Published as Eisenhart, Margaret. The Fax, the Jazz Player, and the Self-Story Teller: How *Do* People Organize Culture? *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (March 1995): 3-26.
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The Fax, the Jazz Player, and the Self-Story Teller: How *Do* People Organize Culture?

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Theories of how culture affects socialization and the formation of persons have long been of interest to anthropologists of education. In most of these theories, individuals are defined, categorized, shaped, or determined by social practices that reflect cultural priorities. Until recently, few educational anthropologists have given serious consideration to conceptualizing how individuals actively and inventively contribute to cultural continuity or change. Using data collected during an 18-month workplace ethnography, I suggest that one means by which individuals actively organize culture is through the "stories of self" that they express or enact when they join new social settings. These stories are conceived as devices that mediate changing forms of individual participation (i.e., learning) in context. As such, stories of self contribute to identity formation and affect culture. ANTHROPOLOGY OF LEARNING, IDENTITY FORMATION, STORIES

Since the early writings of Margaret Mead (1928), Raymond Firth (1936), and Meyer Fortes (1938), anthropologists have been interested in how culture is transmitted, reproduced, and changed. Years ago, Fred Gearing described the special province of anthropology and education as "an array of research and intervention-research interests bearing on . . . the ways schools daily recreate themselves and change, on the patterning of behaviors that occur in and around them, and on the parts played by those behaviors in the transmission of culture to oncoming generations" (1974:1224).

As the quote from Gearing suggests, most of this previous work has focused on the means by which culture is *presented* to children or newcomers, and not on how culture is *learned or affected* by them. In the body of "transmission" research, attention has been directed to the images of personhood in the cultural code and to the ways these images are "brought home" to children and engaged by them in child-rearing practices, rituals, and schooling (see, for example, Fortes 1938, Spindler 1974, Whiting and Whiting 1975). This array of research examines "how culture organizes individuals" and tends to disregard "how individuals organize culture" (Eisenhart 1988).

Transmission theories are crucial if we are ever to produce a cultural theory of education. However, transmission theories alone cannot fully

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Anthropology & Education Quarterly **26(1):3–26. Copyright © 1995, American Anthropological Association.**

individuals over time. That is, we must understand how individuals organize culture for themselves and others. I will suggest that one means by which individuals organize culture is through the "stories of self" that they express or enact in joining new social settings. I found these stories to be key to understanding how newcomers learned in the nonprofit conservation workplace where I recently completed an ethnographic study.

Telling stories of self is here conceived as a device that mediates changing forms of individual participation and understanding in context, that is, a device that mediates learning (Lave 1993:5–6). The stories are schemas that connect individuals to the social and cultural order, and once performed they launch or "subjunctivize" (to borrow Jerome Bruner's 1986 term) an individual's identity in a specific context. As individuals express or enact these stories in a new setting, the stories guide individuals' emerging sense of who they are and how they relate to other people and objects in the world. Others use individuals' stories of self to anticipate what an individual is likely to do, need, and want. In the educational relationship between old-timers and newcomers (at least among adults), stories of self mediate what is of special interest to newcomers to learn and what is made important for old-timers to teach. Thus, telling stories of self affects how individuals learn and what they know. Stories also can affect the cultural worlds of those who tell them and those who hear them. Telling stories of self in context, then, seems one apt metaphor for an active, inventive individual in an anthropological conception of the learner.[1]

The Conservation Corporation Study

The data I draw on were collected as part of an 18-month ethnographic study in the state office of a nonprofit conservation corporation that I call "CC."[2] CC is in the business of preserving the state's biodiversity by protecting land where species, habitats, or ecological processes are threatened. CC provides employment for 22 people, mostly scientists, lawyers, and fund-raisers. Not surprisingly, CC is predominantly white; more surprising, there are about equal numbers of women and men and a roughly equal distribution of high status positions by gender.

