22 NARRATIVE DEVELOPMENT IN SOCIAL CONTEXT[1]

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An important teacher often plants seeds that take years to come to fruition. I am increasingly struck, in retrospect, by how much this pattern applies to my long-term association with Sue Ervin-Tripp. As a graduate student at Berkeley in the late 70s and early 80s, I found it hard to make up my mind whether to focus my dissertation research on cognitive or language development (or to combine them, in the Berkeley style, in some sort of grand synthesis). I eventually opted for cognitive development, but in the meantime this indecision led me — along with much of the rest of my cohort — to attend every seminar offered by the department in both areas. These included several seminars with Sue Ervin-Tripp, which stood out because of her emphasis on the need to situate the acquisition and uses of language in sociocultural context. I was also struck by her occasional favorable references to Freud (who was otherwise pretty much a Great Unmentionable in our department), and, more generally, her suggestions that developmental research should take account of the role of children's emotional life. These were messages I duly noted at the time but (I now see) appreciated only imperfectly. For the last several years, however, as much of my work has involved the effort to integrate the study of children's cognitive development with the analysis of their narrative activity, the significance and value of these themes have now fully come home to me.

In a somewhat complex and indirect way, Sue also influenced this more recent turn toward narrative in my work. A few years after I finished graduate school, I had the good fortune to be involved in a project along with Sue — and Barbara Scales and Millie Almy — that focused on the role of play in children's development. (One result was the publication of Scales, Almy, Nicolopoulou, & Ervin-Tripp, 1991.) In the process, I became increasingly dissatisfied with what seemed to me both the conceptual limitations and the mutual isolation of the dominant approaches to play in developmental research;

[1] The research presented here was supported in part by a Picker Fellowship Award to the author from Smith College. I would like to thank Yoon-Joo Lee, Maureen Carney, and Paula Desjarlais for their careful and diligent work in helping me analyze the data. I am also indebted to Jeff Weintraub for extensive advice, constructive criticism, and theoretical inspiration. An earlier version of the argument in this chapter was advanced in "The active interplay of social-relational and cognitive/symbolic factors in the development of children's narrative activity," a paper presented as part of an invited symposium at the 1994 annual meeting of the Jean Piaget Society (Chicago, IL: June 2-4).

and I began to see how we might build on unexplored possibilities offered by both Piaget and Vygotsky, as well as insights derived from the broad "interpretive turn" in the human sciences, to move toward an approach that could more powerfully illuminate the cognitive significance of play by grasping it as a fundamentally sociocultural and imaginative activity. (For an orienting statement, see Nicolopoulou, 1993.) Sue encouraged me to pursue this line of inquiry further, and her encouragement very much influenced my decision to do so, so I hope she is not too taken aback by the long-term results. At the same time, a side-effect of the play project was to start me on the analysis of preschool children's spontaneous stories, composed and acted out in a practice that straddled the line between play and narrative activity. I thus became aware of the close affinity and interdependence between the discursive exposition of narratives in children's storytelling and their enactment in fantasy play; of the relevance of my emerging theoretical concerns to narrative as well as play research; and of the need to integrate the study of young children's play and narrative activities much more fully and systematically than is usually the case. I arrived, in short, at the conclusion that developmental research should treat play and narrative as parallel, and often interwoven, forms of socioculturally situated symbolic action. (For some of the arguments behind these remarks, see Nicolopoulou, in press.)

Since the research that I am about to discuss brings together all these different strands that lead back, one way or another, to Sue Ervin-Tripp, I am especially pleased to have the opportunity to present it in this volume.

INTRODUCTION

Based on my ongoing study of preschool children's spontaneous storytelling, this chapter advances two interconnected arguments that, taken together, have some broad programmatic implications for the conduct of developmental research on narrative: (1) First, I present evidence suggesting that participation in certain forms of socially-structured peer-group activity can contribute dramatically to advancing the complexity and sophistication of young children's narrative activity. These results strongly suggest, in turn, that the main body of current research in narrative development has tended to underestimate significantly both (a) the potential narrative capabilities of preschool children and (b) the role of social context in the development of these capabilities. (2) At the same time, we need to reconsider and refine the conceptions of "social context" and its effects that predominate in much socially-situated research, to avoid (a) reducing "social context" to dyadic interaction, and/or (b) constructing one-sided models that neglect the child's own agency and motivations. In particular, I argue that one of the key ways that socially structured practices influence and activate individual development is by simultaneously drawing on and shaping the inner motivations that drive and direct this development; and I offer an exploratory analysis of some of the socially-situated motivations which appear to be most crucial in this respect. Specifically, I suggest that the patterns of narrative development displayed by the children in my sample emerge, in large part, from the complex interaction of two related but analytically distinct kinds of motivating concerns

that I have termed (for reasons to be explained below) "social–relational" and "aesthetic" concerns. In general, this chapter urges that development be seen as involving an active interplay between the "internal" dynamics of the individual's cognitive structures and the impact of sociocultural context.

Children and Narratives: The Research Terrain

Let me begin with some necessarily brief and schematic remarks about the main tendencies in current research that can help locate the distinctive emphases of the work discussed here. The first point to note is that, while there is an enormous volume of research on children and narratives being carried out in the overlapping disciplines of psychology and linguistics, studies of spontaneous stories composed by children themselves are decidedly in the minority, and this is especially true for preschool children. A great deal of this research focuses on children's comprehension of stories read by or told to them. And, when studies do deal with children's production of their own stories, they are most likely to be conducted in experimental or quasi-experimental settings, where the stories are generated under conditions that more or less sharply limit their spontaneous character. (For an overview of these general tendencies, as well as some important exceptions, see Nicolopoulou, in press.) For example, children may be presented with preselected topics, with story stems to complete, or with picture books on which to base their stories.

There are often well-considered methodological reasons for these choices; but, as I will try to make clear, they also entail important limitations. Children's storytelling is generally richer and more ambitious when they are following their own narrative agendas rather than those shaped by adults. (This is true even of picture-based elicitations, which allow more flexibility than some other techniques. In a systematic comparison, Wellhousen, 1993, found that the quality of kindergarten children's oral stories, as measured by a number of indices, was higher when they told a story without any props than when they told a story from a picture or were asked to draw a picture to accompany the story.) And while research in experimental settings can of course yield valuable results, an exclusive reliance on experimental techniques has the practical effect of excluding any systematic consideration of the sociocultural contexts within which actual learning and development take place (a point made especially well by Heath, 1983). As Sutton-Smith has argued (1986), the study of children's narrative activity forfeits much of its potential to deepen our understanding of their experience and development "if it is constrained by artificial situations" and by interpretive lenses that obscure those elements of narrative that make it most engaging and significant for the children themselves.

