Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies, Volume 3 (2011), pp. 25-48.

Children's Storytelling

Toward an Interpretive and Sociocultural Approach

Ageliki Nicolopoulou

Recent years have seen increasing efforts to integrate narrative theory with developments in cognitive science (e.g., Herman 2003; Keen 2007; Palmer 2004). Thus far these efforts have been pursued most vigorously by narratologists who recognize the value of creating intellectual bridges between narratology and cognitive science. My own experiences as a developmental psychologist have convinced me that psychological research on narrative—in particular, research on children's narrative activities and their acquisition and development of narrative skills—should be paying equally careful attention to models, trends, and ideas in the domain of narratology. To highlight the potential value of intellectual cross-fertilization between narratology and developmental studies of narrative, I present the interpretive and sociocultural approach I have developed over the years in my research

on the narratives of preschool children, outlining some of the concrete analyses that have emerged from this long-term research project. The approach I have sought to develop emphasizes the need for understanding children's narrative activity as a form of symbolic action linking the construction of reality with the formation of identity; it attempts to integrate the formal analysis of linguistic structure with the elucidation of structures of meaning; and it attempts to situate children's narrative activity in the sociocultural context of their everyday interaction, their group life, and their cultural world.

In what follows, I first explain how I got involved in analyzing the stories of young children and why I concluded that the dominant approaches to narrative analysis in developmental psychology were inadequate to address important issues raised by this research. Next, I explicate the approach I have developed and illustrate some of its applications. I believe narratologists will recognize significant parallels between this approach (and some of its motivating concerns) and approaches emerging in contemporary narratology, especially in work informed by the idea of "storyworlds." I conclude by exploring some similarities and differences between my own developmental approach to narrative inquiry and these "postclassical" narratological approaches, suggesting why cross-fertilization between these two enterprises is both possible and desirable.

How I Got Involved in Narrative Research: A Focus on Situated Storytelling/Story-Acting Activities

It may be useful to provide a brief account of how I got involved in narrative research and the challenges I encountered along the way—so that I can explain how my interests came to converge with themes and approaches in narratology, both classical and postclassical. My first research project on children's narratives was a collaborative analysis of stories spontaneously produced by children over the course of an entire academic year in the four-year-olds' classroom in a university child care program. We used an unusual method in our study. My collaborator, the head teacher of the class, had introduced in her classroom a storytelling/story-acting activity pioneered by the teacher-researcher Vivian

Paley (1990). During this daily activity, three or four children each day had the opportunity to dictate stories to their teacher, who transcribed each story as the child told it, with minimal intervention. Then later on that day, during large-group time, the child-author and the children whom he or she chose acted out these stories for the benefit of the entire class. These stories were a unique and rich source of data that immediately captured my attention—and that have continued to be the focus of my research up to now.

Several features of this elicitation method make it unique. The typical way that children's stories have been elicited in psychological research is by asking children individually to tell a story to an experimenter who listens to and tape-records it; more rarely, either the experimenter or the child writes the story down. Children are often asked to tell a story based on a wordless picture book or on a shorter sequence of pictures, or to retell a story the experimenter told them, or to finish a story that the experimenter started; they are much more rarely asked to tell a story of their own creation. Also, the usual setting for the story elicitation is either a university laboratory or a quiet place outside the child's classroom (see, e.g., Nelson 1996; Nicolopoulou 1997a; Yussen and Ozcan 1996). In sharp contrast, the stories elicited for our study were told not just to the adult teacher who wrote down the story as the child said it, but also, because of the story-acting, to the child's friends and peers. The storytelling and story-acting were embedded in the ongoing context of the classroom miniculture and the children's everyday group life. In addition, the children's storytelling was voluntary, self-initiated, and relatively spontaneous. The children approached the teacher to tell a story, rather than the other way around. The teacher's task was to make sure that all the children who wanted to compose stories had the chance to do so over a few weeks, since only three or four stories could be dictated and acted out each day. Furthermore, the stories could be on any topic the children chose; they were not channeled or constrained by props, suggested topics, or story kernels on which the children were asked to expand. Because this practice ran through the entire school year and the children controlled their participation, it provided them with the opportunity to work over, refine, and elaborate their narratives and to use them for their own diverse purposes—cognitive, sym-

bolic, expressive, and social-relational. In the process the children could use their stories as a way of expressing emotionally important themes that preoccupied them and of symbolically managing or resolving these underlying themes. My research has shown that elicitation conditions of this sort lead children to produce narratives that are richer, more ambitious, and more illuminating than when they compose them in isolation from their everyday social contexts and in response to agendas shaped directly by adults (see Nicolopoulou 1996, 2002; Nicolopoulou and Richner 2004).

Over the years, I have studied the operation and effects of this storytelling/story-acting practice in a total of twenty preschool classes serving children from three to five years of age. From 1988 to 1997 I studied eleven such classes in three preschools in California and Massachusetts serving children from largely middle- or upper middle–class backgrounds; in most cases, collecting stories was combined with ethnographic observations of the classroom activities, friendship patterns, and group life of the children involved. From 1997 to the present, I have studied two different Head Start programs, one in Massachusetts and the other in Pennsylvania, as well as a child care program in Pennsylvania, all serving children from poor and otherwise disadvantaged backgrounds. Over the course of my research I have collected over 3,500 stories and have analyzed a large number of them.

