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Ivy Schousboe

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Abstract Cultural psychology has been criticized for producing universalistic theories and fixed norms that serve as tools of ethnocentric hegemony when they are exported to other countries. One way to solve the problem is to recommend that the researcher concentrates on the study of *local* phenomena.

However, this solution might serve as a straitjacket for the opportunity to revise and develop local norms and thinking as well as curtail the necessary discussion of research methods in culture. The paper has two interrelated aims. The first aim is to argue that cultural comparison can help in keeping local perspectives open to change. The second aim is to illustrate that the use of a (particular) method in cross-cultural research in a context in which it has not been applied before can demonstrate the scope of the method. A dialogue between empirical data concerning a local Danish context and Farver's model for cross-cultural activity analyses is established. The use of this model gives occasion for questioning some of the local ways of dealing with children and for analysing more precisely how they seem to inhibit rather than contribute to children's development. Against this background the scope of the model is emphasized: the model is meant for analysing meaning and coherence within a community, but it is also well suited for analysing whether meaning and coherence exist.

Key Words activity setting analysis, development, immanence, variability

Ivy Schousboe
University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Local and Global Perspectives on the Everyday Lives of Children

Early pioneers within cross-cultural research have demonstrated that research across cultures and macro systems can be profitable, not only because such research can contribute knowledge about other cultures, but also because of its wider perspective which can provide a better understanding of a given local culture, not least the researcher's own cultural hinterland (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Mead, 1928/1973). As more and more research is done under the headings 'context' and 'culture', debates and well-founded warnings about the pitfalls and side-effects

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of this kind of research arise (Bretherton, 1992; Göncü, 1999; LeVine, 1989). With respect to research concerning children, it is claimed that psychology relies on universalistic theories about an abstract child and produces fixed developmental norms. In order to counteract this it is sometimes recommended that the researcher turns his or her back on general theories and conceptions and concentrates on the study of phenomena as *local* phenomena, at least to begin with (Gaskins, 1999; James, Jenks, & Prout 1998; Morss, 1996). I find the criticism valid, but the suggested solution might create a new problem. If the focus is solely on local phenomena and perspectives, there is a risk of missing some of those sources of knowledge that give us occasion to revise and develop our understanding of children. In the worst case we might become engaged in just another way of producing fixed norms and provincial thinking.

This paper has two intertwined objectives. The first objective is to argue that it can be useful to combine local and global perspectives in order to increase our understanding of the local perspective. This combination may both contribute insights in specific local matters and help to keep local discourses and conceptions open for revision. The discussion will focus on a specific method in cross-cultural analysis and the scope of the method will be discussed as we go along. The second objective is to illustrate that the use of the method in a context in which it has not been applied before can demonstrate that it has a wider potential scope than that which is already recognized.

First some features of Western thinking about children are described and a local Danish pedagogical discourse about children will be presented. A difference between the assessment of certain aspects of the pedagogical practice by children and adults, respectively, will be investigated from a cross-cultural perspective by use of Farver's model for activity setting analysis, a model which aims at analysing meaning and coherence. The use of this model opens to question some of the local ways of dealing with children, and subsequently cross-cultural empirical studies and general theory of development will be taken into account in a discussion of the local discourse about child-adult relations. Against this background it is suggested that Farver's model has a broader range of use than explicitly proposed: the model invites us to ask whether—rather than presuppose that—meaning and coherence exist within a community. It is concluded that cross-cultural dialogues can promote discussion of even basic assumptions of how it may be relevant to do research in culture, and two methodological steps that may facilitate intercultural research are suggested.

Cultures with Order and Disorder

At least since the beginning of the philosophy of conscience, it has been a feature of Western thought that the human being is regarded first and foremost as a thinking being. The formula of Descartes, *Cogito, ergo sum*, is influential today both in general, as seen in radical social constructionist thought, and for much cross-cultural research, whose respect for other cultures manifests itself in its attempt to understand and free itself of tendencies to make value judgements.