Bringing Social Context Back In: The Missing Peer Group and the Limits of Interactional Reductionism

A recognition of these limitations has helped give rise to a variety of more socially situated approaches. In the field of language acquisition and development, there is in fact a growing body of research that seeks to specify those features of adult–child interaction (in practice, usually mother–child interaction) that most effectively promote and facilitate

the development of linguistic skills. Most of this work has focused on very young children that are either preverbal or at the one- or two-word stage (for a useful review see Snow, 1989). More recently, there have been increasing attempts to extend this type of research to language development in later years, including narrative development. One impetus for this kind of investigation has been a series of findings suggesting that the early mastery of narrative skills is an especially good predictor of later language and school achievement (Snow, 1983, 1989; Snow, Cancini, Gonzalez, & Shriberg, 1989; Sulzby, 1985). These studies have established the importance of social context for narrative development, and have begun to delineate the interactional styles that best facilitate this development (for a review, see McCabe & Peterson, 1991). But so far the focus of these studies has also been limited in two key respects: (a) they have dealt fairly exclusively with children's "factual" narratives of past experiences and not fictional or fantasy narratives; (b) and the "social" context of narrative development has, with rare exceptions, been conceived only in terms of adult–child interaction, to the exclusion of such other elements as children's peer relationships and group life.

While an exclusive focus on dyadic adult–child interaction is understandable for studying very young children, it is both puzzling and unfortunate in research on narrative development in older preschool children. From the age of 2 on, children begin to devote increasing time and attention to other children; and ethnographic research in preschool settings has underlined the significance of peer relations and peer culture among preschoolers (Corsaro, 1985; Davies, 1989).

Several factors in combination seem to have contributed to the relative neglect of peer-group activity in narrative research. In the work that has studied preschool children's peer interaction and its role in cognitive development, the most vigorous tendencies have generally been those inspired, directly or indirectly, by Piaget's seminal insight that the developmental significance of adult–child relations — necessarily asymmetric and hierarchical — is in important ways qualitatively different from that of peer-group relations, which are potentially more egalitarian and cooperative (Piaget, 1923/1959, 1932/1965; for an exceptionally sophisticated treatment of the field from an essentially Piagetian perspective, see Musatti, 1986; for a useful critical overview of developmental peer-interaction research that compares the influence of Piagetian and Vygotskian perspectives, see Tudge & Rogoff, 1989). For reasons of historical accident, these research tendencies have generally focused on children's play (e.g., Garvey, 1990; Stambak & Sinclair, 1993) rather than narrative activity, and these two fields of investigation are rarely integrated.

Some of the reasons why this integration would be useful are suggested by the work of Garvey, which — aside from its exemplary combination of theoretical eclecticism with analytical coherence — has examined both child–caregiver and child–child interaction, and has extended her play-research concerns to issues of language development and communication (1984). As Garvey's synthesis of the relevant research (1986) makes clear, in interacting with peers children encounter distinctive challenges, but also special opportunities. At the very least, children learn different things from each other — in different ways — than what they learn from adults (see also Paley, 1984). For example, even 2-year-olds "work" harder at maintaining conversations with peers than they do in

their interactions with adults, who assume greater responsibility for maintaining and regulating conversations; in the process, they often use and develop techniques they are rarely required to employ in adult–child interactions. However, even Garvey's work does not systematically address **narrative** activity and development, and her analysis tends to stay largely at the level of dyadic interaction, with only scattered attention to group life and peer culture.

On the other hand, much of the research investigating the role of social interaction in narrative development has drawn theoretically on a Vygotskian perspective. But there is a certain irony about the results of this Vygotskian influence. Vygotsky himself was excited by Piaget's insight regarding the distinctive possibilities inherent in children's autonomous peer-directed activity, and incorporated it into his developmental theory, particularly his seminal treatment of children's play (see especially Vygotsky, 1967; Nicolopoulou, 1993). Furthermore, his theory of play is actually more sociocultural in orientation than Piaget's, emphasizes the cognitive significance of children's imaginative and symbolic activity, and offers a natural bridge between the study of play and narrative (as I argue in Nicolopoulou, in press, from which I draw in the present discussion). However, these promising leads have largely not been followed up. Most Vygotskian-inspired narrative research has tended to interpret his key notion of the "zone of proximal development" rather narrowly, in terms of the direct effects of dyadic interaction between the developing child and either adults or more knowledgeable children — usually the former. And even in research on peer collaboration linked with this paradigm — primarily examining its effects on cognitive development — peer relations have, in effect, been conceptually assimilated to the model of dyadic adult–child interaction. In most of these studies, to borrow a formulation from Tudge and Rogoff (1989, p. 32), "although the interaction is between peers in the sense of age-mates, their relation might be better thought of as a relationship between an expert and a novice than between two equals." (As Tudge, cited in Tudge & Rogoff, 1989, p. 32, perceptively notes, this has also been true, in practice, of much Piagetian-inspired research.)

Reconceptualizing "Social Context": Toward a More Sociocultural Perspective

A different, and less restricted, vision is suggested by Vygotsky's assertion — often noted, but not always pondered — that, in the preschool years, "**Play** is the source of development and **creates** the zone of proximal development" (1967, p. 16; emphases added). That is, it is a form of activity that pushes the child beyond the limits of development that have already been achieved, and provides an opportunity to expand the world of mental possibility. In saying this, Vygotsky is **not** referring to assisted problem-solving in expert–novice interaction. Rather, the crucial feature of play from a developmental perspective is that, in play, children collaborate in constructing and maintaining a shared "imaginary situation" in an activity that is simultaneously voluntary, open to spontaneity, and structured by rules — but these are rules recognized and accepted as necessary by the children themselves, not handed down from above by adults. That is, in play the child confronts a situation where the rules are not so much externally imposed

as inherent in the structure of the activity itself, and are necessary in order to be able to carry out a practice or form of activity that is valued by its participants; thus, Vygotsky argues (following Piaget), the child begins to separate the notion of rule-governed practice from that of adult authority. The shared symbolic space of the play-world (to use the term of Huizinga, 1955) creates a field of activity for children's symbolic imagination that generates both opportunities and motivations for development.