CC is a workplace with a sense of crowded intensity, purpose, and urgency. Just walking in the door of the stately house that is the main office, one immediately notices open office doors; casual dress; spaces made cramped by room dividers, furniture, machines, books, office supplies, and shopping bags of plant clippings. There is always a bustle of activity as people squeeze around and over each other and the office "furnishings." On the walls are beautiful and sometimes-haunting nature photographs and posters. Staff members seem extremely busy, perennially "behind," and warmly appreciative of each others' work. They speak supportively of each other as people who "work their tails off" to manage the various aspects of their jobs. They accept long hours, weekend work, all-nighters, and few opportunities for advancement or high salaries. They are the kind of people who carry their own plates when they walk downtown to pick up take-out lunches, order new office carpeting made from recycled ketchup and soda containers, and recycle their friends' apple cores in compost heaps. They are also driven by a sense that time is running out in the effort to save what remains of viable habitats and biological resources in the state.

Despite the heavy workload, limited financial rewards, and a sense of urgency, staff genuinely seem to like working at CC. They describe it as a "good place to work." In the wider conservation community and at nearby universities, CC is also highly regarded. When I was searching for potential sites for conducting this research project, I surveyed a number of university scientists and environmental-agency employees. I told them that I was interested in a group with a reputation for "serious science" and approximately equal numbers of men and women employees. CC was consistently mentioned as a good choice.

My study investigated uses of science, gender relationships, and the learning trajectories of newcomers in CC. In this article, I focus on two young adults (Marty, a woman, and Dave, a man) who began work as new employees in one of the science areas about nine months into my study. I followed Marty and Dave for the next four months as part of my ongoing study of CC. The data reported here come from observations and interviews with them and other CC staff members during this time (June to September, 1993).

Introducing Marty and Dave

Marty and Dave did not know each other prior to beginning their work at CC. When I first met them (during their first month on the job), they had spoken to each other only once briefly. Although they worked in the same program area within CC, their jobs required considerable time "in the field" and in different parts of the state. Marty was beginning a job as an ecologist; Dave, as a preserve manager.

At our first meeting, I asked each of them to "tell me the story of how you came to work at CC." I was initially surprised by the similarities in what they talked about. Both had known about CC and had been interested in working there for some time. Marty knew CC mostly from its publications and from a graduate school friend who already worked there; Dave had first heard about CC in a course he took in college. After unexpectedly discovering the job openings at CC, both were excited about the close match between their interests and the job descriptions. At the time, both were nearing completion of master's degrees in natural-resource programs (from different universities). Both were tired of school and saw themselves at the end of their formal education.

Marty and Dave were thrilled to land jobs at CC, even though they knew that the work demands would be high and the pay, low. Marty

> At [the second school], there was no graduate student handbook; no one knew what you were supposed to do. There were no written-down rules. . . . When I took my orals, I didn't fail but I didn't pass. So they decided to give me "writtens." Only one other person had ever taken writtens, and he had already written 15 publications beforehand! Once again, I didn't fail, but I didn't pass; so they told me to get a master's rather than a Ph.D.

When this happened, Marty began to worry that she could not pursue her career goal—a job in ecology—with only an M.S. degree. Yet, she believed that she had been mistreated in the Ph.D. program and had some important skills to offer in such a job.[6]

> Since then, they have all apologized for how I was treated, but it was too late. . . . It was all so nebulous. I pushed the envelope a lot for them. I petitioned to have GIS [a computer program for large-scale geographic survey work] be my "research tool," which they agreed to but then couldn't figure out how to let me do it. . . . My advisor is supposedly an expert in landscape ecology, but he's never touched a computer to do GIS. It is true that he started a new subfield and there's not many places you can go around the country to get landscape ecology, but he does theoretical work, not techniques, for looking at large ecosystems.

For Marty, her quest for a career ended with excitement and relief when she got the CC job. She had landed the kind of job that she wanted, at a place where she thought she could use and develop her skills and where others were committed to the same kind of science she was.

> When I read the [CC] ad, I thought, this would be so much fun! . . . In other state offices [of CC] my job would likely be held by a basic scientist, a zoologist. But this state has so much public land being used in various ways that Bill [her supervisor] thought my applied background would be better than a basic scientist's. And I've had work in landscape ecology, which CC is moving to.