How to Analyze the Stories of Young Children: Why Formalist Approaches Are Not Enough

Beginning in the 1980s developmental psychologists and psycholinguists began to assemble an extensive and rigorous body of research devoted to analyzing children's narratives. In starting my own research project I set out to familiarize myself with the range of available approaches so that I could find the best one(s) to analyze the children's stories. I expected this task to be easy. As I carefully reviewed the relevant literature (a critical overview is in Nicolopoulou 1997a), I became less optimistic. Two things were especially striking to me in reviewing this literature. First, very little attention had been paid to young children's narratives. Usually the youngest group included consisted of first to third graders or, more rarely, kindergarteners; it was quite rare to have stories of three- and four-year-olds. Second, the stories of younger children were almost always seen in negative terms—that is, in terms of what these children had not yet achieved as compared to adult models. It was rare to look at these stories in their own terms. The claim was that young children's stories were not really stories, but I knew full well that in the data I had, children were fully convinced that they were telling stories to be shared with and enacted for the benefit of the entire class. So I felt compelled to figure out what principles or rules the children were using to generate their stories—which they considered to be stories even if our developmental analyses did not fully accord them this status.

Another striking feature of psychological research on narrative was the turn to formalism starting roughly in the 1970s. Prior to this period, the analysis of children's stories had focused primarily on thematic content to bring out underlying patterns of symbolism associated with psychosexual and personality development. By the 1980s, however, the emphasis had shifted to formalist approaches seeking to specify the basic underlying story grammar or narrative rule systems that allow individuals to recognize, comprehend, and produce particular narratives. In accordance with structuralist approaches to language and narrative that were prevalent at the time, the tendency was to specify the smallest set of rules that remain relatively invariant and that allow actual narratives to be produced and comprehended. One of the most widely used story grammars, which remains highly influential, was the one developed by Stein and colleagues (e.g., Stein and Glenn 1979; Stein 1988; assessed in Nicolopoulou 2008). This grammar modeled the sequence of actions in constituent episodes of narratives and assumed that such episodes are organized around problems and their resolution. Specifically, stories are parsed into a setting and an episode, with the episode being further parsed into an initiating event that results into a problem, a goal-directed effort by the main protagonist to overcome the problem, specific attempts to solve it, an outcome or resolution, and possibly an evaluation or appraisal of the situation.

Another type of formalist analysis used adaptations of the model developed by Labov and Waletzky (1967/1997), who had attempted to capture the underlying structure of (adults') first-person oral narratives

of personal experience. Their analysis was explicitly "formal," with the aim of "isolating the invariant structural units" that underlie the "superficial" variety of actual narratives; but unlike the story-grammar approach, they stressed that the structure of a narrative is crucially linked to the role it plays in the context of interpersonal communication between teller and listener. Their starting point was a distinction between two essential functions of narrative, which they termed referential and evaluative. The referential function involves the recapitulation of an episode in temporal sequence. The evaluative function is achieved through a variety of devices that convey the point or significance of the story and indicate why it is worth telling. This is often called "high-point" analysis since it rests on the assumption that a story has a "point" or a climatic event toward which the beginning part orients listeners, and away from which the ending parts carry it to a conclusion. In Labov and Waletzky's model, the basic structure of a fully formed oral narrative is composed of six ordered units: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and (optional) coda. Since young children rarely produce stories that match this canonical model, it cannot simply be applied to their narratives. But elements of the Labovian approach have been flexibly applied to children's stories—tracing, for example, their increasing use of evaluative devices. In practice, however, such research rarely goes very far in the analysis of narrative meaning making or the exploration of relationships between narrative structure and semantic content.

Although practitioners of these formalist approaches often suggested parallels to structuralist poetics (Russian formalism and French structuralism), and some pioneers of these approaches paid tribute in particular to Propp's analysis of the Russian folktale (Propp 1928/1968), their formalist orientation was more directly related to certain cognitivist tendencies in psychology at that time (see Mandler 1984)—that is, tendencies to reduce activities or experiences to underlying, abstract, schematic mental representations. Along these lines, their conceptualization of story was based on a thin, schematic, and invariant model of plot structure reduced to sequences of events with no attention to the dramatis personae who act in it and thereby evoke different experiential repertoires (e.g., rescue, love, seduction). Thus the semantic content of narratives was only minimally considered in these analyses.

However, even a cursory reading of Propp's analysis of the folktale makes it clear that Propp's own treatment of narrative is considerably richer and less schematic than these approaches that claimed inspiration from him. Propp did not simply identify invariant abstract elements (or what he called "functions") related to the plot structure, but he went on to cluster these functions into more organized wholes that bring coherence to the story. In fact, the thirty-one functions that Propp identified were not just a series of plot elements, but recurrent actions performed by a small set of character types (e.g., "an interdiction is addressed to the hero," or "the villain receives information about his victim"). Propp also argued, crucially, that these functions join together to create a few discernable *spheres of action* associated with several general roles (the villain, the donor, the helper, the sought-for-person) that correspond to the ways characters can participate in the plot structure of the folktale. In short, whereas the story-grammar and high-point approaches did away with most of the semantic content of narrative, focusing instead on a minimal abstract structure, in Propp's account semantic content remains (at least minimally) via character roles and their interrelations within the ongoing action. (These tendencies were extended by Greimas and Barthes, as an illuminating discussion by Herman 2002 makes clear.)

