which Miller et al.'s research on culture and communicative practice contributes to our understanding of development. Next, I synthesize the important educational implications raised by the study, particularly in terms of inter-group classroom communication, and point out some questions it raises for future research. Finally, I pose a question about the extent to which children's and adults' narrative practices are active choices for presenting the self rather than ways of 'seeing the world' imposed by the culture.

Culture, Communicative Practice, and Development

When educators or child development researchers observe children utilizing communicative practices and narrative styles that diverge from their expectations, they need an understanding of the language practices of the community to help situate those differences. Studies such as Miller et al.'s are essential in this regard. These studies are grounded in language socialization theory [Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986] and speech genre theory [see Miller, Hengst, Alexander, & Sperry, 2000 for a discussion of applying speech genre theory to personal story-telling research], which view language practices as carrying cultural and social meanings. More specifically, for members of a community, as a result of their participation in the everyday language routines of the community, forms become associated with 'indexical' or situational meanings (e.g., 'social identity, social act, social activity, affective or epistemic meaning' [Ochs, 1996, p. 410]). When these forms are invoked by members of the community, they call up or 'project' these meanings in the 'immediate situation at hand' [Ochs, 1996, pp. 411, 414], and these meanings may differ from those that are called up for members of a different community. I consider here two features of the S. Baltimore and Daly Park children's narrative styles whose meanings are illuminated through Miller et al.'s analyses.

First is the 'oppositional and narrative speech' style of the children. For the S. Baltimore and Daly Park children, the meanings that these practices index include the celebration of hell-raising and standing up to authority in the face of challenging life experiences, and the message that 'the right to be heard ... cannot be taken for granted.' But middle-class researchers do not have the same indexical meanings for those signs. They would make different inferences [Gumperz, 1982, 1996]. Research such as Miller et al.'s can help researchers remove their 'middle-class lens'

for a moment. The detailed ethnographic description of the family narrative practices in these communities informs child development and education researchers of the meaning that those practices hold for the children.

A second feature of the working-class children's narrative style on which Miller et al.'s data shed light is affective expression. South Baltimore and Daly Park children do not use emotion state words ('I was mad!'), as do middle-class participants, but rather use verbs ('I smashed him more'), reported speech and other linguistic forms. These forms do not conform to middle-class speakers' ways of talking. Speakers from middle-class communities are more likely to use 'school-based language,' which relies on 'strategies of nominalization' [Schleppegrell, 2001, p. 431] including 'elaboration of noun phrases through modifiers' [Schleppegrell, 2001, p. 438]. However, for S. Baltimore and Daly Park children and adults, verbs, reported speech and other linguistic forms may be preferred because they are 'better adapted to the dramatic form of this genre.' Looking to Miller et al.'s detailed ethnographic description of the meanings of communicative practices provides child development researchers with a deeper understanding of stylistic features of children's narrative skills and narrative development.

Educational Implications

Researchers only infrequently explore the multiple and varied developmental contexts of the same community of children. In prior work, Miller and Mehler [1994] found, after observing show-and-tell and other practices of three kindergartens, that 'opportunities to engage in oral narrative were extremely limited.'

I find it discouraging to learn that narrative practices in schools do not engage the narrative skills of all our children. The findings make me wonder whether some more engaging practices for nursery school children and kindergarteners could be suggested as interventions in schools in these communities, such as a collaborative activity with competitive 'rounds of narratives,' which Kuntay and Senay (2003) found to be very engaging for children of lower middle-class and middle-class backgrounds in two preschools in Turkey.

But the most important educational implication of Miller et al.'s findings about family narrative practices in S. Baltimore and Daly Park is the prediction that features of children's 'oppositional and narrative speech' style may 'clash' with the narrative styles of teachers and middle-class children at the school. The result is a devaluing of the children's narrative styles [see also Michaels, 1991]. Miller et al. made this prediction based on comparative analyses of working-class and middle-class stories that they collected, which revealed quite different practices. This prediction has profound implications for inter-group communication in the classroom and needs to be investigated empirically. Analyzing the forms these 'clashes' take and the inferences that speakers make about the meaning of 'contextualization cues' [Gumperz, 1982, 1996] used by speakers from different communities can provide a basis for training teachers to be sensitive to 'different ways of learning and using language' [Heath, 1983, p. 265].

Narrative Practices – Active Choices or Ways of Seeing the World Imposed by the Culture?

Miller et al. argue that a community provides members with a set of communicative practices or genres and that, for members, the genres constitute ‘ways of seeing’ reality. But in the multi-ethnic communities comprising the urban and other areas where children grow up today, children and adults are exposed to a range of communicative practices. To what extent are communicative practices active choices of community members for presenting the self, and to what extent do children and adults embrace different ways of ‘seeing’ reality?

Recent work on identity practices, particularly from work on gender identity, provides a framework that can be applied to children’s socialization and development. This work suggests that speakers actively choose among a range of communicative practices [Goodwin, 1999; Kyratzis & Guo, 2001], sometimes going along with, sometimes resisting, the ideologies and values that are passed down to them through parental socialization [Cook-Gumperz, 2003, July] and the culture [see discussion in Ochs, 1996, p. 424]. Building on work of Butler [1990] and West and Fenstermaker [1993], McElhinny [1996, p. 469] argues that gender identity should be viewed not as ‘an attribute, but (as) an activity or performance’ [see also Goodwin, 1999]. ‘We are positioned to hear multivocality within women’s and girls’ speech across diverse groups and can analyze identity as shifting rather than static’ [Goodwin, 1999, p. 403]. ‘Multivocality’ is especially evident in the multi-ethnic communities in which children grow up today, as they interact with peers who expose them to diverse sets of communicative practices.

What would happen if a preadolescent girl from S. Baltimore or Daly Park happened to be part of a peer group comprised predominantly of middle-class girls from a neighboring community? Might she reject the assertive speaking style and narrative practices of her home community? Miller et al. dealt with the socialization of very young children, but I wonder if they had any indication, perhaps from older siblings or cousins of the children followed, of what happened as children moved beyond the family sphere? Moreover, did they observe any contextual variation in their data? Did mothers in Daly Park and S. Baltimore always display assertive personae and hold their daughters to a high standard of truth and standing up for themselves, or did these practices vary in accordance with who was present in the interaction? What about the children? Were they willing and able to stand their ground with all of their family members and with their peers, or did they do so more with some than with others? Were Miller et al. to find contextual variation in the same individuals in the use of communicative practices, this would suggest that these practices are active choices for presenting the self made by speakers in response to situational as well as cultural factors. Such findings would suggest that speakers may embrace the ideologies invoked by their community’s preferred communicative practices, but not at all times for all audiences. Speakers perhaps can embrace multiple ways of ‘seeing’ reality. In light of these issues, it would be important to examine the socialization of daughters and sons from the S. Baltimore and Daly Park communities as they go through childhood and adolescence, and as they interact with peers and adults beyond their family sphere in a variety of contexts. Miller et al.’s data have rich implications for further research.

A Final Note

Miller et al.'s program of work reveals significant aspects of the socialization of European American working-class children through personal narratives told in their families. The 'ways with words' [Heath, 1983] described may socialize distinctive ways of thinking and talking about the world and distinctive ways of viewing the self. These 'ways' are vital for developmental psychologists, sociolinguists and educators to understand. They have implications for schooling and they point to important directions for future research regarding the socialization of children. I greatly enjoyed the article, and am a long-standing admirer of the research program.

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