She saw the job as a way to begin what she expected would be a long working career. She ended this part of her narrative by saying, "I don't really think [CC] wanted to hire a Ph.D. for this position, because [they] didn't think someone like that would stay. I plan to stay; I'm committed; I want to stay."

The other part of Marty's narrative was about the miscarriage she had just a few days before her interview for the CC job. She said:

> The week of the interview I had a miscarriage. I told them [the two staff members who interviewed her], and they were so supportive. I thought right then: This is an organization that really cares about a person, that knows that there's more to life than work. I was really impressed with that. . . . Coming from such a gender-repressive place as the [Ph.D.] program, CC is wonderful. . . . I've never felt my gender was an issue here. . . . When I had the miscarriage, at first I wasn't going to say anything [to people at CC], but then I decided to call them and let them know.

Marty explained that she made the call because she was upset, and she worried that her distress might affect her interview. Bill and Kelly interviewed her. Kelly said she had had a miscarriage, too, and that was comforting to Marty. Bill told Marty that Ann had taken her baby with her to the field. Marty continued:

> We even discussed child care, and how Ann had taken her baby daughter on some field trips. I couldn't believe that we were talking about child care during the interview! I felt so supported, and I really wanted a supportive environment. . . . We even celebrate birthdays here—they've never done that in other places I've worked!

In presenting this narrative, Marty seemed to be identifying herself as someone who wanted to settle into a job and an organization where she would be appreciated and supported in a lifestyle as well as a profession. She was excited and grateful that CC was providing her with this opportunity. Marty's telling of this particular story begins to give a shape to the kind of person she is becoming in CC.

Other features of Marty's story were revealed in our first meeting. At one point, I asked her about her job responsibilities and how comfortable she felt in the job. She said:

> I'm not so confident with the hikes, because you have to answer questions on the spot. It's part of my personality to be an introvert; so I have to work on gaining confidence in that area. . . . At Creek Preserve I had only been on the property two days, and I had to lead my first hike by myself. . . . It's hard being the so-called expert.

At various times during the next weeks, Marty suggested that she was not fully comfortable with other aspects of her job. Once she told me:

> Bill and I have been going out together to monitor some sites. We go over what the plants are. He takes the lead reading the transect. Then I do it, so I'll be comfortable later doing it on my own.

She also made an appointment with the fund-raising staff when she realized she would be monitoring (alone) on the property of a very wealthy landowner. She said,

> I was nervous, because he's such an important person . . . and he hasn't contributed to CC for awhile. I thought [the fund-raising staff or the executive director] would be nervous about my meeting with him. They gave me some tips, but no one told me what to do. . . . They told me some things to mention if I had a chance, but not to worry about it. . . . [As it turned out] he was very nice; and he's really interested in what we're doing because the land is so dear to him.

In these examples of Marty's discomforts, she further identifies herself as a person who expects to learn from CC and its staff. Although she

Like Marty, Dave seemed to be developing an identity for himself in CC as he spoke. Dave's focus seemed to be on presenting himself as someone with a long-standing interest in CC, a desire for the chance to work there, and the capabilities to manage whatever came up on the job. He did not expect to receive much direct assistance from CC (although he would have appreciated it). He did expect to accomplish the job with the skills he had. Although I conducted the interview with Dave alone, I suspect that his presentation of self to me was similar to the one he made to Bill. When I told Bill about interviewing Dave, he offered: "He's a self-starter. He likes to figure out what to do on his own."

Differences between Marty and Dave

There are many differences that might be discussed about these two stories. They may have been prompted by differences in job conditions made clear in early discussions with the organization. They may reflect differences in social interactions or relevant cultural models associated with gender. Rather than focus here on the *sources* of difference (an important topic for another paper), I want to suggest how differences in the way Marty and Dave construed their identities seemed to affect their *subsequent* experiences in CC, that is, their changing forms of participation in the organization.

One consequential difference was in the way they related their school experiences to their work at CC. Dave presented himself as someone who took his experiences in graduate school as a sign that he had learned all he could from school, that it was time to leave school behind and move on to the next stage, his career. Marty, in contrast, presented herself as someone who saw school as a site that had let her down, where its lack of supportiveness was an obstacle to her career development. Dave approached CC with the confidence that he could handle the job, if they gave him a chance. Marty approached with the concern that she might not be fully prepared.