My reading of Propp's work, which I encountered through Bruner (1986), helped bolster my intuition that we should not attempt to look at narrative structure independent of crucial aspects of semantic content but instead should find ways to integrate the two. In other words, as Bruner (1986) has argued, conceptions of narrative structure cannot just focus on plot structure as a sequence of events but need to combine setting, characters, and plot in a narrative whole that serves as a vehicle of meaning. My growing sense of the inadequacy of narrowly formalist approaches was further strengthened by a conviction, also emphasized by Bruner and others, that we need to understand children's stories in their social context—not only to capture what the children were trying to do when they told stories in particular sets of circumstances, with particular interlocutors involved, but also to grasp how these contexts both shape and support their storytelling.

Thus, I came to realize that rigidly dividing narrative form and se-

mantic content, and ignoring the situation or context for acts of narration, make it difficult to capture precisely those features that render stories important and emotionally engaging for children. The child's story is fragmented into elements that, taken in isolation, do not fully capture the point of telling and listening to stories. Studies of children's narrative competence, for example, are often strangely abstracted from the uses to which children put this competence and their purposes for doing so. Even when these strategies of analysis are not purely formalist, they tend to limit themselves to the "internal" structure of the narratives. That is, they focus on delineating how narratives are constructed and how children acquire, over time, the capacity to construct and understand them. These questions cover only part of what we want to know about the place of narratives in children's development. They leave out, first, what children's narratives reveal about their conceptions of the world—an issue whose exploration requires a more interpretive or hermeneutic mode of analysis. And the questions also pass over the crucial dimension of narrative as a form of *symbolic action*, which includes its use as a cognitive tool and a vehicle of identity formation. As Bruner (1992) has cogently put it, "The central concern is not how narrative text is constructed, but rather how it operates as an instrument of mind in the construction of reality" (233). Overcoming this fragmentation—reassembling the phenomenon of story as a living whole—requires an approach that can integrate the formal analysis of children's narratives into a more comprehensive *interpretive* perspective, in a way that effectively situates human thought and action in its sociocultural context.

An Interpretive and Sociocultural Analysis: Gender-Related Narrative Styles in Children's Storytelling

The interpretive framework I developed to analyze the children's stories attempts to capture both their form and their semantic content and to bring out the relationship between them. In working out this approach, I have drawn on a number of sources—including my reading of classical narratology as mentioned above. One especially useful source of guidance has been the broader "interpretive turn" in the human sciences.

The guiding insight of this perspective, especially as formulated by theorists such as Bruner (1990), Geertz (1973), and Taylor (1985), is that the interpretation of meanings is not only a key requirement for the study of human life but is simultaneously a central condition for human thought and action itself. Accordingly my starting point has been the premise that the children's stories are meaningful texts that, if analyzed carefully, can tell us a great deal about the ways that children grasp the world, including their social relationships. The crucial concern of an interpretive analysis is thus to elucidate the *structures of meaning* that the stories embody and express—reconstructing not only the surface meaning or semantic content of stories but also their relation to broader sociocultural meaning-making activities. When approached in this way, children's spontaneous stories offer us an invaluable and privileged window into the mind of the preschooler that captures the interplay of mind and culture (Nicolopoulou and Weintraub 1998).

One strikingly consistent pattern demonstrated by my analyses of young children's spontaneous storytelling over two decades is that although the children's stories were shared with the entire class every day, they divided systematically along gender lines (Nicolopoulou 1997b, 2002; Nicolopoulou, Scales, and Weintraub 1994; Richner and Nicolopoulou 2001). The body of stories generated through the storytelling/story-acting activity was dominated by two highly distinctive gender-related narrative styles that differed sharply in their characteristic modes of representing experience, in their underlying images of social relationships, and in their portrayal of the self. In fact, these narrative styles embodied two distinctive types of genuine aesthetic imagination (surprising as it may seem to assert this of preschoolers), each with its own inner logic and coherence—two different "ways of worldmaking" (Goodman 1978). To summarize my conclusions very briefly and schematically, in general girls' stories show a proclivity toward or concern with cognitive, symbolic, and social order whereas boys' stories favor cognitive, symbolic, and social disorder; and this difference is manifested in both the semantic content and the formal structure of the children's narratives.

In the rest of this section I sketch out some of the most characteristic features that define and distinguish these two narrative styles (for a

more detailed analysis, see Nicolopoulou 1997b; Nicolopoulou, Scales, and Weintraub 1994; Richner and Nicolopoulou 2001) and then situate them vis-à-vis some broader considerations of the interplay among mind, culture, and social contexts. Because coding analyses have shown that stories conforming to these characteristic narrative styles divided overwhelmingly along gender lines in the classrooms I have studied, for the sake of convenience I refer simply to girls' and boys' stories.

THE GIRLS' STORIES: THE FAMILY GENRE

The girls' stories were more likely to feature a stable set of characters located in stable and specified physical settings. More fundamentally, an important way that the girls gave their stories coherence and continuity was by structuring their content around stable and harmonious social relationships, especially—though not exclusively—family relationships. It thus seems appropriate to characterize their most preferred narrative model as a *family genre.* Girls often used this framework of relationships, meticulously enumerated and anchored physically in the home, to depict the rhythmic, cyclical, and repeated patterns of everyday life. Princes, princesses, and other fairy-tale characters, who were popular in the girls' stories, were also generally assimilated to the family romance, often getting married and having babies.