What Vygotsky says of children's play applies equally to their narrative activity: both represent the union of expressive imagination with rule-governed form. And in both, as Vygotsky emphasizes with regard to play, the elements of fantasy and imagination are central to the **cognitive** significance of the activity, in terms of both its motivations and its developmental value. It is through the creation and elaboration — in imagination — of a symbolic world dominated by meanings, with its own inner logic, that children are first able to emancipate their thinking from the constraints of their immediate external environment and, thus, to take the first steps toward organizing thought in a coherent and independent way. But the creation of this autonomous world of imagination also leads the child, paradoxically, back to reality. Inserting elements from the larger culture into the symbolic universe of the "make-believe" forces the child to try to make sense of them, even as they are stylized and transformed. In short, it is precisely by fostering the development of children's symbolic imagination and providing a field for its exercise that fantasy play — and, we can add, narrative activity — prepares the way for the development of abstract thinking and "higher mental processes." As children come to realize the possible purposes and satisfactions that can be pursued in narrative activity — which are symbolic, expressive, and emotional as well as instrumental — they are driven to learn and appropriate the narrative forms culturally available to them and to turn these to their own ends; and they gradually discover that, in order to do so, they must attend to and grasp the (mostly implicit) rule-governed structures inherent in these narrative forms. Children are both impelled and enabled to do this through their participation in practices of shared symbolic activity that serve as collectively constituted fields within which to use and master these narrative forms, to explore and extend their inherent possibilities through performance and experimentation, and to push on to greater narrative range and proficiency. It is in this sense, if we follow Vygotsky, that certain types of peer-group activity can serve as especially powerful contexts promoting development.

None of this is to deny the critical role that various forms of educative and socializing relations between unequals play in the process of development. But that should not be allowed to eclipse the potential complementary contributions of peer-group activity, beginning in the preschool years. An exclusive focus on one-way transmission (or facilitation) in the acquisition of skills and information overlooks the real possibilities offered by the shared construction of reality in various forms of genuine peer collaboration (noted by Tudge & Rogoff, 1989, pp. 32-33; see Damon, 1984, for a useful analysis of this complementarity; see Forman & McPhail, 1993, for a promising Vygotskian approach to egalitarian peer collaboration).

Even more important, the methodological temptation to reduce the "social" context of development to dyadic (or triadic) interaction entails the neglect (or even the conceptu-

al invisibility) of the larger sociocultural frameworks within which these interactions are embedded, and which structure their nature, meaning, and impact. To move from the isolated individual to the interactional pair (or triad) as the unit of analysis is a useful first step in the direction of a more socially situated perspective, but taken by itself it is incomplete and misleading. Such sociocultural frameworks as institutions, communities, classroom mini-cultures, socially structured practices and activity systems — or, for that matter, the shared symbolic space of the play-world — have to be understood as genuinely **collective** realities which, in manifold ways, shape the actions and experiences of those who participate in them. To take one example, different educational settings may be more or less successful in fostering a culture of collaborative learning, which will then affect both the frequency and the quality of problem-solving interaction within these settings (see Nicolopoulou & Cole, 1993, which also offers a more general critique of the tendency toward interactional reductionism in much Vygotskian-inspired research). In addition, young children's peer-group activities can generate rich fields of symbolic action that provide critical arenas for the shared use, appropriation, and working-over of cultural resources. Thus, both narrative research and educational practice should treat children's group life as a developmental context of prime importance and great potential, and should seek to identify, understand, and facilitate those forms of peer-group activity that can most effectively engage children in ways that promote their narrative development.

The preceding discussion should also make clear why we need to avoid a one-sided concentration on children's "factual" narratives of past experience (ranging from adult–child conversations to everyday anecdotes to classroom "sharing time") of the kind that has marked the bulk of current narrative research conducted in naturalistic settings — important as these narrative genres undoubtedly are for children. In another ironic twist, part of the impetus for this turn to narratives of personal experience was a reaction against what many of these researchers took to be an excessive preoccupation, in previous work, with fantasy narratives elicited by adults in semi-experimental contexts. Indeed, in summing up her particularly illuminating study of children's conversational narratives — one of the few, incidentally, that deals with spontaneous conversations between children rather than adult–child conversations — Preece (1987) comments that "make-believe" stories actually make up a very small proportion of the repertoire of narrative forms that children employ when left to their own devices, with the implication that these should be regarded as being of limited significance for narrative research. But, while these proportions no doubt hold true for the particular situation in which her study was conducted (young children in the back seat of a car being driven to and from school), the general conclusion is unwarranted, and represents an overreaction. For one thing, it overlooks the enormous field of children's pretend play, which is dominated by the composition and enactment of fictional or fantasy narratives. Furthermore, there is abundant evidence that, when children are offered the right kinds of context, they plunge into fantasy storytelling with great enthusiasm, energy, and creativity (e.g., Paley, 1984, 1988, 1990; I can also attest to this from personal experience in helping to introduce spontaneous storytelling practices into several preschool classrooms). And it is of great importance, both theoretically and practically, not to neglect or undervalue those forms of narrative activity that

most effectively nourish and educate children's symbolic imagination.

A final word is in order regarding the theoretical concerns informing the analysis in this chapter, so that my emphasis on the need for a sociocultural approach not be misunderstood. Despite some notable attempts to bridge the gap, it remains true that much developmental research in psychology falls into two sharply polarized camps. One focuses more or less exclusively on individuals' cognitive structures and their inner tendencies toward development, while the other focuses on the sociocultural contexts and practices within which development occurs. The first body of research was, for a long time, primarily Piagetian in its orientation, but it is now also increasingly influenced by perspectives rooted in biology or cognitive science. A key limitation of this approach, whatever specific form it takes, is that it tends to neglect or deny the significance of sociocultural contexts in providing both **resources** and **motivation** for development and in shaping its direction; furthermore, it finds it difficult to capture important aspects of change and variation that are socioculturally specific.

The second approach, which has been especially stimulated by the influence of Vygotsky and the Vygotskian school, has properly emphasized the need to situate the individual mind and self in sociocultural context. In practice, however, it has often tended to go beyond this to **dissolve** the individual in his or her sociocultural context. Thus, even when it claims to be Vygotskian in inspiration, it is often in danger of sliding into a new form of simple learning theory. Substantively, one result is that, while it can account for **change**, it often has difficulty formulating a strong concept of **development**.