As far as children are concerned, prominent anti-ethnocentric scholars have emphasized that there is more than one way in which children can develop and have stated that cultural differences in the development of children are therefore to be understood and not judged (e.g. Göncü, 1999). This may imply a certain risk that by adopting an understanding approach the scholar may inadvertently focus so hard on finding meaning and coherence that other possible aspects which might appear to be or actually are less meaningful can be overlooked. Super and Harkness have pointed out that in every culture there exists a special 'developmental niche' for children. Adults who take responsibility for children will plan the routines of their everyday life with children so that they fit in with the local ecological and cultural conditions and guide the children towards becoming participating members of their culture (Harkness & Super, 1996; Super & Harkness, 1986). The authors stress the rationality which exists in the relation between the material and cultural conditions of a culture and the developmental niche which it has produced. The basic assumption that a society's developmental niche for children is connected with other parts of society in a rational way will be questioned in the present paper.

The valuable aim to understand seems often to be taken as synonymous with finding meaning and coherence in almost all phenomena. Many scholars state that cultures are characterized by producing relatively stable and consistent systems of meaning and core-cultural ideas which individuals transform into systems of personal meaning and sense. That there may be great heterogeneity both within a culture and across cultures with respect to what meaning is and how meaning can be produced is well known, but it is taken for granted that there *is* meaning (e.g. Geertz, 1973; Göncü, 1999; Smolka et al., 2000). Entities within a culture or society can be mutually related in various ways, and in line with this, many scholars state that cultures may contain internal disharmony. Thus, Geertz (1973) says that 'Not everything is connected to everything else with equal directness' (p. 407), and he

points out that cultural discontinuity, and the social disorganization which can result from it, is as real as cultural integration. However, with his semiotic concern he seems to maintain the idea of meaning as a granted master key for the understanding of cultures. He emphasizes that societies without internal harmony can and do function rationally and that cultural discontinuity may be not only compatible with but even necessary for the function of systems which are so complex as all cultures are (pp. 3–30, 407). In these respects, he seems to give strong encouragement to a search for order or functionality.

Without denying the importance of studying meaning and coherence as one characteristic of cultures, one might still supplement such studies with a study of the very relationship between the production of 'internal order' and the possible production of 'internal disorder' within cultures. A relatively great lack of order and consistency might conceivably be of no particular importance in some cultures, whereas in other cultures it might be a sign that the culture was disintegrating. In other cultures still it might be a condition for the consolidation of the culture through change, as happens when groups within a population become able to establish themselves as reformers of society because they have lived in partial separation from and perhaps in opposition to others for a considerable time. To look for a possible *lack* of meaning and coherence could be recommended, firstly, because meaning and coherence may not always be the great master key, and, secondly, because in order to examine cultural discontinuity fully, it might be advantageous to ask every time whether an observed discontinuity might not simply be dysfunctional.

A Current Western Perspective on Children

Adults throughout the world share one role in relation to children, namely that they help guide them towards becoming active participants in society, and they base their ideas of development on their understanding of the society in which they live. Western society may be described as a late modern or postmodern society in a world characterized by increasing globalization, and we live with and think about the rapid changes in life conditions. We know that the future is unpredictable and that we do not know precisely which qualifications may be useful to children in the long run. So it is relevant to give children the opportunity to learn to deal with change, and development has become a relatively open-ended notion. The very willingness and ability to develop, change or adapt has become one of the important goals of development.

Hand in hand with this, a new discourse which underscores the competence of children has been developed (e.g. Durkin, 1995; Field, 1990). Previously the Western child was characterized by fragility and inexperience. He or she needed settings that were clear with respect to people and activities and the role of adults was to guide and support the dependent child. Today the child is characterized by being a competent and flexible agent who needs a diversity of settings and freedom to choose activities and relations. Researchers emphasize that the child's participation in child groups is of crucial importance to his or her development and that the role of the adult should to a great extent be to show respect for children's own initiatives. A few scholars believe that adults today matter very little in the socialization of children. This is the view advocated in Judith Harris's theory of group socialization (Harris, 1998). Many scholars share the more moderate view that children prosper and their development is furthered when to a considerable degree it takes place through participation in child communities. On the basis of their common position and interests children inspire each other's emotional, cognitive and conative development in especially engaging ways (Dunn, 1993; Harris, 1998; Hartup, 1989; Rutter & Rutter, 1993). There has been a shift in the assumptions about what the central loci of good and developing relations should consist of and where they should be located.