Thus, the ideal world of the girls' stories tends to be an orderly world: centered, coherent, and firmly structured. In fact, whenever order was threatened or disrupted—which did occur—the girls were typically quite careful to re-establish it before ending the story. Likewise, although the animals they introduced into their stories were most often "cute" and reassuring ones like butterflies, bunnies, and ponies, they also employed a range of devices for neutralizing more dangerous or disruptive elements. For example, potentially threatening animals (even monsters) were neutralized by absorbing them into the family unit as "pets." The theme of order threatened and restored is nicely illustrated by this girl's story:

> Once upon a time there was a mom. The mom was playing with two babies and there was a dad. The dad went to work. And the mom went to work. And then there came a dinosaur in a boat. It rode into water in the house. The parents came back home. The babies were gone. The dinosaur robbed the babies. The dad came home and said, "Babies, we're home. It's your Birthday!" Then the dinosaur branged them home and they were friends. The babies blew out the candles. They were two years old. The end. (Polly, 4-3)[1]

The crucial point is that the girls' stories are not just orderly; they show a positive assessment or valorization of an orderly world.

THE BOYS' STORIES: THE HEROIC-AGONISTIC GENRE

In contrast to the centered stability of the girls' stories, the boys' stories were marked by movement and disruption, and often by associative chains of exuberant imagery. Their favorite characters tended to be big, powerful, and often frightening—warriors, cartoon action heroes, monsters, huge or destructive animals—and boys were also fond of "scary" figures like ghosts or skeletons. In comparison with the girls' stories, what was striking was the general *absence* of stable social relationships in the boys' stories and their frequent tenuousness when such relationships were in fact mentioned. If the explicit depiction of the family group was a prototypical feature of the girls' stories, the corresponding motif in the boys' stories was the explicit—and usually enthusiastic—depiction of active violence, conflict, and destruction. Their most highly preferred genre can thus usefully be termed *heroic-agonistic.* But physical violence was only one means used to generate disorder. The theme of rule breaking was also common in the boys' stories, as well as bursts of extravagant and deliberately startling imagery.

What propelled many of the boys' stories was a striving toward excitement, novelty, and excess—and the energy driving their stories often outran their capacity to manage it coherently. Characters and events tended to be loosely connected and were often introduced sequentially into the story for the sake of action and thrilling effect, producing a string of escalating images. The following (non-agonistic) story captures this aspect of the boys' storytelling style:

> Once upon a time there was a bear that went to the forest. Then a big wolf opened up his mouth. Then a beam of light came into a bunny's heart. Then he was a *Vampire* bunny. And soon some monsters came. A giant alligator came. And crocodile came to get the alligator. A big egg

was rolling around. It belonged to the alligator. A tiger ran and ran and ran after a bat. And he was safe from the tiger. (Toby, 4-3)

In short, whereas the girls' stories are structured so as to maintain or restore order—cognitive, symbolic, and social—the boys' stories revel in movement, unpredictability, and disorder. What they express is a positive fascination with disorder.

SOME FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS: THE INTERPLAY OF MIND, CULTURE, AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

These preschool children actively constructed, used, and creatively elaborated two quite distinctive narrative styles through their ongoing activity within the context of a shared classroom miniculture. At the deepest level the contrast between these two narrative styles expresses two sharply different approaches to the symbolic management of order and disorder.

In constructing their narratives, the children drew themes, characters, images, plots, and other elements from each others' stories; they also incorporated elements into their narratives from a wide range of other sources including fairy tales, children's books, TV (and popular culture more generally), and their own experience. However, they did not simply imitate other children's stories, nor did they just passively absorb messages from adults and the larger culture. It was clear that even at this early age, they were able to appropriate these elements selectively and to use and modify them for their own purposes.

One of the most revealing and theoretically interesting manifestations of the contrast between these two gender-related narrative styles is the way that anomalous or ambiguous elements were symbolically "reworked" to conform to the distinctive model informing each style (Nicolopoulou, Scales, and Weintraub 1994: 113–16). Thus, even if apparently similar elements appeared or were mentioned in the boys' and girls' stories, they were transformed in significance by being used differently, approached with a different attitude, and fitted into different structures of meaning. (An important methodological implication is that such elements cannot be taken in isolation and simply aggregated but need to be interpreted in the context of the larger structures of meaning within which they are embedded.) Examples include the "nice monsters," animals-as-pets, and dinosaurs-with-families in some girls' stories. On the other hand, boys did sometimes depict a family group, but usually with different symbolic intentions from those informing such depictions in the girls' stories:

> There was a dad and a mom and two babies. They went to the park and there was a monster and he ate the family up. After he ate the family the monster died because there was too much family and he was fat. (Andrew, 4-4)

I want to emphasize that this approach to gender differences in narrative development views them not as a straightforward product of biologically determined "essences," but rather as emerging, socially constructed patterns bound up with the formation of gendered subcultures and the sociocultural dynamics of the children's peer-group life. And this line of research has implications that go beyond the specific subject of gender. It can help us better understand how to delineate some of the diverse pathways and strategies pursued by young children in the course of narrative development—which, in turn, can help us build up a more precise and illuminating picture of young children's developing narrative competence and their efforts to increase their mastery of narrative form.