Accounts of development that focus one-sidedly on either of these dimensions are necessarily truncated and misleading; rather, both are mutually and intricately implicated in the process of development, and their interplay helps to motivate development and contributes to shaping its form and direction. In recent years there have been increasing attempts to overcome these limitations by finding ways to integrate a socially informed perspective with a constructivist one (see, e.g., Forman, Minick, & Stone, 1993). I see my own work as offering a contribution to this larger project.

YOUNG CHILDREN'S SPONTANEOUS STORYTELLING IN A PEER-GROUP CONTEXT: POSING THE PROBLEM

The stories analyzed here are drawn from a multi-year project that examines the development of children's narrative activity and attempts to situate it in the context of their group life. The children in this sample were a class of 28 four-year-olds, 14 boys and 14 girls, who attended a half-day nursery school affiliated with the Child Study Center of the University of California at Berkeley during the academic year 1988-1989. At the beginning of the year, the ages of the children ranged from 3;10 to 4;9 (with a mean of 4;2 each for both the boys and the girls). The family backgrounds of the children in this group were primarily middle- to upper-middle-class, mostly professional or academic.

The stories were generated and collected as part of a storytelling and story-acting practice, pioneered by Vivian Paley (1984, 1988, 1990), that is a regular component of the preschool curriculum. One optional activity in which any child in the school can

choose to participate every day is to dictate a story to a designated teacher, who records the story as the child tells it. At the end of each day, all the stories dictated during that day are read aloud to the entire class at "circle time" by the same teacher; while the story is being read, the child/author and other children, whom he or she chooses, act out the story. One result is that children tell these stories, not only to adults, but primarily to each other. Furthermore, the children's storytelling activity is embedded in the ongoing framework of their everyday group life — in the "real world" of their classroom miniculture.

The analysis is based on the complete set of 582 stories collected during the entire academic year 1988-1989, which included stories told by all 28 children. About 60% (347) of these stories were dictated by girls and about 40% (235) by boys. (This corpus of stories is drawn from the "Child Study Center Archives of Children's Play Narratives" at the Institute of Human Development of the University of California, Berkeley.)

I am presently extending this line of research by collecting further data in collaboration with teachers at two preschools in western Massachusetts who use the same storytelling and story-acting activity in their classrooms. At several points in this chapter, I will draw on observations from my current research to support and supplement the analysis presented here.

The Development of Children's Narrative Activity: A Case Study

As the year went on, the stories told by all of the children became more complex and sophisticated, manifesting significant advances in both narrative competence and cognitive abilities. To illustrate some features of this development, let me begin with three of the stories told by a girl in the group whom I will call Nora.[2] Nora was a frequent storyteller (she told 28 stories over the course of the year, 14 in the fall and 14 in the spring), and her stories exemplify a number of typical patterns. The first story quoted here was dictated toward the middle of October, the second and third toward the end of January. Nora turned 5 shortly before the second story.

> Once upon a time there was a **bunny** and a **duck** and they played in the park on the swing. And then they went back to their house and there was a **monster**. And then they were into their room there was **another monster**. The end.
>
> (Nora, 4;9; 10/18/88)

This was Nora's fourth story of the year. Now let's jump ahead three months (and ten stories) to the following, which she told in sequence:

> Once upon a time there was a **mom** and a **dad** and a **sister**. They lived in a house in the forest. And one morning the sun came up and they weren't awake yet. But then a **fox** came looking for food. But then the sister woke up, and she heard the fox. And then the fox came knocking in her door. Then the sister peeked out the door. And then she slammed it closed. And then she ran to tell her mommy and dad. They opened the door and the fox ran away.

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[2] Pseudonyms have been assigned to the children whose stories are quoted. Characters in the stories are marked by boldface.

(Nora, 5;0; 1/26/89)

> Once upon a time in a forest there was a **tiger** and a **bunny**. They played hide and seek. And then they found a **person** and they thought it was a stranger. They ran and then got up a tree, and then the person ran away. They were all scared. And then came a whole **family**. Then they took the bunny back to their house. And they had dinner there. And then all went to bed. And then in the morning, they woke up. And then they looked out the window. And then they saw snow falling down.

(Nora, 5;0; 1/29/89)

Many of Nora's most interesting stories actually came later in the year, but these are sufficient to bring out certain key contrasts. Without going into a full-scale analysis, let me just note some of the most important differences we can see when we compare the first story with the second and third. In all three stories the number of characters per story remains roughly the same (about four characters, with the last story introducing a "family" as a collective character whose members remain unspecified), but there is a significant difference in the length and quality of the stories. In a pattern that is not uncommon among the children, Nora tends to re-use and recombine certain basic themes and characters in many of her stories, but gradually works over this material so as to produce stories of increasing narrative complexity and sophistication.

The first story is brief, and each character performs a limited number of actions that are described in generic terms (e.g., they played, they went back home). The second and third stories have much more specificity and complexity: A background is established, and then an interrelated sequence of actions is initiated and elaborated (with the second story combining a general and a specific temporal marking device, "once upon a time" and "one morning"). In addition, the characters are more fully developed, with a number of specific actions attributed to each, and the relations between the characters are more clearly and carefully worked out. Furthermore, we see the attribution of motives and the development of focalization, or an "internal" point of view, whereby scenes in the story are related from the perspective of one or more of the characters (e.g., the girl hears, then sees, the fox; the tiger and bunny think the person is a stranger and are scared, etc.). Above all, the different characters and activities in each story are organized into an interconnected **plot**. Note, for example, that in the second and third stories a series of dramatic **problems** are posed (the fox goes looking for food, then the sister hears the fox at the door, etc.), which are then **resolved**. In the third story, which has a looser form than the second, elements from two episodes are nevertheless coordinated into a continuous story.

Reconsidering Preschool Children's Narrative Capabilities

The kind of movement toward greater narrative competence, richness, and complexity demonstrated in Nora's storytelling is generally typical of the children in the sample — though, it should be noted, the precise patterns of development vary from case to case. The most striking implication of these results is that the stories of almost all the children involved come to display a degree of narrative complexity and sophistication that,

according to the overwhelming consensus of mainstream research in narrative development, 4- to 5-year-old children should simply not be able to achieve. This research consistently reports, for example, that preschool children are not able to go beyond simple event descriptions or scripts. As Hudson and Shapiro (1991) emphasize in their useful summation of the predominant point of view in current research — backed by an extensive range of supporting references — there is widespread accord that the construction of plot structures with clear initiating events, dramatic problems and their resolution, internal points of view, and formal ending devices should not emerge until "much later" than 4 years of age; and children should not be able to integrate the full range of these characteristics until "around 8 years" (Hudson & Shapiro, 1991, pp. 100-101; similar arguments are made by McKeough, 1992; Stein, 1988.) But in fact by the end of the year **all** these characteristics can be found in at least some of the stories told by **all** of the 4- to 5-year-olds in the classrooms I have been studying (and they can also be discerned, for example, in a number of stories told by children of similar ages that are reported in Paley's books). With many of the children in my sample, a high proportion of their stories meet these criteria beginning quite early in the school year.