Below I shall try to open up and vary the new discourse about what constitutes good relations for children by introducing a dialogue between local and global perspectives. First we shall step *inside* a local, institutionalized context and incorporate statements from children and their professional adults. The next step will be an attempt at understanding a disagreement between the two parties by looking at the institutional context from the *outside*—that is, against the background of a cross-cultural perspective.

A Local Context

A Local Context Seen from the Inside

The quotations below are extracted from a body of empirical data about the everyday lives of Danish children (Hviid, 2001). The extract comes from an after-school centre, that is, an institution in which most 6- to 10-year-old Danish children spend their afternoons. Twenty-three children and one adult were interviewed. The extract consists of observations by adults and children, respectively, on the relationship between adults and children.

Henrik,¹ the deputy head, talks about the pedagogical principles of the institution:

Many of us have chosen this work as a counter-balance to school—we are certainly not going to *decide* for the children. Here we like to give children *freedom*. There is also a resistance within the individual adult against deciding or dictating—carrying one's point with the children. We are not very strong in that respect. Many people talk about how children should have a many-faceted development. That they should pursue their own interests and still at the same time be presented with something which they *might* benefit from. That's not where we step in. We let the children *choose*. It is probably a resistance against organized pedagogical work in us. It is troublesome and you have to *force* the children. We certainly let them follow their own inclination to a large extent. That's what we believe in long-term. It is the children's leisure time. You go easy and not so goal-oriented in that respect.

To Henrik the children's freedom of choice and from adult interference is of prime importance. What do the children think of the after-school centre? Here are some quotations from some 9-year-old children who were interviewed in small groups. They have spent three years at the institution and so they are *experienced* after-school children; this, as we shall see, is for better and worse.

Maria: When I first came here I thought it was Paradise, really. For it was so—big. And then when I got older, it became like this. [*Shows with her hands that it has become smaller.*]

Camilla: Now it is like: You run up. That takes five seconds. You run down. That takes five seconds. Then you have tried that playground.

Katrine: Something has gone wrong. They [i.e. the teachers] almost only take care of the little ones. They almost never take care of us.

Maria: It is as if they think that we can take care of ourselves. They should help a little now and then, because sometimes we disagree and fight and then it is as if we are supposed to fix it between ourselves; it is only the little ones that they help.

Martin: The teachers are OK, it's just that they do not make much fun. They do not start us [suggest activities], they start all the little ones in what they do. In clay and stuff like that. But me and Daniel are no longer interested in that. Now we have simply grown too big for what we have done for [*counts*] one . . . two . . . three years. We are no longer interested. I have *never* known a year where we haven't done clay. Then you sit there and do the same thing. When I was little I thought deep down that when you grew older you got closer to the adults. When you are little you want to become big. But then when you grow older . . . then in a way you would like to be little again. In a way you would think that they noticed you much less, but in fact they notice you much more when you are little. Now they say: 'That is the kind of stuff you can handle on your own,

isn't it?' In a way one was told much more then. Because everything was new then. At that time one was told in a more *personal* manner, really. Now I must find out for myself. It's a big change.

Martin summarizes his view of his developmental conditions in the following image:

It is almost as if you must . . . you must climb a wall. In the beginning they give you a horse-shoe [a leg-up]. Then when you get up and get a hold, you are left to haul yourself up. Because then they can no longer reach you. Now it is up to you to get on.