In later phases of this long-term research project, the analysis of the corpus of children's stories was combined with extensive classroom observation at the preschools where the stories were generated (see Nicolopoulou 1997b; Nicolopoulou and Richner 2004; Richner and Nicolopoulou 2001). This strategy allowed me to address more fully a number of intriguing issues raised by the first phase of the project—and should contribute, in the long run, to addressing the larger questions of how and why gender differences of the sort outlined above emerge in the first place. I found, for example, that the gendered narrative patterns identified in the analysis emerged from the complex, mutually reinforcing interaction of two ongoing processes: (a) the children's distinctive narrative styles express underlying differences in their emerging cognitive modes and symbolic imagination; and, at the same time, (b) the use of these different styles is part of an effort by the boys and the girls to mark themselves off from each other symbolically as members of two distinct groups and to build up a sense of cohesion and shared identity

within each subgroup (for further discussion, see Nicolopoulou 2002). Therefore, children's use of the storytelling and story-acting practices to build up a common culture within the classroom may also, ironically, have provided the children with a framework for the articulation of differences within this common culture. The regular observation of classroom activities, friendship patterns, and so on allow for a fuller exploration of the interplay between these two complementary processes. By situating the crystallization and use of the children's narrative styles more systematically in the context of their group life, this ethnographic approach sheds more light on the dynamics of preschool children's participation in the construction of their own individual and collective identities—including their gender identities.

Extending the Analysis: Gender-Related Narrative Genres as Generative Frameworks

The next step was to extend this analysis to examine more systematically the patterns and dynamics of the children's narrative development. The narrative genres that the girls and boys in these classrooms constructed, used, and elaborated over the course of the school year—predominantly the family and the heroic-agonistic genres, respectively—do not simply provide rigid or static models for storytelling. Instead, each of these genres serves as a flexible *generative framework*, or matrix for meaning making, offering distinctive possibilities for increasing narrative complexity and symbolic elaboration. While the distinctive orientations that shape and define these genres provide different narrative resources and opportunities, they also tend to pose different—in some ways complementary—formal problems for the children who draw on them. They therefore tend to direct the children's narrative development in somewhat different directions. Over time the complexity and sophistication of the children's stories increased quite markedly. But this narrative development proceeded along two distinctive gender-related pathways.

As the previous discussion shows, these narrative genres embody and express distinctive images of the self or person that are linked, correspondingly, to distinctive images of social relations and the social world. Within the framework of the family genre, the girls portrayed

and developed a conception of the person as essentially socially embedded and interdependent. Within the framework of the heroic-agonistic genre, the boys portrayed and developed a conception of the person as essentially separate and agonistic. But each of these gendered models of personhood also showed a clear developmental pattern, along lines I outline below. And in each case, this developmental transformation in the portrayal of the person was bound up with a transformation in the landscape of social relationships portrayed in the stories.

For this analysis, my colleagues and I selected thirty preschool children from several classes in half-day mixed-age preschools. The sample consisted of an equal number of boys and girls, with five boys and five girls at each of three age levels: three-, four-, and five-year-olds (for more details, see Nicolopoulou 2008; Nicolopoulou and Richner 2007; Richner and Nicolopoulou 2001). Levels of narrative development did not always correspond precisely to increasing age, but on the whole they corresponded closely enough for me to use the children's ages as my frame of reference.

BOYS' STORIES REVISITED: THE HEROIC-AGONISTIC GENRE AS GENERATIVE FRAMEWORK

As previously noted, the boys' stories began by introducing a set of highly kinetic and aggressive but also transitory and disconnected characters. A key narrative problem the boys faced was to stabilize the characters and to link them in ways that could generate coherent plots, while maintaining the essential separateness of the characters and an overall strain toward disorder. In the girls' stories, on the contrary, the characters typically started off by being embedded in the ordered framework of a cohesive and harmonious group, usually a family group, within which they were linked by networks of "given" and interdependent roles. Stabilizing and connecting the characters was thus not a salient problem within the family genre; instead the girls faced the problem of generating movement, action, and dramatism while maintaining the basic framework of order and cohesion. In each case the children found distinctive and sometimes ingenious narrative devices to address these genre-specific formal problems.

The three-year-old boys started out with the portrayal of disconnected,

transitory, and aggressive characters defined fundamentally by their *actions*. At this age the characters were not only essentially separate but actually isolated. The characters also lacked any real stability, solidity, or continuity; when they were not simply introduced and then forgotten, they functioned as no more than vehicles for action. With age and through storytelling experience two processes proceeded in complex interconnection. On the one hand, the characters became more stable and substantial and were given greater psychological depth; and on the other hand, the boys tried to find strategies for connecting the characters in more stable and coherent ways. Their main strategy for bringing characters into contact was through conflict, so the first stages of this process involved the stabilization of conflicts. At first the stories portrayed relatively unfocused aggression and destruction; then this shifted to conflicts between specific opponents; then in some cases paired opponents engaged in repeated conflicts. Boys also began to link characters in alliances, in coalitions, or later on in "teams," either temporary or more stable, but always structured by the overriding motif of power and conflict. In these ways what began as chaotic conflict was transformed into more clearly agonistic competition (though even among five-year-olds the world of the boys' stories remained a world of disorder).