This marked discrepancy in results can be readily demonstrated. As a first step, the entire corpus of stories was coded for their level of structural complexity using the criteria provided by Hudson and Shapiro's study (1991), since these are broadly representative. (While I will later raise some questions, on conceptual grounds, about whether this set of criteria needs to be refined, taking it over directly provides the most convenient basis for an initial comparison.) "Despite some variations," Hudson and Shapiro note, "there is considerable agreement on the minimally acceptable characteristics of the structure for a single episode story" (p. 100). For fictional or make-believe stories, the "checklist" consists of the following structural characteristics (pp. 108-109): (1) "a **setting statement** such as 'Once upon a time', 'once...' or 'one time...'"; (2) using "a **fictional character**" such as animals, monsters, giants, queens and kings, princesses and princes, or cartoon characters, as well as using the self as a fictional character; (3) "[e]xplicit **temporal sequencing**"; (4) including "a **problem** or **surprise** action"; (5) a "**resolution** of" or "**reaction** to a problem or surprise action"; and (6) an "**ending marker** such as 'The end', 'they all went home', and 'they all lived happily ever after'."

Hudson and Shapiro use this scheme to measure the percentages of children who included each of these structural elements in their stories. When a direct comparison is carried out with the stories in the present sample, the results are overwhelmingly different. Hudson and Shapiro found that when 37 preschoolers (mean age 4;8) were asked to tell make-believe stories about four separate events (birthday party, doctor's, Halloween, and trip) only 17% of them ever used a setting statement, 14% used fictional characters, 41% used temporal sequence, 30% used problem/surprise, 20% used resolution/reaction, and 16% used an ending statement (pp. 107ff). In striking contrast, the results for the present study reveal that **all** 28 children in this group used **all** of these structural elements sometime during the year. In fact, even when percentages are calculated based only on stories told during the fall, they remain much higher than those reported by Hudson and Shapiro: 96% of the children used a setting statement, 100% used fictional characters, 96% used explicit temporal sequence, 100% used problem/surprise, 81% used resolu-

tion/reaction, and 96% used an ending statement. (And these more stringent measures include three children who told only one story apiece in the fall — which means they did not really get started in their storytelling until the spring.) What is even more striking is that almost half of these children combined **all** of these structural elements in at least one of the first five stories they told.

Given the very high percentages of children who used these structural elements at some point, it seemed worthwhile to probe the data a bit further by using a finer and more demanding measure. Thus, I calculated the percentage of stories **per child** that used each of these structural elements. Fig. 22.1(a) and Fig. 22.1(b) summarize the mean percentages, listing results separately for stories told by the girls and by the boys, respectively, as well as by semester.

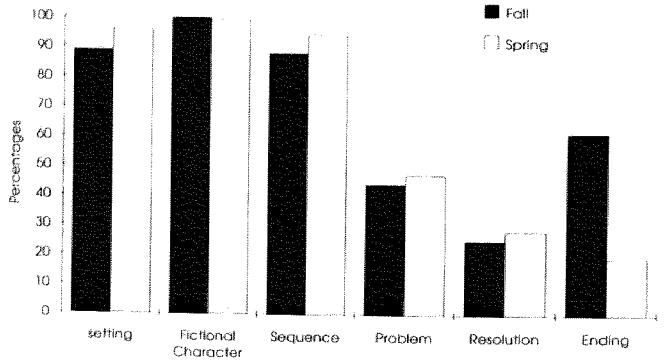

FIG. 22.1(a).
Mean Percentages of Stories by Girls that Include Specified Structural Elements

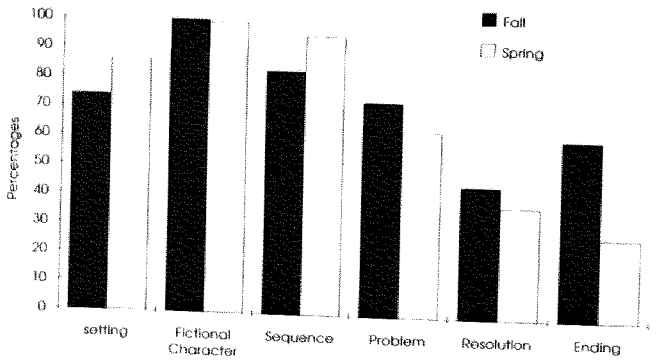

FIG. 22.1(b).
Mean Percentages of Stories by Boys that Include Specified Structural Elements

The results remain fairly high, though now a slightly more differentiated picture begins to emerge. The children in this sample used all the designated structural elements in a

substantial proportion of their stories. This is particularly true for the use of a setting statement, fictional characters, and explicit temporal sequence (93%, 100%, and 91% respectively for the girls; and 80%, 100% and 89% respectively for the boys). The introduction of problem/surprise and resolution/reaction is higher for the boys than for the girls (68% and 42% respectively for the boys; and, 46% and 27% respectively for the girls). This result accords with an earlier interpretive analysis of these stories (Nicolopoulou, Scales, & Weintraub, 1994), in which we argue that girls' stories are more likely to portray images of order while boys' stories are more likely to portray images of disorder (and it suggests that this particular criterion may be weighted toward the boys' preferred storytelling style).

However, a puzzling result is that while the girls' scores generally increased during the spring semester, particularly for their use of problem/surprise and resolution/reaction, in the case of the boys' stories the use of these two structural elements decreased (see Fig. 22.1[a] and Fig. 22.1[b]). Similarly, both boys and girls decreased dramatically in their use of a formal ending statement (from 61% to 28% for the boys and from 61% to 19% for the girls).

