Reply

Human Development

Talk, Small Stories, and Adolescent Identities

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In their commentaries, Avril Thorne and Rogers Hall are critical, helpful, *and* constructive – a rare find in the genre of academic discussions. I take up two issues that they touch upon: the problems that arise when working with *transcripts* and the notion of *narrative*.

Talk, the Interpretation of Talk, and Working from Transcripts

Both commentators hint at a different interpretation of the participants' actions/interactions. They ask whether it is possible to interpret the silence or non-engagement of some participants as a counter strategy or even resistance to what I termed 'slut bashing' and what I assumed to be the dominant activity of the group. At first, I was surprised by this interpretation because I had been working with transcripts from the videotaped interactions and could *see* how the participants were responding with their facial expressions and bodies, and how they were engaged with each other. However, there is a larger issue at stake. The transformation of bodily interactions into written texts is an issue of theoretical and methodological importance, and it was (conveniently) glossed in my contribution. Not only is it the ground against which Thorne and Hall (and other readers) can reach a non-complicity interpretation of some of the participants' non-involvement in the slut-bashing activity, but it also has repercussions that reach into the Schegloff-Wetherell-Engestrom debate that Hall very appropriately alluded to. Let me briefly explicate.

When we engage in transcription, we yield to a view of discourse as language – the way we encounter it in the form of literate products and literary interpretations. According to this view, we hear 'words' and 'sentences' simply because writing has become our second nature, and it is in writing where words and syntactic units are marked off so we can *see* them. In fact, however, oral actions and interactions are limited to the immediate situation of the interlocutors; this 'narrowness of the dialogical situation' [see Freeman, in press] is transformed when we fix it in recordings and translate it into written text. What can be 'lost in translation' is the non-fixity, the fleetingness and negotiability of the interactive situation as a whole. And what comes into focus is a world of individual intentions as 'behind' the indi-

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vidual contributions of individuals' turns [Bamberg, in press]. Not even the inclusion in the transcript of the finest details such as pausing (or '*being silent*'[1]), intonation contours, gestures, eye gaze and the like can counteract this process of translation. To accommodate this problem, I stress in my analysis that talk always is activity and not, as Engestrom seems to suggest, different from activity and only 'located' in it (among and along with 'other forms of information,' see Hall, this issue).

Along these lines, I would start the analysis of the same data over again, but with a slightly different orientation. The focus would be on the analysis of visual material, not transcripts. And this time, I would background the activity of slut bashing and the co-tellers complicity with it. Rather, in this new pass at a new transcript, backed up with the 'real' visual images, I would keep a close eye on the strategies employed by all participants (including the moderator) in both sustaining their interaction and in the process doing something a lot more complex. Rather than the construction of a homogenous group activity of slut bashing, I could equally foreground more of the ambivalence and ambiguity by which the participants were bringing off and managing their identities. Within this type of analysis then, the interactants would be more closely analyzed in terms of their fine tuning and maneuvering 'in between complicity and countering' [Bamberg, 2004]. And, although we could show and document the analysis with visual images, let me reassure that interpretive analysis may ultimately still remain 'inconclusive.'

Narratives – Biographies and 'Small Stories'

Avril Thorne's contrast between my 'socially situated approach to storied identity' and more traditional life history and/or biographical approaches opens another interesting venture. Yes, I decidedly wished to complement or supplement the life historian's interest in grand lives with what I called the analysis of 'small' stories – the ones we tell in passing, in our everyday encounters with each other, and which I considered the '*real*' stories of our *lived* lives [Bamberg, in press]. The subject within this approach is clearly more 'social' in a Bakhtinian and Vygotskian sense. However, this is obviously at the expense of a subject who is also 'social,' but in another sense; namely, a subject who more reflectively puts together the possible stories that can be told as narrative episodes of one's life. Although this narrative activity is more of an individual accomplishment, it is only possible against the social matrix of known or imagined possible life narratives. Thorne argues for a way to intertwine these two approaches and two subject positions, and I agree: this is where we ultimately have to be heading. However, this venture is not easy. There are a number of obstacles, and at this point at least, I am not clear whether and how they can be successfully circumnavigated.

[1] Of course 'being silent' is very different from 'pausing' or 'not immediately following with one's turn,' because it requires some form of an intentional stance. It represents an act of the form: 'I could have said something here, but I decided to keep it to myself.' When we, as interpreters, make this kind of inference, we are in the midst of placing participants in between level 2- and level 3-types of positioning activities.

Let me start by briefly elaborating the notion of a narrative construction of self. Selecting episodes from lived lives and stringing them together in a way so they appear as more than mere listings requires familiarity with this type of social practice. Selecting episodes for the purpose of commenting and reflecting back on aspects of a lived life also requires the ability to cull these stories and bracket them out of the original social settings in which they have been socially shared. This kind of practice is based on socio-cultural traditions and institutionalized practices[2], and the subject that is created in these socio-cultural practices is a reflective subject: one that is able to step back, choose from all those that are tellable episodes, and organize them into some form of an overarching theme that gives (more or less) coherence. No wonder that this approach to narratives privileges a notion of the person as fuller and rounder. And equivocations and inconsistencies, though possible in life accounts, are signs of disarrays. Children and young adolescents simply do not seem to have had enough practice to work their way up to this kind of challenge, placing them into the developmental slot of 'not-yet-adult'.

In contrast, if we take everyday, small narratives to be the primary territory where co-conversationalists seek and find ways to mitigate the interactive trouble and fashion a portrayal of themselves in ways that are interactively useful, we draw on a different kind of subject and identity. Rather than seeing narratives as intrinsically oriented toward coherence and authenticity, and inconsistencies and equivocations as an analytic nuisance, we turn the latter into what is most interesting. They offer ways into examining how storytellers are bringing off and managing a sense of themselves in contexts that require interactive accounting. Seen this way, such instances no longer appear as contradictions or inconsistencies, but rather as openings into which the analyst can delve and see how such multiple attending and rhetorical finessing is used to work up identity claims that are complex, reportable, and multifaceted [Korobov & Bamberg, in press]. Sure, aspects of the person that come to the foreground as privileged are those that orient more to the fragmented and fleeting underpinnings than to the full and round.

These two different notions of narrative, one as oriented toward organizing lives, the other as situated in small-talk, chit-chat, but nevertheless being highly instrumental in local identity work, thus far have not been sufficiently differentiated, let alone integrated, as appropriately pointed out by Thorne. Hall's suggestion to collect more of these 'real-life' small stories-in-interaction with the same participants, but at different times and in different settings, is an extremely valuable suggestion for future research in identity development. And indeed, we are trying to do exactly that. My main interest, at least at this point, is less to document coherent selves but rather to point to important divergences that locate identity positionings in everyday interactive practices and their performance (rather than as brought off by engaging in reflection and abstraction). This is a perspective that research and theories in identity development in the past have not well pursued, focusing instead too much on what is constant and often relying on a single 'take' in the form of a single interview [see Mishler, 2004, for an excellent proposal of how to expand this

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[2] How much these practices have developed as parts of literacy practices is an interesting question [see, for instance, Elias, Schroter, & Jephcott, 1987; Goody, 1977; Goody & Watt, 1968; Ong, 1982]

perspective]. Like Hall, I believe that investigations that conduct several 'takes', from different angles and in different situations, can lay out revisions in our sense-making and re-storying capabilities in much more detail and with greater effectiveness. This is something I feel could be highly relevant for researchers and scholars in human development.

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