

Co-constructing Family Identities through
Telephone-mediated Narrative Exchanges
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Abstract

Introduction: We explored telephone interactions between young children and adult family members as contributing insights to the co-construction of identities (Marcia, 2002) within both the nuclear and the extended family (Blackledge and Creese, 2008; Ochs & Capps, 2001). We deployed methods of linguistic ethnology to enrich the scope of pragmatics, semiotic resources and temporal range of engagement (Maybin & Trusting, 2011). Our premise was that intimate relatives have knowledgeable appreciation of their child's affective and cognitive worlds (Göncü, 1999; Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005) that they can call upon to enhance emerging language use and narrative productions, and especially in distanced communications (Aarsand & Aronsson, 2007). Talking over the telephone potentially scaffolds children's skills at offering clear, cohesive communications, and elaborated narratives (Cameron & Hutchison 2009).

Methodology: Examination of the corpora of four preschool children in telephone interactions with a family member showed them to employ extensive expressive power to negotiate considerable communicative space in having both emotional and cognitive needs addressed. These techniques included: participant discussions to aid interpretation; photography of sites and phenomena discussed to stimulate participants' recall and aid interpretation (Pink 2006); participant observation. These extended methods beyond transcription analysis enhanced interpretative endeavors. Participants were five pairs of lower- to middle-income family couples: one mother-son pair, two mother-daughter pairs one father-daughter pair, and one grandmother-granddaughter pair. All the children were between four-and-one-half and five-and-three-quarters years of age when the exchanges occurred. One participating parent was a librarian; two family members were university faculty members; one parent, a car mechanic; and one, a telephone call-centre service representative. We recruited research participants in families where telephone interactions between parent/grandparent and child were relatively uncommon, but where launching calls for our research was welcomed for additional familial contact.

Findings: Five-year-old Sam and his mother, talking on the phone (Mother at work, and Sam at home) achieved inter-subjectivity about questions of fact, such as whether the insect that stung him was a wasp or a bee, in spite of the challenges of their decontextualized situations by virtue of their mutual personal and familial knowledge and parental modeling of mutual respect. Sarah, four years, and Mother negotiate what her mother looked like at a certain point in time, and how tall she must have been (not an 'Bitty-Baby' size, not the size of Raggedy Ann, but the size of Raggedy Ann plus a small doll on her head) and engaging in apparently accurate speculation about Mother's current desire states. Fumiko, age five, discusses with her mechanic father the sorts of cars he might have fixed that day, speculating as to which colors of cars are their most favorite. Emily exchanges with her distant grandmother her experiences on the first day of school and lapses into a discussion of a previously shared Christmas.

Discussion: We support the proposal that identities are co-constructed as stories about persons and shared experiences are (Reddy, 2008; Reddy & Trevarthan, 2004; Sfard & Prusak, 2005; Schatz, 2007). We noted the high degree of mutuality within informal pedagogic encounters that Rogoff (2003) characterizes as 'guided participation'. We also conclude that using diverse techniques to come to emic appreciation of participants' perspectives is essential to deepening interpretive understanding.

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