The results I have outlined so far raise two sorts of questions: (1) On the basis of a number of the standard indicators used in research on narrative development, it is clear that this group of preschoolers performed at a far more advanced level than the bulk of current research would lead us to expect. What kinds of factors might account for this discrepancy? (2) At the same time, certain features of the results raise questions about the conceptual adequacy of these indicators themselves. In particular, the scores for several of these criteria do not increase in either a uniform or unilinear way. This fact is already apparent from the illustrations presented schematically in the previous paragraph, and it is brought out even more strongly by detailed analysis. These and other anomalies pose the issue of whether the criteria being employed are fully adequate to capture the developmental patterns in young children's narrative activity — in part because the criteria may often be more oriented to operationalizing the adult researcher's picture of a good story than to elucidating the narrative elements that the children themselves are trying to achieve. To take the simplest and most obvious example: It seems implausible that the children's decreased use of formal ending statements represents a developmental regression; it is more likely that, having mastered the use of these devices, they gradually find them less necessary or assign higher priority to other concerns in constructing their narratives. Similarly, my own analysis of young children's narrative styles suggests that the different ways that girls and boys use certain structural elements has less to do with their having reached different developmental levels than with the fact that they are using their narratives to pursue different symbolic purposes.

To be sure, the kinds of developmental criteria examined so far remain useful and important, though they often require some refinement. But they also need to be supplemented — and informed — by a more systematic effort to reconstruct the underlying purposes and motivations that actually drive and direct young children's narrative activity and development. This is especially necessary if we wish to understand the factors that most effectively promote or facilitate this development.

EXPLAINING YOUNG CHILDREN'S NARRATIVE DEVELOPMENT: CONTEXTS AND MOTIVATIONS

The Peer-Group as Social Context: Beyond Interactional Reductionism

What accounts for the striking disparity between the findings of the present study and those that predominate in the research literature? Part of the answer certainly lies in the very different **contexts** within which the children's narrative activity is being examined. The great bulk of current research in the field of children and narratives, as I have emphasized, is conducted in more or less isolated experimental settings; whereas, in the case of the children I am studying, the narrative activity is carried out in the context of a storytelling and story-acting practice that is embedded in the context of their everyday classroom life. The conclusion is inescapable that this socially structured practice significantly enhances the development of the children's narrative abilities — which drives home, at the same time, the crucial significance of sociocultural context for the process of development.

This being the case, the next questions are: Which features of this sociocultural context are decisive, and how do they achieve their effects?

It is not yet possible to resolve all the relevant issues (especially in the limited space available here), but I will try to highlight some of the most important. In thinking about how a classroom setting might influence children's narrative development, two factors that often occur first to people are (1) the stories that are read or told to the children as part of the curriculum and (2) the feedback and encouragement they receive from the teachers concerning their own stories. These factors clearly play a role; but, in fact, there is considerable evidence that they are of secondary importance. While the children obviously draw symbolic themes and other elements from what is taught or read to them in the classroom, they also draw heavily on popular culture; and, in both cases, it is clear that they draw selectively, so that the impact of these elements is heavily mediated by the children's own preoccupations and by the narrative forms they develop (for a more extended discussion, see Nicolopoulou et al., 1994). And the teachers' prime concerns are not to have the children tell "better stories," but rather to facilitate the storytelling practice as a way of building up a common culture in the classroom; their direct intervention to improve the **quality** of the children's stories is negligible.

In both the northern California preschool from which the stories in this chapter are drawn and the western Massachusetts preschools I have been observing, the teachers write down the story as the child tells it and generally give very little feedback. On the whole, the only kind of probing that I have (occasionally) observed is for the teacher to ask, when the cues are ambiguous, whether the child had something more to say or whether he or she is "done." Rather rarely, if a child has listed a string of characters and stopped (most typical of the younger children toward the beginning of the year), the teacher might ask whether the characters "do something?" (This kind of question doesn't

necessarily elicit any further elaboration from the child.) In short, the input that the children get from the teachers is minimal and non-directive, and cannot go very far to explain the dramatic changes we observe in the children's narrative activity.

In addition, one indirect — but telling — piece of evidence that the teachers are not systematically guiding the development of the children's narrative forms is that they are often not clearly aware of such development when it does occur. As I noted earlier, some children tell stories that use the same or similar characters over and over again, but if one follows the pattern of these stories over time it is clear that they are methodically working through the formal possibilities of the material and gradually producing more complex and effective narratives. However, what the teachers notice in these cases is that the stories are getting monotonous, and in fact they often complain to me that these children are "stuck in telling the same stories." Whatever the children's motivations for developing the formal structure of their narratives this way, they are evidently not doing it for the teacher's benefit.

Of course, teachers influence children in many ways other than direct intervention; but, even in this respect, another interesting piece of evidence from my current research suggests the limits of their impact on children's narrative activity. In one school, I am observing two preschool classrooms with children of the same ages. In one of these classrooms, the teacher is herself a vivid and imaginative storyteller, who does try to use her stories to provide models for the children's narrative activity (and particularly to influence their content). The children love her stories, constantly press her to tell more, and hang on her every word. However, her stories have no obvious effect on either the form or the content of the children's stories; nor is the quality of their stories noticeably different from those told in the other classroom, where the teacher does not tell her own stories.

Thus, rather than focusing on the interactions between the children and the teachers, it seems more fruitful in this case to focus on the dynamics of the children's peer-group relations, and on the experience of this narrative practice itself. The evidence suggests that the children's mastery of narrative form is advanced most effectively not by **listening** to stories alone, but by **telling** stories as well; in fact, the best predictor of a given child's improvement in narrative ability over the course of the year is the number of stories he or she told. Furthermore, a close analysis makes it clear that the children are highly attentive to each other's stories, and influence each other extensively — in ways, I should add, that are intricately mediated by friendship ties, subgroup formation, gender, and so on.

In short, it appears that a key matrix for the children's narrative development is a **socially structured practice** which is, in turn, deeply embedded in the sociocultural fabric of the children's group life. But recognizing this does not, by itself, fully explain the kinds of **motivations** that shape the pace and direction of development within this context.

Social–Relational and Aesthetic Concerns

I submit that these motivations are complex — which helps to explain why individual

children's patterns of development are themselves complex, rather than simple or unilinear. Elucidating them and grasping their interrelations remains a long-term challenge for developmental research, but at this point I can offer a first step in that direction. Building on an extensive, though still exploratory, analysis whose results I can only summarize here, I would suggest that the process of the children's narrative development appears to be driven, to a great degree, by the ongoing interplay of two interrelated but analytically distinct kinds of motivating concerns. Each of these sets of concerns is influenced by, and at the same time helps to sustain, the sociocultural context of the children's narrative activity.