The great majority of the twenty-three children interviewed explicitly expressed the same opinion and not one expressed the opposite view either directly or indirectly. It is apparent that there is a discrepancy between the discourse of the adults and the children's conception of what makes a good institution. The adults emphasize what they call the freedom of the children and particularly their possibility of choosing freely and independently. The alternative, as they see it, is to force or compel the children. But in the eyes of the children, the kind of free and independent choice which is practised becomes too much freedom *from* being together with others and engaged in some activity and too little freedom *to* be together with others and engaged in some activity. For the children, the alternative to this kind of freedom appears to be greater *participation*—and not compulsion—from the adults. They believe that the adults could help create better possibilities for engaging activities and they also miss the personal contact. In the hope of gaining a better understanding of the noted discrepancy it will be illuminated from the outside. What kind of discrepancy do we have here?

A Look from the Outside: 'Activity Setting Analysis'

In order to illuminate the discrepancy, the method of 'activity setting analysis' will be employed. This method has been developed with the aim of analysing the cultural aspect in specific everyday settings and the various and mutually dependent levels of context which are present in them. The method is used in the way that Joe Ann Farver (1999) has developed it. She has applied it in cross-cultural studies of how children in Western and non-Western societies are involved as participants of their culture.

Activity settings are contexts in which various kinds of interaction and learning occur. They consist of everyday experiences rather than an explicit curriculum. There are five specific components which are essential to the understanding of an activity: (1) the personnel present

and their availability; (2) the nature of the activities or tasks performed; (3) the purpose of the activities or tasks, including their meaning to the individuals; (4) the scripts that guide the children's participation; and (5) the salient cultural values, goals and beliefs of the adults who organize the children's behaviour.

Farver (1999) demonstrates how activity setting analysis 'can be effective in "unpacking" culture to identify how broad cultural factors are translated into specific contexts that influence children's daily activities and the development of relevant skills and behaviours' (p. 99). The remarkable point in this context is the very fact that Farver finds consistent and transparent interrelatedness (translations) between cultural values and the specific practice through which these values are transmitted to the children. For if we try to apply activity setting analysis to the daily lives of Danish children in the after-school centre, we will see that there is a breakdown as seen from the children's side.

1. In the institution, the adults are present, but they are not available for the older children. The same presence-but-lack-of availability was found in Farver's studies in the United States, Mexico and Indonesia.
2. In the after-school centre the task of the adults is children, and not only little children. When the adults in the cultures which Farver has studied are present without being available to the children nearby they are preoccupied with activities and tasks which have nothing to do with children. It is precisely this difference between the Danish and the other contexts which seems to be crucial in order to understand what kind of divergence there is between the conceptions of the Danish children and the adults. This divergence causes the breakdown in the children's understanding because:
3. To the Danish children, the unavailability of the adults assumes a more 'personal' meaning than it does for Farver's children. Farver's children see that the adults are unavailable because they are preoccupied with tasks which are not related to the children. The Danish children know that the adults are in the after-school-institution in order to take care of the children. So they do not see the restraint of the adults as an unavoidable or neutral behaviour but as a deliberate choice to withdraw from them.
4. When Danish children look for scripts which can guide their participation, they are very much left to themselves and the group of same-aged peers. In the cultures Farver studied she finds that children receive support and scripts from considerably more skilled partners, namely older children or adults. The Danish children

quoted above do not have much access to any kind of more skilled partners whose scripts they might follow, develop or revolt against.

5. The agreement which Farver describes between the salient cultural values, goals and beliefs of the adults and the way in which they organize the children's everyday lives is not apparent in the after-school institution. It is a Danish value that it is good for children to have their daily lives marked by diversity and the possibility of choice. But in the daily lives of the children, adults show a lack of commitment with respect to contributing social and activity-related inspiration.

When Farver's model is used in relation to the after-school centre it is not possible to 'translate' cultural factors and find coherence. The actions of the adults do not conform to their own discourse. They refrain from suggesting new activities which might give the children something to choose from. Indeed both the social and activity-directed diversity in the daily lives of the children is unnecessarily restricted, which may be regarded as dysfunctional with respect to children's development of the competence to make independent choices in a world marked by change and complexity.

