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## Sociocultural Perspectives Meet Critical Theories

Producing Knowledge through Multiple Frameworks

Cynthia Lewis and Elizabeth Birr Moje

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# **Sociocultural Perspectives Meet Critical Theories**

## **Producing Knowledge through Multiple Frameworks**

**Cynthia Lewis and Elizabeth Birr Moje**

This article focuses on new directions in sociocultural research on literacy in light of a policy context in the United States and other western nations that dismisses the significance of such research. The official authorization of “scientific” research, narrowly defined, has threatened the viability and impact of sociocultural research. We argue that at a time when the state views reading and writing as neutral skill-based behaviors, it is even more important to conduct research that reveals the relationship between literacy and identity. To make this point we begin by explaining what we see as the limitations of sociocultural research and the direction we believe it needs to take. We follow this argument with an attempt to define what we see as key terms in the sociocultural equation—identity, agency, and power—using research data (Moje, 2002) to demonstrate how we are using these terms. Next, we analyze data from another study (Lewis & Ketter, (2004)) to demonstrate how an analysis that is informed by critical theories of language can place identity, agency, and power front and center. We conclude with a discussion of what all of this means for learning, which, in the end, is our central concern.

## **Sociocultural Research: Gaps and New Directions**

Although sociocultural research often attends to identity in learning, as Kevin O’Connor (2001) and others point out, it tends to focus on how individuals shape identities as they come to belong to communities of practice rather than on how they shape identities related to the conflict and tension that is always present in such communities. As Kris Gutierrez (2003) notes, moments of conflict and disjuncture are often the spaces in which learning occurs. Our argument, then, is that we not only need to reinforce the importance of attending to the sociocultural nature of literacy, but we also need to focus on how identities are shaped within and shaping of social and cultural contexts. The sort of attention to identity that we have in mind is one that looks carefully at the macro as it shapes the micro, a focus that attends closely to matters of power and agency in ways that are not usually foregrounded in sociocultural research.

Although there are many strands of sociocultural theory, including activity theory (Engestrom, 1999), distributed cognition (Rogoff, 1995), situated cognition (Kirshner & Whitson, 1997), communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and cultural psychology (Cole, 1999), all of these strands share a view of human action as mediated by language and other symbol systems within particular cultural contexts. While we are committed to the broad definitions and roles of mediation, language, and culture in learning as described in sociocultural theory, we question its emphasis on individuals embedded within particular contexts. The research we have conducted compels us to give greater emphasis than usual to the institutional,

historical, and cultural contexts that influence relationships, language, and meaning. In conducting such analyses, we have turned to other theoretical orientations that also deal with the social and the cultural but are not perceived to be within schools of sociocultural research in education. These theoretical orientations include cultural studies, poststructural theory, postcolonial theory, performance theory, dialogic theory, and discourse analysis, a few of which we will use to frame our discussions of data later in this article.

One of our concerns about the limits of sociocultural research as it is currently conceived is that it does not adequately explain how subjects are produced through language and discourse. As Valerie Walkerdine (1997) argues, its focus on individuals thinking in different contexts to accomplish activities in practical settings does not account for the production of subjects through discourses that regulate practices and rationalize actions and events. As she put it, "if thinking is produced in practices, we need to understand what practices are and how it is that they produce cognitive processes" (p. 58). Related to literacy practices, individuals (or subjects, to use the poststructural term) have been constructed through social codes and practices that shape their relationships to texts and how such texts might be defined. Yet, as Engestrom and Cole note (1997), Walkerdine's position may present a limited view of individual agency. Our research suggests that power does not reside only in macro-structures; but rather it is produced in and through individuals as they are constituted in larger systems of power and as they participate in and reproduce those systems.

Our aim, then, is to generate a sociocultural theory that accounts for these larger systems of power as they shape and are shaped by individuals in particular cultural contexts. We do so by examining relationships of power, identity, and agency in our research and the ways in which these elements shape learning and the production of knowledge.