(1) First, there are what might be called **social–relational** concerns. Since the stories that the children tell are acted out every day in a group context, and the author of the story chooses the other children who will help act it out, the stories are used as vehicles for seeking or expressing friendship, group affiliation, and prestige. These social–relational concerns affect the character of stories in a number of ways, most of which will have to be neglected here. For example, in composing stories a child may be inclined to include specific characters that his or her friends like to act out, as well as using themes that will appeal to them or which mark the clique to which he or she belongs; and so on.

Here I will focus on one relatively simple, but generally quite significant, index of social–relational concerns, namely the inclusion of large numbers of characters in a story. Everything else being equal, multiplying the number of characters gives children the chance to include all their friends in the story, as well as potential friends and playmates who will then owe them a favor in return.[3] In addition, it often gives them a feeling of power and influence, since it allows them to control the situation and to bring many other children on stage under their direction.

(2) At the same time, it is clear that the children's construction of narratives is also guided, to varying degrees, by intrinsically cognitive, symbolic, and formal concerns, including the mastery of narrative form for its own sake. Certain children seem especially preoccupied with developing a greater control of characters and their interrelations, in working through specific formal problems through repeated efforts, in attaining more coherent plot structure, in achieving more powerful or satisfying symbolic effects, and so on. In short, the motivations driving the children's narrative activity include what must be seen as genuinely **aesthetic** concerns, strange as it may seem to assert this of 4-year-olds.[4]

The two sets of concerns may be in tension — for example, when a child's desire to multiply characters is limited by the number that he or she can effectively handle — but in the long run they are also complementary. The different ways that children manage this interplay helps to produce a range of subtly distinctive routes to narrative development.

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[3] On the other hand, restricting the number of characters sometimes allows children to express special bonds with close friends — and perhaps to **exclude** others — but these tendencies seem to be less significant at the preschool level.

[4] I have also emphasized the motivating significance of the aesthetic dimension in children's symbolic imagination, in two somewhat different contexts, in Nicolopoulou, 1991; Nicolopoulou et al., 1994.

The Interplay of Social–Relational and Aesthetic Concerns: A Longitudinal Illustration

To examine fully the working-out of these two analytically distinct yet interrelated concerns for the entire sample would require a lengthy discussion. But their interplay is illustrated in a particularly revealing way by the stories of another child in the group, a boy whom we can call Mickey. At the beginning of the year, he was 4 years and 5 months old, and he told 28 stories throughout the year (17 in the fall and 11 in the spring). What makes the pattern of Mickey's storytelling especially illuminating in this respect is that it seems to involve a partial differentiation, and then a gradual reintegration, of social–relational and aesthetic concerns.

Mickey's first two stories contained a large number of characters (ten and eight, respectively) and were relatively unstructured and disconnected. Here is one of them:

> There is a **horse** and a building (a clock tower). The horse was standing near the building. There was a little fire in the building. Then a **whale** came and sprayed the fire out with his blowhole. The horse just watched. Then there was a farm and it had lots of kinds of animals from the forest, a **fox**, a **bear**, a **deer**, a **woodpecker,** and **horse**. A **tiger** owned the farm. The tiger took them all to the zoo.
>
> (Mickey, 4;5; 9/12/88)

This story displays a vivid imagination, but not a very coherent narrative structure. In fact, there are two separate stories, which are juxtaposed rather than integrated. There are eight characters in all, each of which performs at most one action.

We then see a striking shift. Mickey begins to tell stories that have very few characters (sometimes only one), but uses them to generate stories that have increasing narrative complexity and density of character development. The following is an example of such a story:

> Once upon a time there was a **dinosaur**. The dinosaur gets under a tree. Then the leaves fell off the tree and the leaves buried the dinosaur. Then the dinosaur unburied himself. He ate the leaves. And then painted a picture of all the horses, all the stores, all the schools, and he painted himself. Then he painted all the barns. The end.
>
> (Mickey, 4;5; 9/21/88)

As the year goes on, he once again gradually begins to compose stories with larger numbers of characters; but now he is able to manage them within a coherent and effective plot structure. I would argue that, while social–relational concerns predominated in Mickey's first stories, he then gave an overriding priority to addressing aesthetic concerns. In the long run, however, he is increasingly able to integrate these two concerns. The result is the overall pattern shown in Fig. 22.2.

After experimenting extensively with stories that have a few characters, toward the end of the fall Mickey can tell a story with a moderate number of characters that are well-related to each other:

> Once upon a time there was a **man** and one **girl**. They found some dinosaurs

in the stick house and they were **Tyrannosaurus Rex** and **Packiasefalasaurus**. They rode on them and the man was bad and the woman was good. The woman was on Packiasefalasaurus and the man rode Tyrannosaurus Rex. And they fighted while they were on the dinosaurs. Packi bited Tyrannosaurus with his head. And Tyrannosaurus bit him with his teeth. And Packi won the fight.

(Mickey, 4;7; 12/1/88)

Then, in the second semester, there are some remarkably elaborate constructions:

Once upon a time there was a **cat** and a **bunny** and a **dog**. They all lived together in a backyard. One day a **rag man** came along. He said, "Any rags today? Any rags today?" It was a chilly day and the rag man began to sneeze. "Ah-ah-choo!" "Ke-choo! Ke-choo! Ke-choo!" The bunny had the cat's ears! And the cat had the bunny's ears. And the cat had the dog's bark. So the bunny tried to run over and pull his ears off. And the dog had the kitty's meow. They walked around looking for the rag man. Then they met a **goose** with her feathers off, and she was carrying her feathers in a little basket. So then, the cat and the bunny all said to the goose, "Did you see a rag man go by?" "Yes," said the goose, stomping her foot. Then they went on walking, and they met a **rooster** with a comb and a beak and his tail feathers on top of his head. Then they went on walking and they met a **boy** with a shoe on top of his head and his [?] the rag man. Ah-choo! Ah-choo! Ah-choo!

(Mickey, 4;9; 1-27-89)

It has undoubtedly occurred to some readers that Mickey probably based this story on something he had heard. However, it needs to be emphasized that, for these children, hearing stories does not necessarily imply being able to reproduce or adapt them. (In the same way, some of us can't manage to tell jokes however many times we've heard them.)