These attempts to find ways to connect the characters (albeit in a conflictual and ultimately unstable pattern) went roughly in tandem with the gradual effort to give characters more stability, continuity, and psychological depth. Among three- and four-year-olds, the characters were stabilized and made a little more substantial, but they remained essentially vehicles for action. Among older four- and five-year-olds, there was a movement toward greater character depth. For most four-year-olds, the *character* began to be distinguished from the visible *actions* that he (rarely she) performed, through portrayal of the capabilities, intentions, or motivations of the actor; that is, the character began to be depicted as an intentional agent (though not yet one who explicitly expressed intentions). For most five-year-olds, this process was pushed further as the character began to be explicitly depicted formulating plans and, in the most advanced cases, even considering possible future actions and events. In this overall developmental process the fundamental portrayal of the person as essentially separate and agonistic was not altered, but only refined, deepened, and brought to fruition. The character was now portrayed, not as a transitory and insubstantial locus of observable action, but as an increasingly stable and self-conscious agent—not just as isolated or independent, but as increasingly autonomous (i.e., consciously self-determining). Here is a fairly sophisticated example of a boy's story; in this narrative, the characters display mental abilities that they use in their conflicts with opponents and also to exercise leadership or dominance within alliances.

> Once upon a time an alien was trying to sneak a little piece of treasure from a bad guy named Penguin. Penguin was watching his alien robot and Batman and Robin the Boy Wonder said, "What could that be?" And Batman said, "Hmm, I don't think it's a robot." And then the alien pushed out his arms and shot bullets out of his fingers and Batman said, "Oh, I was wrong. It was a robot." And then Batman had a plan. He said, "Let's go back to the bat cave and next time we'll bring our big hammer and smash the robot to pieces. And then Penguin will be screaming when we broke his robot." And then they went back to the robot and went boom, boom, boom, boom, boom with the hammer and smashed it to pieces. And then Penguin called his whole army—Joker and Riddler and Catwoman—and they got set. And Batman got his army—Batgirl and Robin and Superman—to kill them. And all the superheroes and all the bad guys had a battle at last and the good guys winned—and they cheered, "Hooray! Hooray!" The End. (Jacob, 5-2)

THE GIRLS' STORIES REVISITED: THE FAMILY/GROUP GENRE AS GENERATIVE FRAMEWORK

In the girls' stories one observes a very different developmental trajectory, driven by very different purposes, preoccupations, and narrative problems. The contrast was established in their respective starting points. Among the youngest children, girls' concern was to construct the family (or quasi-family) group and to embed the characters in its structure of orderly relations. Thus, the girls' characters were defined fundamentally by their *relationships*, not their actions. In fact, in three-year-olds' stories, the characters typically performed no actions as individuals; and even among four-year-olds, actions by the group as a col-

lectivity still predominated over the actions of individual members. In these stories individual characters were largely swallowed up by their roles within the group, and the key preoccupation seemed to be consolidating the group and elaborating the rhythms of its activities.

Only when this was accomplished did the girls turn to the process of differentiating the characters (within the group) and fleshing out their portrayals of individual characters. Among four- and five-year-olds there was a significant shift, which featured the use of some complex and even rather sophisticated narrative devices. In the girls' stories the group, typically anchored physically and symbolically in the home (or "castle"), represented the central framework of order in the story. Among four-year-olds this framework of order, rather than being a taken-for-granted background of the story, was now treated as an explicit focus of concern. This was done either through the explicit articulation of the group's normative order or through the device of breach and restoration of the canonical order—in which group order was framed as problematic, but precisely in order to highlight and reaffirm it. Among five-year-old girls the explicit articulation of group order was carried further, and in addition differentiated individual characters were assigned responsibility for maintaining or restoring this order (including through the performance of verbal expressions of what was normatively required, expected, or prohibited). The person was now represented as an individuated and self-consciously responsible agent—but still within the group framework. Here is a sophisticated example of a girl's story that focuses on the breach and restoration of normative order in the context of explicit depiction of danger and even some violence.

> Once upon a time there was a little girl and she had a brother, a mom, and a dad. One day they went walking and they met a bear. The bear was a baby bear. The sister said, "Isn't he cute" and they brought him home. A crib was in the sister's room and the baby bear sleeped in it. And when they woke up the very next day, the brother came into the sister's room and she was gone. The bear was gone too, and they got kidnapped. And the brother found a kingdom and he saw the bear and the sister been locked up in a cave. The brother said, "You can't do this" and the bad guy got a timer and put the sister in it. And in 5 minutes time, sand was going to bury the sister. But in 5 minutes she got buried, but the brother had a knife in his pocket and he banged the knife on the timer and it broke. And the sister came out and she said, "Where is mom and dad?" And the brother took the sister's hand and brought her home. When the sister was grown up, she met a boy in the street named Pete. And she got married. Her cousins were the flower girls and they lived happily ever after. (Anna, 5-1)

Thus, while the developmental project of the boys' genre began with disconnected and unstable characters and sought both to flesh them out and to bring them into contact (but without fully establishing firm or interdependent links), the corresponding project in the girls' genre began and ended with central characters firmly embedded in the group's framework of stable and harmonious relationships but found ways to differentiate and individuate the characters within this framework. It is worth noting that in the development of the girls' model of personhood, there was not a simple trade-off between group cohesion and individuation. In important ways one could even argue that *both* were strengthened in the developmental trajectory from three to five years of age; what changed was the way that group cohesion was organized and portrayed in the stories, so that it came to rely more explicitly on the self-conscious motivation and responsibility of group members.