Deborah Brandt and Kate Clinton (2002) provide us with a way to further extend sociocultural theory. In discussing the limits of focusing on local, situated literacies, they use the work of Bruno Latour (1993) to focus on how the things, the objects, of literacy represent not only localized literacies in one context but globalized literacies in another. They suggest that when literacies are observed in action, we need always to ask who (people, institutions, etc.) is not on the scene that is getting something out of it. Citing Latour, they note that by neglecting the significance of materiality in social interactions, "we are stuck either working at the interactive level where people seem to be calling their own shots or else gesturing to hegemonic forces, larger social structures, patterns, etc., that impose themselves in some undefined way on human actors" (p. 346).

A quick example from Cynthia's research project (Lewis, 2001) illustrates this point. The mother of a very successful student who loved literature told Cynthia that her daughter's teacher was a good match for her daughter because the teacher focused on literature rather than reading, adding that this was unusual in elementary school. The meaning this mother gave to literature can be viewed, in Pierre Bourdieu's (1980) terms, as "habitus" for her daughter, a social field about which she formed (through the social codes that were available to her) embodied perceptions, tastes, and actions relative to literary texts. Indeed, the habitus included the literary texts themselves-the particular kinds of texts. It was a habitus that served her well in that it aligned with her teacher's "ways with literature" and allowed the girl to shape the literary culture of the classroom along with her



teacher. Furthermore, the mother's discourse was constituted within larger institutional discourses as well. For example, the meaning of literature shared by the student, her mother, and her teacher opposes the way that literature is usually viewed within elementary school contexts, but coincides with particular disciplinary discourses about literacy knowledge that are more associated with secondary and postsecondary education. Thus, the connection that this mother implicitly made to literature as interpretation rather than comprehension, aesthetics rather than utility, carried a certain legitimacy within and beyond her classroom, and helped to produce her daughter as a particular kind of literate subject. And this daughter's position in relation to literature supports the institutionalization of high culture-what counts as literary, who will be considered successful, and so forth.

In tension with this structural view on a local scene is one that is more agentic and dynamic. It is about kids performing their identities moment-to-moment, shifting and destabilizing classroom power relations. It is about a boy with a challenging home life and marginal classroom status taking charge of a literature discussion group when the talk turns to series horror fiction-a genre he knows and loves, both in movies and books. We are drawn to the notion that all social action is performative, including the social actions surrounding literature, and that studying performative shifts in power can lead to understandings about how performances reproduce, sustain, or transform participant statuses and texts-what Baumann and Briggs call the "emergence of texts in contexts" (1990, p. 66) Such transformation, they suggest is tied to the process of recontextualizing-that is the process of taking a text from one social context and resituating it in another. In this case, from out-of-school reading to the official world of school. The text and the participants are transformed in the process. The participant becomes a knowledgeable and motivated reader and the text becomes a legitimate object of analysis.

However, and this is where Brandt & Clinton become relevant again, the local scene is not entirely local. They discuss what they call literacy-in-action, which situates literacy itself as the social agent imbued with social meaning – "carrying a social load" (p. 348) as Brandt and Clinton put it. In this case, horror fiction carried gendered, patriarchal, misogynistic meanings that opposed discourses promoted by the classroom teacher, who was concerned about media representations of females, who actively championed strong girlhood, and who was somewhat dismissive of popular culture. The horror fiction itself was the carrier of these meanings just as the artifacts of "quality literature" – books, read aloud rituals, school media specialist, etc. carried a particular ethos that recruited students such as the girl mentioned earlier whose mother valued literature. However, although the weight of this high/low culture divide matters in particular contexts, suggesting particular material effects and social identities, it does not matter in relation to the global multimarketing interests of multinational corporations. Those horror series books are socially loaded in other ways, then, in ways that place this low-status boy front and center, among his male peers, and within the corporate vision of what his social identity can be.

Yet, in the end, we find this view of social identity too limiting, not respectful enough of the incredible dialogic complexity of the social worlds and big-D discourses (Gee, 1996, 1999) within which all of us find ourselves, the disequilibrium in relation to identity and discourse that Bakhtin (1981) so perfectly speaks to and that allows each of us to "create new ways of being" as Dorothy

Holland and her colleagues (1998, p. 5) put it, to reinvent ourselves in relation to texts and contexts.