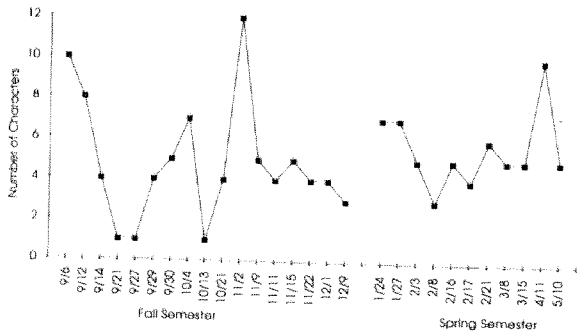

FIG. 22.2. Characters per Story in Stories by Mickey

In short, the overall pattern of Mickey's stories during the year demonstrates both the distinction between social-relational and aesthetic concerns and their ultimate interrelatedness. Once again, it should be noted that different children emphasize and blend these concerns in different ways, depending on variations in temperament and situation, thus yielding distinctive rhythms and configurations of narrative development. But in the end

their patterns of development express, in one mode or another, the structuring interplay of both types of motivating concerns.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The present study demonstrates that an ongoing storytelling and story-acting practice such as the one examined here, which integrates individual spontaneity with group participation, creates a powerful context for enhancing preschool children's narrative development. This practice draws on preschoolers' existing ability and inclination to tell and enact make-believe stories, and helps these develop by providing the children with continual opportunities for narrative performance and cross-fertilization in composing their own stories, acting in each others' stories, or simply listening to and watching the stories of others. Furthermore, since this practice is integrated into the preschool curriculum and the children are given control over what stories to tell, when to tell them, and who should act in their stories, it provides children with the opportunities to use and elaborate their narratives for their own purposes, which are both symbolic and social–relational (in complex combinations). Over time, this practice helps to create and sustain a common culture in the classroom (as well as an arena for the articulation of differences within this common culture) woven together by an ongoing framework of shared narrative activity in which all the children participate according to their own pace, rhythm, and inclination.

As a consequence, children become enthusiastically involved in this practice, and bring considerable energy and creativity to their narrative activity. And this results, in turn, in their generating stories of increasing variety, complexity, ambition, and sophistication. Not only does this rich body of spontaneous stories provide us with an invaluable window into the mind of the preschooler; the stories of these preschoolers also indicate that they have achieved levels of narrative capability and proficiency that go well beyond what the great bulk of current research in this area would lead us to expect for children of their age.

These results have some important implications for the study of development in general and of narrative development in particular. First, they strongly suggest that studies conducted in experimental and semi-experimental settings, which predominate in current narrative research, systematically underestimate the potential narrative capabilities of young children. Not only are these studies not well suited to tap the full extent of children's actual capabilities. More crucially, since they necessarily exclude the examination of the sociocultural contexts within which actual learning and development take place, they are also not well suited to understand many of the factors that are most important in promoting and facilitating this development.

These limitations are only partly overcome by many of the more socially-situated approaches in research on narrative development, because (among other reasons) they tend to conceive of the "social" context of development rather narrowly in terms of the direct effects of dyadic (or occasionally triadic) interaction, usually adult–child interaction. Such interactions are of course important; but when they are examined exclusively and in isolation, the result is a truncated and misleading picture of the social

embeddedness of thought and development. As I have argued (here and elsewhere), it is also necessary to situate these interactions in the larger sociocultural contexts — ranging from classroom mini-cultures and socially structured play-worlds to communities and institutional frameworks — that shape the nature, meaning, and impact of these interactions.

In short, this study demonstrates the crucial importance of social context for narrative development; and, at the same time, it suggests the need for a more comprehensive and genuinely sociocultural understanding of "social context" and its impact than those which currently inform most narrative research (and developmental research in general). The social contexts of development cannot be reduced (conceptually or in practice) to simple aggregations of dyadic (or triadic) interactions; they consist above all of cultural and institutional frameworks that need to be grasped and analyzed as genuinely **collective** realities which, in manifold ways, structure, enable, and constrain the actions and experiences of those who participate in them. In the present case, the social context most critical for the children's narrative development consists of a socially structured practice of ongoing shared activity which simultaneously offers them opportunities and resources for development (including the mastery of narrative skills) and serves to motivate this development.

This study also provides strong evidence for the importance, both theoretical and practical, of peer relations and peer-group activity in young children's learning and development. Practices that build effectively on children's group life, and on the spontaneous exercise of their symbolic imagination, can significantly promote their narrative development. In educational contexts, the role of adults in this connection — which remains a vital one — lies in facilitating these practices and in helping to create, maintain, and support the kinds of social environments in which these forms of activity can flourish. This role complements, rather than replacing or undermining, the more direct role of the teacher as a transmitter of skills and information.

In the present case, a still exploratory analysis suggests that the storytelling and story-acting practice being examined is successful, in part, because it is able to draw on, and integrate, two interrelated but analytically distinct kinds of concerns that are especially important in motivating and directing young children's activity: (a) social–relational concerns, rooted in the children's group life and expressed in their preoccupation with issues of friendship, affiliation, status, group membership, and so on; and (b) more intrinsically aesthetic concerns, including the mastery of (culturally elaborated) narrative form for its own sake and the effort to use it for a variety of symbolic purposes. Both types of motivating concerns are socially situated, but each child in the study pursued, emphasized, and combined them in a different pattern; and, in the process of the child's narrative performance, experimentation, and increasing proficiency, the two concerns acted on and reshaped each other as well. Thus, while both of these motivating concerns seem to be present in all cases, their complex interplay produced a variety of distinctive patterns of narrative development over the course of the year.

The theoretical perspective underlying this exploratory argument stems from an effort to delineate and understand the reciprocal links between sociocultural context and individual motivation in the process of development. That is, I argue that one of the key

ways that socially structured practices influence and activate individual development is by simultaneously drawing on and shaping the inner motivations that drive and direct this development. This argument bears, in turn, on a larger theoretical agenda that has informed this chapter as a whole. An effective approach to understanding individual development requires a genuine integration of sociocultural with constructivist perspectives (as the Piagetian tradition has termed them), and such an integration is not only necessary but eminently feasible. Any approach to development that does not systematically address the embeddedness of human thought and action in sociocultural contexts will necessarily be incomplete and misleading. But, on the other hand, an approach that simply dissolves the individual in his or her sociocultural context is in danger of forfeiting any genuine conception of **development**. The analysis offered in the present chapter has attempted to suggest some concrete ways that we can move toward overcoming this damaging and unnecessary polarization.

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