The setting analysis has helped uncover how a local discourse and the practice that goes with it have become divided against themselves. But why do the children not simply use the freedom they have to create a rich developmental space for themselves? Are they, after all, spoiled pests, or do they encounter real obstacles to their development? In the following, cross-cultural research into the relation between generations and general conceptions regarding development will be included in an additional discussion of the local practice.

A Discussion of the Local Discourse

Empirical Evidence

There is considerable evidence that horizontal (same-aged) and vertical (different-aged) relations may very well be regarded as separate, complementing each other, rather than being alternatives or competing entities. Adult culture and child culture are dynamic subcultures within a common culture, and when children engage in both horizontal and vertical relations they can gain special advantages with respect to developing as important participants in the cultural community (Hartup, 1989). As noted above, the children in the Danish setting regret that the distance between themselves and the adults has become greater and greater with time. If we look at the world at large it becomes clear that such a distant relation between the generations is

very rare. Most cultures have long-established procedures which ensure that children become involved in the cultural community by cooperating with more skilled partners (e.g. Göncü, 1999). Positive implications have been found for the coexistence of differentiated types of relations in different societies with widely differing means of subsisting. There are detailed descriptions of how children in non-industrialized cultures move with increasing age and experience and under guidance from more skilled partners from legitimate peripheral participation towards a position as equal central participants in a cultural community (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990). Research in learning settings in technologically highly developed societies like the United States or Japan indicates that in a classroom working as a 'community of learners' it is possible to develop both horizontal and vertical relations, and that teachers can function both as scaffolding guides and as participants in learning processes (Brown, 1994; Kobayashi, 1994). With regard to symmetry and asymmetry in the mutual relations of children, it is interesting that even small children know about and can utilize the difference between same-age peers and older peers, and that research in three continents has shown that most children are familiar with the differences between peers of various ages (Edwards, 1992; Whiting & Edwards, 1988).

This invites a closer scrutiny of how children best become able to reach the developmental goal of being able to act flexibly and under various complex conditions. Research in the interrelatedness of social interaction and cognitive development, in the development of social representation and in the question of transfer indicates that the development of context-free skills is most successful when the developing person has the opportunity to gain rich specific and situation-bound experiences and to do this in collaboration with various partners (Berry, Dasen, & Saraswathi, 1996; Durkin, 1995). It seems clear that the idea that children will develop non-specific competences and dispositions in a fairly non-specific and adult-free space is a specific local conception. Seen against a cross-cultural background, the withdrawn position of the Danish teachers becomes particularly remarkable. Some general concepts of development seem useful for a closer examination of their practice.

Conceptions of Development

Constraints and Variability

From a general developmental perspective, Valsiner (1987/1997) has claimed that development should be conceived of as irreversible

changes over time to the structure of a recognizable system as a result of the system's constant relating with its surrounding conditions, and that psychological development should thus be conceived of as being context-bound, that is, that the individual and the environment are open interdependent systems that change as a result of each other. He has advanced the view that it is characteristic of development that there is a constant production of 'redundant' variability, while at the same time constraints both from the developing person and the surrounding world work as dynamic regulators, limiting the possibilities of change. This makes it possible for people to develop within a necessarily limited set of practicable possibilities, rather than being check-mated in a wilderness of an infinite number of equally possible possibilities. For the discussion here, the central point is that at least some connection between variability and constraints may be seen as a general condition for development.

When development is conceived as irreversible structural changes and is characterized by the continuous establishment of new variability and new constraints, it becomes clear that in the course of the child's development, yesterday's news may turn into today's trivialities. The very kind of environment which contains developmental potential for a child at one time may become another kind of environment—without developmental potential—for the same child at a later stage, simply because the child has developed. If an environment is to facilitate children's progression from one level of development to the next, it must grow with the children. So if an environment for some reason does not change—as is seen in the case of the after-school centre—its lack of change is not to be regarded as a neutral condition for the individuals. They might take a step back from development to stagnation. In this sense an undeveloping environment can function as a direct hindrance to individuals' development.