Implications for Future Learning

Hypothetically, the identities Marty and Dave projected could be expected to affect what learning opportunities they look for and take within the organization. My observations suggest that Marty's and Dave's learning trajectories did become different. Over the next few months, Marty asked for and received considerable training from Bill.[7] As time passed, she took on more responsibilities after first reviewing them with him. Dave, in contrast, did not expect help, and he did not get much. Bill, who might have spent time with Dave as he did with Marty, told me that he faced the choice of training Dave or going on vacation. He chose vacation, saying he thought Dave would be able to manage on his own. Dave did manage in some extraordinary ways. By the end of the summer, he had overseen the construction of a six-mile trail, interpreted the preserve for hundreds of visitors and potential donors, and contributed advice about the preserve to others on the CC staff.

Further, by the end of my study, sharp differences had emerged in the skills Marty and Dave demonstrated and the identities they embodied. For example, one day in late September I participated in seed harvesting at Canyon Preserve. Both Marty and Dave happened to be there that day. Marty was very precise and methodical in what she told the public about Canyon; she appeared to stop and think before answering questions. She never tried to guess an answer, and as far as I could tell, she was always accurate. Dave, in contrast, was quick and eager to please in answering the questions posed to him. In the process he sometimes misspoke or was inaccurate. What is important about these differences is what they reveal about what each person was learning to do well at CC. The following excerpts from my field notes provide a glimpse of the differences.

> Marty was very precise in describing to the volunteer harvesters a "seed bank" study being conducted at Canyon. She said, "You collect a set amount of soil from the surface, and then at regular depths. Then you grow the soil in controlled laboratory conditions and record the plant species that you find. The scientific question is: 'What's in the soil?' The answer provides a base line for us to use if later we decide to burn an area like this—which we might do to encourage the native grasses, such as big bluestem, the original grass of the tall grass prairie." Marty explained, "We know that the tall grass was burned frequently in its original state. For that reason, the seed didn't need to remain in the soil for long periods of time. [Fire reduces competition from other species.] The seed bank study isn't showing much [dormant seed], which is really what you'd expect. The results mean that we can't just burn and have the tall grass come back; we have to reseed, which is the reason we are collecting seeds today from the few stands that are still here." . . .
>
> When we first arrived, Dave excitedly told us that he'd be providing lunch along the trail, that he was going into town now to get it, and would wheelbarrow it out to a lunch spot where our group [seed harvesters for CC and members of a local horticultural society out to see the preserve (and hopefully to donate money)] would meet up with 39 volunteers who were building trail today. Later, when we arrived at the lunch spot, there was no lunch and, at first, no Dave. Then he arrived to announce that there was no way to get the food to this spot. Later, when someone asked for a sandwich, he said they were for the trail builders, and he was reluctant to give them out to anyone else. Then, he quickly noted that he did have some cookies available, which he rushed to offer. . . .
>
> Along the hike to the cabin, Marty referred all questions about the preserve to Dave, then found herself correcting him. At one point, he talked about the CC-owned land boundary being about "100 acres" below the cabin. Marty said, "You mean 100 feet or 100 yards?" Dave: "Oh, yeah, 100 yards is what I mean." Then less than five minutes later he said that research on the cabin was being done by the "horticultural society." Marty offered: "You mean the historical society?" For a moment he seemed a bit confused. Then he said, "Oh, I mean the archaeological society." When asked what they were finding, Dave said he wasn't sure.

organization. In these ways, Marty's and Ann's stories can be viewed as having small but potentially consequential effects on the cultural system in which they are working.