Integrating Recent Narratological Approaches: Storyworlds and the Interpretive and Sociocultural Approach

Recently I have become immersed in studying some current developments in narratological theory that I believe share strong affinities with the type of analysis I have sketched out—while also displaying significant differences that may prove usefully complementary. Over the past few decades narrative scholars have been concerned to understand how readers comprehend narrative texts, whether these take the form of printed texts, graphic novels, films, or everyday conversation. Specifically, postclassical narratologists have sought to delineate how readers use textual elements to build up coherent overall representations of the worlds evoked by stories—what have come to be called *storyworlds* (Herman 2002, 2009). This approach attempts to investigate the cultural models and cognitive frameworks on which readers draw in order

to understand a text and also to account for the intimate engagement and immersion that readers experience when using those models and frameworks to construct and inhabit storyworlds.

In contrast to the route I followed in coming to study narrative as a form of worldmaking, postclassical narratologists arrived at the idea of narrative worlds or storyworlds while grappling with the limitations of classical structuralist narratology—including the failure of classical theories to account for how the abstract models of story grammar can be mapped onto the textual cues included in the story (cf. Hendricks 1967; Herman 2002: 131–32). Furthermore, as Palmer (2004) argues, classical story-grammar analysis "can seem rather rigid, mechanical, and uninformative" (29). Given these limitations of the earlier work, recent narratological research explores the interrelations among linguistic form, world knowledge, and narrative structure involved in readers' or listeners' understanding of narratively organized discourse—and the patterns of inference required for this understanding to be achieved.

There are several storyworld models in circulation, emphasizing a range of approaches to narrative and to processes of narrative comprehension. Some models characterize the experience of readers in relatively macrostructural terms, exploring how interpreters move from perceiving strings of words on the pages of books to the sensation of being transported or immersed in different worlds, witnessing events and experiencing the emotions of characters (Gerrig 1993). Other approaches are more microstructural in orientation, exploring how readers anchor types of inferences about storyworlds in particular kinds of textual designs, such as the hierarchical organization of actual and possible worlds (Ryan 1991) or the distribution of deictic cues for story creation and updating (Segal 1995). Overall, despite such differences in emphasis and in the underlying analytic frameworks on which theorists draw, this research portrays storyworlds as organizing mental models of situations and events, "of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which recipients relocate—or make deictic shift—as they work to comprehend a narrative" (Herman 2002: 9).

While I have been working from a different direction, I believe there are significant and exciting points of convergence between my own approach to analyzing young children's narratives and these recent contributions from postclassical narratology. I would also argue that establishing a genuine dialogue between these two approaches to narrative inquiry—an interpretive and sociocultural mode of developmental research and a postclassical narratology centered on the elucidation of storyworlds—promises to be mutually beneficial. Both approaches focus on narrative as a meaning-making process and adopt holistic models that help capture what makes narrative text unique by integrating setting, plot, and characters. On the other hand, one should also mention some differences between these two approaches that can help highlight opportunities for further dialogue. First, they differ with respect to the types of stories investigated. Developmental research on narrative tends to focus on children and their emerging narrative abilities, and my own research has dealt specifically with the stories of young children, whereas most narratological analysis deals with well-formed narratives produced by accomplished authors for an adult audience. Although this is a significant difference, it is not necessarily unbridgeable. With a certain amount of adaptation, some of the analytical tools used for developmental research could help explore full-fledged adult narrative productions; and narratological work on storyworlds could certainly help inform the examination of children's narrative production and comprehension. That brings us to a second difference. Whereas my own research has focused primarily on the production of narratives, most narratological work focuses on processes of narrative comprehension. But integrating these complementary focuses would certainly be worthwhile. Narratologists have argued that the same processes are involved in both the comprehension and the production of narratives (e.g., Herman 2002), and in many respects this position seems quite plausible; but it would be useful to explore the relationship between story creation and story understanding more systematically.

Probably the most significant difference between my own approach to narrative analysis and that of postclassical narratologists is that despite their shift toward storyworlds, my work remains more interpretive in emphasis—or so it seems to me. I seek to reconstruct and analyze structures of meaning, the generative frameworks underlying them, and the ongoing interplay between narrative texts and the larger sociocul-

tural contexts in which they are produced and communicated. While there are certainly some exceptions, on the whole even postclassical approaches in narratology tend to pay more attention to the structural elements required for *building* storyworlds, while my approach pays closer attention to the types of social world, characters, and relations between characters *expressed through* narrative worldmaking. In these respects, the two approaches emphasize different aspects of the meaning-making process, but they should be regarded as potentially complementary rather than inescapably incompatible.

For developmental researchers, narratologists provide a rich conceptual apparatus that can usefully be applied to the children's stories. For example, exploring structures of actantial roles and their relationships can help illuminate the overarching story genres I have studied from a developmental perspective. On the other hand, engagement with developmental research on narrative can offer various benefits to narratology. If nothing else, the brevity and (relative) simplicity of children's stories provide an arena for testing narratological models that may help illuminate some of the elementary features of narrative structure. In particular, the kind of material I have collected in the course of my research offers some rich possibilities. The fact that each child told a fairly large number of spontaneous stories over the course of a year, and that stories composed by a variety of children can be compared, should make it possible to specify the elements that are most crucial for the development and elaboration of narrative coherence and complexity—in ways that would be more difficult in studying adult narratives. Exploring how characters and their interrelations connect to setting, time, place, and other features in stories told by children of different ages may further illuminate developmental trajectories in the creation of storyworlds—as well as in the structures of meaning conveyed through them. In short, while studying children's developing storytelling practices can help clarify and assess the grounding assumptions and analytic implications of narratological models, borrowing some of the apparatus developed by narratologists for the interpretation of fully formed narratives can, conversely, deepen our understanding of young children's narrative development.