When Danish children are offered a so-called 'free space' with the aim that they may freely and independently discover and establish both relevant variability and relevant constraints, they also become 'free from', in the sense of deprived of, variability and constraints from circumstances and from adults. When adults refrain both from 'intruding on' the children and their current everyday life and from forming, let alone communicating, reasonably articulate assumptions about possible future conditions, then it is left to the children to develop dispositions and competencies which can enhance daily life and which might be adequate for future conditions. It is also up to the children to compose a whole perspective on life which encompasses the possibility of recursivity in the conception of the past, the present and the future

and which enables them to form their current lives in the light of a future-oriented perspective. Irrespective of the nature of the society, one may question the wisdom of deliberately leaving such a compositional task to children, and the uncertainty about Western life conditions might serve as another indication as to why it would be advantageous for children to also receive some suggestions from adults. The emphasis of the new discourse on the high rate of change and lack of predictability of conditions is naturally accompanied more by clear statements about what you cannot assume, than by a search for what you can assume in the light of these conditions. But there is no compelling reason to assume that the future, no matter how complex and unpredictable, will be particularly free of social and object-related constraints. The material world is not likely to disappear. One might equally well take the view that the future, precisely because of the great diversity expected, will necessarily contain a broader spectrum of people's own deliberate constraints as well as situational constraints. The abundance of both variability and constraints can be regarded as two sides of the same coin. It may be necessary for individuals to be able to manoeuvre with an increasing multitude of constraints, and it may be assumed that the way in which they handle this situation will have crucial consequences for them.

Many researchers have emphasized that human agency must be understood against the background of its capacity to structure and organize its relations to the surrounding world in a hierarchical manner. Thus Werner has argued that all kinds of development are characterized by structural patterns and that the direction of a developmental process is from the global and diffuse towards the differentiated and hierarchically integrated. The various structures interact continuously, but a certain differentiation is regarded as a necessary condition for the establishment of a hierarchical order. The ability of human beings to organize and reorganize their ways of orienting and acting hierarchically is a condition for their ability to act in a flexible manner and cope with changes in the environment as active, stable agents rather than enter into a labile state where they act reactively and in a manner which is dependent on stimuli (Werner, 1948/1961). Thus it is necessary for a person's agency that that person constrains his or her activities through differentiation and hierarchical organization. Focusing on the directionality of individuals, Staub has stressed that characteristics of individuals and their circumstances jointly affect how potential goals as well as actually pursued goals are selected from a multiplicity of possible goals. Goals are conceived as potential, and individuals construct different goal hierarchies restricted by three

classes of influence, namely environmental conditions, their own relatively stable personal characteristics and their actual psychological states (Staub, 1986/1991).

For the present context the essential point is that agency and structuring are internally related phenomena. A great redundancy of possible choices thus requires the individual to establish corresponding constraints if he or she is to perform agency and organize hierarchically, rather than become stuck in a situation in which he or she orients him/herself diffusely and is caught by influences from a net of innumerable possibilities.

As for the after-school centre, it is a problem that the teachers do not want to contribute or cooperate to make the children engage themselves and become familiar with selecting fields of engagement. It seems unwarranted to simply diagnose the teachers as lazy. The fact that they attribute to the group of older children the capacity to develop on their own is in harmony with the great contemporary focus on what child groups are capable of. The problem, as I see it, is that child groups are simply expected to be capable *tout court*.

Development: Immanent or Context-Bound?

Cultural-historical theory claims that people develop by participating in social contexts, and it has abandoned the idea that the individual possesses an immanent developmental capacity (lately Rogoff, 2003). There seems to be a risk that the new discourse will transfer the idea of immanence to the group level. Children's groups are assigned an inherent developmental capacity which incidentally is most welcome to the adults of the community.