Discussion

Stories have attracted the attention of a few anthropologists interested in learning.[8] Dorothy Holland and Debra Skinner (1987), for example, found (counter to their expectation based on cognitive-structure analysis) that attribute lists of gender types elicited from men and women about the world of romantic relationships were insufficient to summarize how their respondents were speaking or thinking about the cultural world of romance. To explain gender types to the researchers, respondents put the gender types into stories, thereby revealing characteristic behaviors, intentions, beliefs, and disruptions. Holland and Skinner realized that "the respondents were thinking of the types in terms of social dramas rather than single attributes" (1987:87). Their findings suggest that knowledge of social types is not learned or remembered in terms of attributes but in terms of stories.

In a 1991 report of a study of Alcoholics Anonymous, Carole Cain argues that becoming a full-fledged member of the group means losing one's old identity and acquiring a new one. Fundamental to the new identity is learning to tell one's personal story in terms of a specific AA story structure. Cain writes:

> As [the drinker] learns the AA story structure, he [learns] to see the events and experiences of his own life as evidence for alcoholism. He learns to put his own events and experiences into an AA story, and thus learns to tell, and to understand, his own life as an AA story. He reinterprets his own past, from the understanding he once had of himself as a normal drinker, to the understanding he now has of himself as an alcoholic. [Cain 1991:233]

Sharon Traweek, in her study of high-energy physicists (1988), demonstrates that the progression from pilgrim to experienced scientist can be divided into five stages marked by the expression or telling of distinct moral tales. As the new physicists begin their journey through graduate school and beyond, they are told and then come to tell themselves characteristic stories of what kind of people succeed and fail as physicists. These stories serve as guides to individual actions, goals, and interpretations.

Charlotte Linde has recently analyzed the personal, social, and cultural "work" that telling a story does (1990). She argues that stories create continuity over time, affirm social relationships, and illuminate the "good" self, that is, the moral value of self. Jerome Bruner has described them as launchings of "possible worlds in which action, thought, and self-definition are permissible (or desirable)" (1986:66).

Sara Harkness and her colleagues (Harkness et al. 1992) reveal these processes in more detail. Harkness, Super, and Keefer studied first-time parents, propelled into a new context in which they must work to fashion an identity. The parents in the study initiated this identity formation process by telling stories about their children to others. The stories referenced three domains: recollections of the parents' upbringing (positive and negative elements); concerns derived from their informal conversations with other parents; and the information they gained from reading or listening to child-rearing experts. Using elements from the three domains, new parents projected models of appropriate parent behavior and relationship with the child. A model gave the parents a way to think about themselves and to organize their child-rearing behavior for awhile, until some perceived change in the child, themselves, or what they were hearing from others created the need for a new model. In this sense, Harkness et al. described individuals actively and productively "organizing culture" for themselves and those around them. From the particulars of individuals' interpretations of their previous and present experiences, in conjunction with their interpretation of the received wisdom of others, new mothers and fathers formulated stories of parenthood. As parents expressed their stories, they established a conceptual frame that was in turn embodied materially in their interactions with their child and other caregivers. Harkness and her colleagues found that story commonalities derived from the labels and categories used, shared circumstances of parenting, and expert advice. Differences arose from interpretations of background experiences.

In a similar way, CC newcomers contributed to forming themselves into possible selves within the organization as they interpreted their past and present personal experiences for me and the CC audience. The claims that they publicly made about themselves had consequences for how they learned (e.g., from whom, for what reasons) and what they came to know (e.g., to demonstrate, to be recognized for).

In complex societies, entering new situations or statuses often requires that individuals identify themselves anew, both to themselves and for others. In the Cain and Traweek examples, the process of identification entailed the gradual reformulation of the story of one's past self into a new story of self consistent with the organization's "party line." For new parents in the Harkness et al. study, identification was an ongoing process of telling "appropriate" stories of self and child by deft use of existing cultural categories, social norms, and personal experiences. For Marty and Dave, identification occurred as the stories they told propelled them into specific trajectories of learning.

Thus, telling stories about self is not only a way to demonstrate membership in a group or to claim an identity within it. Telling stories about self is also a means of becoming; a means by which an individual helps to shape and project identities in social and cultural spaces; and a way of thinking about learning that requires the individual to be active, as well as socially and culturally responsive.

self-esteem, and even encouraging them to construct their own explanations. We rarely make storytelling about self or joining an activity or institution even an option.

