



Communication experiences: A constitutive principle in pupils' socialization of agency

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a discussion of the Special Issue's content from a socialization perspective. The argument is based on a social constructivist understanding of socialization, which highlights the meaning of communication skills with regard to human agency. In order to illustrate the dynamic interrelations between conversational practices, individual skills and habits in diverse social settings, we present a model of "agency as a gearwheel". Following the traditions of social-ecological research, we argue that a multilevel and methodologically complex investigation of communication practices helps to understand not only the development of individual competencies, but also their context-sensitive impact on educational inequality.

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1. Introduction

The linkages between social structural opportunities, concrete cultural practices and personal competencies and performances have, to date, not been very well decoded (Edelstein & Grundmann, 2006). Although comparative cross-national studies have shown that educational systems have a strong impact on people's accumulation of cultural capital and therefore on the conduct of their lives, large survey data in particular does not explain *how* personal involvement in certain lifeworlds accounts for individual differences. To remedy this omission, insight is needed into the social processes through which individuals become legitimate members of their reference groups (cf. Grundmann, Steinhoff, & Edelstein, 2011), as it is well known that changes in individuals' self-conceptions, their world-views and the development of their cognitive and social-cognitive competencies are subject to personal relationship experiences. Focusing on the constitution of relationships between two or more agents and therefore between agents and their social environments, a constructivist understanding of socialization as a social practice appears to be a promising means by which the above mentioned linkages might be decoded. It encourages a close look at interpersonal relationships, which informs us on the views and behaviour suitable for individual participation in the given social context as well as on personal experiences of being recognized as a member of a social group or milieu.

In this vein, our review of the preceding papers in this Special Issue focuses on how a multilevel and methodologically complex investigation of concrete communication practices helps to figure out and understand variations in individual competencies and their impact on educational inequality. We depict an empirically-based model of socialization practices referring to a social ecological heuristics of human development as was proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1995). In this model, the focus is on an individual's participation in various social contexts, scrutinizing the impact that particular experiences in such contexts have on the development of personal views and dispositions. From such a perspective, individual differences in educational performance, for example, cannot be understood unless we have decoded the inter-relationships between the requirements and developmental

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opportunities offered by school environments on the one hand and family, peer groups and many other contexts that children are involved in on the other. As we will argue, the studies presented in the preceding papers contribute significantly to our understanding of *how* context-specific experiences account for individual differences in educational attainment. Just like the pieces of a puzzle, they systematically correspond with one another and, as a whole, comprehensively illustrate in what ways educational success is shaped by personal experiences that derive from individual involvement in various social settings. In particular, the results reported provide insights into the multifaceted influences that conversational experiences have on individuals' development of interaction, especially linguistic skills, and point out their specific relevance for educational success.

2. Class-specific socialisation and agency

Social practices can, in all their facets, be considered as essential for personal and cultural development. However, the relations between social structure, interactional patterns and personal competencies are highly complex and their analysis is, accordingly, demanding. While socialization in general can be described as a process of transmitting dominant cultural values that enable children to take on the social inheritance of their lifeworlds, we have to assume that the concrete mechanisms at work often proceed latently. In order to understand thoroughly how varying social contexts affect individual development and life chances, we have to look beyond general preconditions provided by social structures, and decode even unconscious, endogenous individual processing of opportunities and capabilities to meet the demands of one's actual social environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In general, social environments serve as socio-cultural frames of interactions and therefore of individual perceptions of one's own capabilities to explore, to recognize and to cope with social reality. However, social reality is subject to interactive co-construction of meaning, which calls for those competencies that enable individuals to express and unlock diverse and common views during the course of their reciprocal communication. In this we follow the assumptions of social constructivist theories of socialization and communication (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Bergmann & Luckmann, 1995), focusing on the micro-social production and reproduction of human lifeworlds via social interactions and relationships (Grundmann, 2006).

We conceive of the socialization process as a perpetual tradeoff between individuals' developments and their participation in the social co-construction of reality. In other words, communicative practices demand and, at the same time, affect cognitive and social-cognitive competencies as well as personality traits. However, such practices vary greatly between social contexts and groups, not only with regard to contents negotiated, but also concerning standards of articulation. Consequently, it is worthwhile to pay special attention to lifeworld-specific potentials for interacting individuals to learn and develop. Moreover, during their life-course, individuals are embedded in manifold social relationships and, as they grow older, their social environments become more and more complex. This complexity may produce developmental opportunities or inhibit contradictive experiences of requirements.

To give an example, class-specific developments of educational aspirations in children generally reflect typical characteristics of their social lifeworlds, such as rearing styles and the parents' valuation of their child's educational achievements (Grundmann, Dravenau, Bittlingmayer, & Edelstein, 2006). Family socialization thereby represents class-specific opportunities and conditions as well as educational strategies in support of the child's potential to master the demands of the educational system. For instance, parents who embrace values of self-direction and are, accordingly, willing to stimulate the child's engagement in independent exploration and self-directed action, help the child to master the demands of the educational system, because their inputs in social practices with the child correspond with the individualistic orientation of the latter. Looking at it the other way round, as family and peer contexts constitute major parts of his or her life conduct, it can be rational for a child to focus on orientations and behavioural manners typically valued in these environments, even if the corresponding competencies may, at the same time, be dysfunctional in the domain of schooling. With regard to conversational strategies, for example, Bernstein (1964) has impressively shown that class-specifically distributed patterns of functional language usage, which he refers to in terms of restricted and elaborated codes, differ in their level of usefulness in the context of the educational system. In this vein, the child can be conceived of as a systemic actor who adopts educational strategies available in his or her proximate environment. Accordingly, social, economic and cultural resources as well as socialization practices can be regarded as either risks or protective factors with respect to children's development of personal goals and their potential to perform successfully in educational contexts (cf. Maccoby, 1992; Scarr & Weinberg, 1978; Thorlindsson, 1987).

The ability to participate actively in diverse social settings, which in our example means a constructive coordination of opportunities offered and requirements to be met in the contexts of family life and at school,² can generally be conceptualized as an indicator of human agency (cf. Bandura, 1995; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Sewell, 1992). Sewell (1992, p. 20) in fact argues that "a capacity for agency [...] is inherent in all humans" but is essentially shaped "by a specific range of cultural schemas and resources available in a person's particular social milieu". The degree to which the actors are able to prescind from the constraining forces of structure depends on habit, imagination and judgement used to orient oneself in relation to structure (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Agentic orientation may vary in different contexts and situations but is also part of individuals' personality system, product of socialization processes and – although not necessarily fixed in an unchangeable manner – subject to its own inertia in the routines of everyday life. Therefore, in order to decode the relationships between social opportunities and constraints on the one hand and personal life chances on the other, a comprehensive examination of intra-individual development is crucial (Edelstein, 1993, pp. 97–100).

In this vein, Bandura (1995) identifies four main sources that enhance or weaken individuals' beliefs in self-efficacy, which he considers to be the foundation of agency (Bandura, 2000). Besides (1) physical states, these are (2) experiences of success and

² Having chosen the compatibility of family and school contexts here, we shall not underestimate several other social contexts' relevance in the course of children's development, such as kindergarten, peer groups or sports clubs.

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