In the present context one relevant quality which researchers of widely dissimilar theoretical backgrounds find characteristic of children is that they are creative and imaginative. They are apt to transcend and enrich the actual contexts in which they find themselves, and not least within the research in play it has been solidly documented that precisely social groupings or communities among children can facilitate this. However, it is an important first acknowledgement in the field that children's groups' ways of playing are intimately connected to the practical conditions and values in their own cultural context, regardless of whether they radically transform certain aspects of this context, whether they are concerned with rendering parts of it with great accuracy or whether they only play in a very limited way—if at all—because their play is for some reason looked down on or openly oppressed by adults (Sutton-Smith, 1997). The types of games which children play as well as the themes which they elaborate in play

and the nature of their mutual relations are all closely connected with their cultural background (Hetherington & Parke, 1999). Another important insight is that people cannot simply be regarded as having a natural gift for acting creatively, but that the culture plays an active part in the introduction of unconventional thinking, for children as well as adults. Under the influence of psychoanalysis it has been emphasized in the past that culture has the necessary role of gradually correcting the wild imaginative world of children so that they become increasingly reality-oriented. More recent research indicates that from a very early age children react realistically to their surroundings in many ways and that culture plays an important part in introducing them to the use of so-called 'alternative' forms of rationality like magical thinking (Rosengren, Johnson, & Harris, 2000). The fact that children become capable of operating with conventional as well as alternative forms of reality enables them to interact with their environment at a high level of creativity. It seems problematic to ascribe to child groups an immanent developmental ability to generate capacities which are assumed to further their possibility of getting excitement from and transforming their surroundings when it is clear that these capacities are at least predominantly nurtured through cultural introduction.

Even at the group level of analysis, development should be conceived as taking place between open interdependent systems, in this case between the group and its immediate environment. In the same vein it should be pointed out that even a niche ought not to be attributed with an inherent developmental power of its own.

Regardless of how closely the developmental niche is connected to other parts of society, it is always embedded in society and can only be understood via its embeddedness. A relatively isolated institutional context can only be isolated because it is embedded in a particular society. The examination of how a niche is embedded will yield information about how central or peripheral it is in relation to other contexts and about how bound or fixed the relation is between the surrounding society and the niche. These circumstances are crucial when the niche is to be understood precisely as developmental: What conditions does society pose for the character of the developmental niches which it has produced? And who determines how and indeed whether it should be developmental?

In Denmark, children are spending more and more of their time in institutions which have been designed specifically for children and which are rather isolated from the rest of society. The children are not necessary as citizens and the institutional part of their developmental niche may exist without continuous positive or negative regulating

feedback from outside. The institutions may therefore assume very diverse forms with no appreciable difference to anyone except the parties directly involved, and so differences in opinion about the meaningfulness of everyday life can and do exist without becoming apparent and thus give rise to external dialogue or confrontation. The relative isolation of the institutions enables teachers to attribute a great immanent developmental capacity to children's groups. It is not necessary for them to examine the scope of the attributed capacity using the children's actual development as a yardstick.

With Farver's model as a starting point, it has been attempted to illustrate how the inclusion of several layers in the investigation of cultural features can adduce insight into what is or is not happening in a specific setting, and that this holds true whether or not the structure of the setting seems to have a positive functional meaning for the superordinate goals and values of society.

Evaluation of Farver's Model

Farver's model of activity setting analysis has proved well suited to a closer scrutiny of a particular discrepancy and useful in lending support to the claim that a practice can produce not only meaning and coherence but also lack of meaning and coherence in a specific context. The model has been set up with the aim of examining the consistency between various components of the culture, and it is not quite clear whether it is also regarded as particularly suited to throw light on the opposite. For this reason it might be an idea to explicate the broad scope and potential of the model by adding to it an explicit enquiry into meaning and coherence. For example, Farver's first component could include questions like 'Which persons are available to which persons and in connection with what kind of activities?' and 'Which persons do not have other persons available and in connection with what kind of activities?' If the model is expanded in this way, it can inspire scholars to investigate both the extent of the relevance of meaning and the distribution of meaning within a given activity setting.