It also has not been customary to think that newcomers, for example, students, could or do exert any pressure on the system to change. Yet, as new kinds of students enter U.S. schools and old solutions no longer seem to work with new problems, it seems patently obvious that changes are occurring. They may eventually be formalized in policy or given catchy category labels by the media, but to begin with, they are being negotiated every day among teachers, students, and parents.

These insights suggest that anthropologically informed studies of adult learning and learning outside of schools have something important to offer educational research. In particular, we can begin to see the outline of an alternative to developmental theories that take children's learning as the standard. In psychology, attempts to conceptualize adult learning suffer by comparison to child development. Child development is usually viewed in terms of advances stemming from physical and cognitive changes of increasing complexity and sophistication. While adults also change, the changes are not ordinarily thought of as "advances" (Cole and Cole 1993). If, however, learning is conceived as changing forms of participation in context, or changes that transform newcomers into old-timers, outsiders into insiders, or amateurs into experts, then it becomes possible to apply the same conceptual tools to children and adults. Regardless of age, the focus of development research would be the mediational devices used by people in various contexts, and the personal, social, and cultural consequences of engaging these devices over time (Cole 1992). Developmental theories could then be directed at understanding the processes of re-creating and changing culture, including but not limited to the contributions of individuals (Bruner 1986). In such a project, adolescents and adults could well become the center, rather than the periphery, of developmental research.

Telling stories of self in new contexts is one mediational device that warrants more attention by researchers interested in both development and culture. Harrison White recently has written, "Stories come to frame choices, from among those innumerable distinctions and nuances that could be imposed upon relationships in hindsight or from the outside" (1992:87). Stories and storytelling provide clues to an understanding of the individual learner in culture.

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Notes

Acknowledgments. Portions of this article were originally presented at the 1993 Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, in Washington, DC. I would like to express special thanks to Joe Harding, Alex Harding, Maurene Flory, Liza Finkel, Marki LeCompte, and the *AEQ* reviewers for their comments on earlier versions of the article. I also want to thank the people of CC who welcomed me and helped me with this study.

1. I do not intend to imply that these stories or the inclination to tell them spring sui generis from individuals. Like other anthropologists, I expect to find their *causes* in social context and their *forms* in existing cultural codes. However, in this article, I will focus on the personal, social, and cultural work that individuals engage in when they tell stories of self. I expect that telling such stories is a ubiquitous requirement of entering new social contexts, at least in the United States once an individual has passed infancy. Thus, the work that individuals do in telling the stories is an important topic in its own right.

2. All proper names used in reference to the research site are pseudonyms.

3. CC staff members lead nature hikes on preserve lands for potential supporters of or donors to CC. CC is a nonprofit organization that must raise nearly all of its operating expenses (including salaries) from foundations, corporations, or the public. CC also relies heavily on volunteers, whose work allows CC to devote less than 12 percent of its operating budget to salaries. Thus, successful hikes are a very important activity of the organization.

4. "Monitoring" is the main activity of Marty's job. It means conducting regular inventories of the plants found in selected sites located all over the state. Both individual rare plants and plant communities are inventoried and then tracked over time. Monitored sites are often located on preserve lands (owned by CC) or on public lands (e.g., BLM or U.S. Forest Service lands), but they may also be located on private property with the owner's permission.

5. Marty's and Dave's stories could be analyzed as examples of quest narrative (see, for example, Atkinson 1991), although I have not done that here.

6. It would certainly be possible to develop a gender analysis of Marty's situation; however, that will not be my focus in this article. Here I am interested in describing how Marty orients herself to CC. Analysis of the "cultural scripts" she and Dave drew on to orient themselves requires another article.

7. Receiving the kind of attention and training that Marty got is unusual for newcomers to this organization. The small staff size and the urgency of fund-raising and protection efforts leave little time for training.

8. In educational research, see also Bruner 1986 and Connelly and Clandinin's (1990) use of teacher narratives as metaphors for teaching-learning relationships.

9. However, a number of people working in these two areas have noted that the influence of previous conceptions on later ones should receive more direct attention.

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