Note

1. Pseudonyms have been assigned to the children whose stories are quoted. Also, here and throughout, I use the system of notation that is standard in developmental psychology to indicate the age of the children. In this notation, "4-3" means "4 years, 3 months old."

Works Cited

Bruner, Jerome (1986). *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.

——— (1992). "The Narrative Construction of Reality." *Piaget's Theory: Prospects and Possibilities*. Ed. Harry Beilin and Peter Pufall. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum. 229–48.

Geertz, Clifford (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

Gerrig, Richard (1993). *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP.

Goodman, Nelson. (1978). *Ways of Worldmaking*. Indianapolis: Hackett.

Greimas, Algirdas J. (1977). "Elements of a Narrative Grammar." *Diacritics* 7: 23–40.

Hendricks, William O. (1967). "On the Notion 'Beyond the Sentence.'" *Linguistics* 37: 12–51.

Herman, David (2002). *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P.

———, ed. (2003). *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*. Stanford, CA: CSLI.

——— (2009). *Basic Elements of Narrative*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Keen, Suzanne (2007). *Empathy and the Novel*. New York: Oxford UP.

Labov, William, and Joshua Waletzky (1967/1997). "Narrative Analysis: Oral Versions of Personal Experience." *Journal of Narrative and Life History* 7: 3–38.

Mandler, Jean (1984). *Stories, Scripts, and Scenes: Aspects of Schema Theory*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Nelson, Katherine (1996). *Language in Cognitive Development: The Emergence of the Mediated Mind*. New York: Cambridge UP.

Nicolopoulou, Ageliki (1996). "Narrative Development in Social Context." *Social Interaction, Social Context, and Language: Essays in Honor of Susan Ervin-Tripp*. Ed. Dan Slobin, Julie Gerhardt, Amy Kyratzis, and Jiansheng Guo. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum. 369–90.

——— (1997a). "Children and Narratives: Toward an Interpretive and Sociocultural Approach." *Narrative Development: Six Approaches*. Ed. Michael Bamberg. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum. 179–215.

——— (1997b). "Worldmaking and Identity Formation in Children's Narrative Play-Acting." *Sociogenetic Perspectives on Internalization*. Ed. Brian Cox and Cynthia Lightfoot. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum. 157–87.

——— (2002). "Peer-Group Culture and Narrative Development." *Talking to*

Adults: The Contribution of Multiparty Discourse to Language Acquisition. Ed. Shoshana Blum-Kulka and Catherine Snow. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum. 117–52.

——— (2008). "The Elementary Forms of Narrative Coherence in Young Children's Storytelling." *Narrative Inquiry* 18: 300–326.

Nicolopoulou, Ageliki, and Elizabeth S. Richner (2004). "'When Your Powers Combine, I Am Captain Planet': The Developmental Significance of Individual- and Group-Authored Stories by Preschoolers." *Discourse Studies* 6: 347–71.

——— (2007). "From Actors to Agents to Persons: The Development of Character Representation in Young Children's Narratives." *Child Development* 78: 412–29.

Nicolopoulou, Ageliki, Barbara Scales, and Jeff Weintraub (1994). "Gender Differences and Symbolic Imagination in the Stories of Four-Year-Olds." *The Need for Story: Cultural Diversity in Classroom and Community*. Ed. Anne Dyson and Celia Genishi. Urbana, IL: NCTE. 102–23.

Nicolopoulou, Ageliki, and Jeff Weintraub (1998). "Individual and Collective Representations in Social Context: A Modest Contribution to Resuming the Interrupted Project of a Sociocultural Developmental Psychology." *Human Development* 41: 215–35.

Paley, Vivian (1990). *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter: The Uses of Storytelling in the Classroom*. Cambridge: Harvard UP.

Palmer, Alan (2004). *Fictional Minds*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P.

Propp, Vladimir (1928/1968). *Morphology of the Folktale*. 2nd ed. Trans. Laurence Scott. Ed. Louis A. Wagner. Austin: U of Texas P.

Richner, Elizabeth S., and Ageliki Nicolopoulou (2001). "The Narrative Construction of Differing Conceptions of the Person in the Development of Young Children's Social Understanding." *Early Education and Development* 12: 393–432.

Ryan, Marie-Laure (1991). *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.

Stein, Nancy (1988). "The Development of Children's Storytelling Skill." *Child Language: A Reader*. Ed. Marjery Franklin and Sybil Barten. New York: Oxford UP. 282–97.

Stein, Nancy, and Christine Glenn (1979). "An Analysis of Story Comprehension in Elementary School Children." *New Directions in Discourse Processing*. Ed. Roy Freedle. Norwood, NJ: Ablex. 53–120.

Segal, Erwin (1995). "Narrative Comprehension and the Role of Deictic Shift Theory." *Deixis in Narrative: A Cognitive Science Perspective*. Ed. Judith Duchan, Gail Bruder, and Lynne Hewitt. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum. 3–17.

Taylor, Charles (1985). "Self-interpreting Animals." In *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1*. New York: Cambridge UP. 45–76.

Yussen, Steven, and Nihal Ozcan (1996). "The Development of Knowledge about Narratives." *Issues in Education* 2: 1–68.

VOLUME 3 • 2011

STORYWORLDS

A JOURNAL OF NARRATIVE STUDIES

Editor

David Herman

Professor, Department of English,

Ohio State University

Published by

The University of Nebraska Press

Contents