Because meaning has a kind of ontological status in the Western conception of individuals and cultures, it seems particularly important to discuss the notion of meaning in connection with inter-cultural studies. Western scholars are occupied with modernist notions like social construction and social negotiation of meaning, meaning through discourse, narration and recursive construction. Such notions can be particularly adequate in a society marked by great possibility

for or even necessity of individual choice and the creation of meaning. Contrary to this, for people living in societies marked by material hardship and for people who have few options within an affluent society, the intense preoccupation with choice and the construction of meaning may be considered less relevant for daily life. In addition, there may be societies whose members do not suffer material hardship, but simply have more prominent interests than the construction of meaning.

The idea is not to discredit the relevance of operating with 'meaning' or to reserve this notion for the study of Western cultures. It appears that human life everywhere contains some measure of choice, perceived meaningfulness and narrativity. But because our preconceptions about the meaning of meaning are solidly founded and of great importance for our conception of human beings, it may be worthwhile trying to find out whether and how they are to be regarded as local so that we can keep the notion of meaning sensitive to the facets of different realities. Inter-cultural research can illuminate whether everyday life in various cultures differs with respect to the aspect of meaning.

A method-like activity setting analysis seems very useful for this purpose. Firstly it is sensitive to the question of whether and how meaning is found, and it invites a practice of interpreting all phenomena, and therefore also the phenomenon of meaning, in their material foundation. For this reason it can help us understand potential differences in the meaning of meaning as a result of their being culturally generated. Secondly, and in contrast to grounded theory—whose dominant idea is that the researcher should rid him- or herself of preconceived opinions—the axioms and systematics of activity setting analysis are transparent. For this reason it gives scholars of differing persuasions an excellent opportunity to enter into a discussion of its premises, and the adherents of the method get the opportunity to sharpen their awareness of their own premises.

The method should not be seen as a closed entity with a fixed suitability to analyse a once and for all given set of questions. Rather it can be conceived as an open-ended model which can develop its scope when confronted with new topics and at the same time adhere to its general purpose of exposing the cultural dimensions of human everyday life. In connection with inter-cultural studies, it appears advantageous to keep concepts and research methods adjustable in principle with a view to their adaptability to various contexts of application. In order to facilitate this, two suggestions for inter-cultural research will be briefly advanced.

Two Methodological Suggestions

For an inter-cultural approach it might be advantageous to query a few of the methodological approaches which have been recommended by some of the scholars who have made cross-cultural studies and are critical of an ethnocentric approach. As mentioned in the introduction, it is sometimes suggested that one should first study local phenomena and then their possible global incidence in order to compare the very aspects or phenomena which are found everywhere. But, on the one hand, it could be advantageous to add 'foreign' voices by comparing cultures, also with respect to precisely those circumstances which do not appear in both or all the cultures examined. This may expose how cultures actively select their goals from a greater or smaller multiplicity of possible goals, and how, with equal awareness, they cut off or avoid potential goals. As pointed out by Mead (1928/1973), this approach may sometimes have the additional advantage that members of a community become aware of the existence of some choices which they have not yet made. On the other hand, it could be advantageous to make the recommended sequence of steps in the research process less strict. The timing of the beginning of the dialogue with other cultures is important because it influences the question of which discussions and concepts will be particularly relevant. The possibility of affecting pre-conceived notions may be assumed to be greater when, in addition to waiting for 'finished' results from various cultures, the scholar also allows the dialogue about research in progress to form the basis of the discussions. In the last resort, the choice of subjects, methods and working partners is also a question of with whom you would like to enter into an interdependent relation.

Note

1. All names are pseudonyms.

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Biography

IVY SCHOUSBOE is Associated Professor in Developmental Psychology at the Department of Psychology, University of Copenhagen, Denmark. Her main research topics are: children's development as individuals and as members of their cultures; children's perspectives in research about children; the perspective of persistence in developmental psychology; and implications of society's policies of integration for individuals' participation as members of society. ADDRESS: Ivy Schousboe, Department of Psychology, University of Copenhagen, Linnégade 22, 1361, Copenhagen K, Denmark. [email: ivy.schousboe@psy.ku.dk]