Stuart Hall (2000) describes identities as ambivalent-“negotiated, not ‘resolved’” (p. xi). Our own take on social identities-their significance in the face of structural conditions that often seem intractable-is continually negotiated but not resolved in our research. As we continually rethink our own research, we want to better understand the way that performances of social identity are cloaked in the fabric of power and ideology and economics. The fans of horror fiction are created through an economy that benefits from the production of particular versions of masculinity as well as from the production of subjects who associate themselves with low rather than high culture. It is the performances themselves and the material objects that imbue them with meaning that instantiate the larger social politic. And this is where both the girl whose mother values literature and the boy who loves horror fiction serve a common purpose-to reinstate the social politic, to reiterate the high/low divide that sustains economic and institutional inequity. One thing is clear, social identities are both vitally local and profoundly global.

### **Identity, Agency, and Power: What Do these Words Really Mean?**

Identity, agency, and power are constructs that beg some definitions, albeit tentative ones, particularly because the terms have multiple meanings and long histories that depend on one’s disciplinary background. A full discussion of the literature around each construct is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, we offer here our own definitions and distinctions together with data-based examples of what these constructs look like in the lives of actual people. The people, in this case, are Latino/a youth who live in Detroit, Michigan, USA and participate in a research study with Elizabeth (Moje).

Detroit is a large urban center (city population is currently 950,000; the urban area is just under 4,000,000). In the city proper, residents are primarily African American, but the community Moje focuses on in her on-going ethnography (currently heading into its sixth year) is predominantly Latino/a. The youth range in age from 12-16 years old. The area can be described as culturally rich, but economically distressed, with approximately 75% of students at the area schools qualifying for free or reduced lunch programs. Moje and members of her research team have worked with these youth for 3-5 years over the course of her on-going study. The particular young woman-Jovana, whose data we use in this piece-identifies in various ways that are at times agentic, at times constitutive of larger power relations, and at times moments of learning and identity making and remaking.

Identity has been defined in countless ways throughout history. Indeed, identity as a construct could be described as overdefined and overdetermined in the theoretical and research literatures, in and out of the fields of education. Many scholars would argue that definitions of identity have moved from the assumption that identity is a single, stable state that one achieves over time and development (with many psychological theorists pinpointing adolescence as a time of extreme instability and searching in terms of identity development), to a more complex and shifting phenomenon, one that is always in flux, depending on one’s experiences and contexts. While we reject notions of identity as stable and achieved, we also

do not accept the idea that identity is constantly shifting or that one has multiple identities that are taken out and dusted off for performances in different contexts. Instead, we will argue that identity can be considered “an enactment of self made within particular activities and relationships that occur within particular spaces (geographic, social, electronic, mental, cultural) at particular points in time. These enactments are always situated in and constitutive of histories and of power relations” (Moje, in press).

In taking up this definition, we suggest people take selves and subjectivities with them from space to space and relationship to relationship (hence our rejection of the notion of “multiple” identities that are necessarily in conflict and contestation), but that they enact a particular version of self that is appropriate to a time, space, relationship, or activity. At times these enactments may cause tension, but at other times seemingly contradictory enactments may sit perfectly well with an individual, precisely because the relationships, times, spaces, or activities make room for such enactments without tension, without crisis, and without pretense. Consider the following data exemplars (cf. Ciechanowski & Moje, 2002; Moje & Ciechanowski, 2002), in which Jovana enacts or represents different aspects of self—all of which she would claim to be legitimate aspects of who she is even as they at times appear to conflict (bold face type indicates emphases that we have added to the transcripts):

#### **From an Interview With Jovana About How She Identifies:**

Like when people ask us where we’re from, we say **we’re Mexican**. My older brother says we shouldn’t say that because we’re not from Mexico, we’re American. And, he says that he’s the one that’s supposed to say he’s Mexican. But I think that’s not true because **I’m Mexican, too**, and **he’s American, too**, because he’s basically lived here all his life... If you have the **traditions** then **you’re considered Mexican**. Like if you celebrate Cinco de Mayo, Christmas, January 6th (Reyes Magos), posadas and stuff like that, that’s when you’re considered a Mexican. **It doesn’t matter that I wasn’t born in Mexico.**

#### **From an Interview With Jovana About How She Talks:**

I: What about how you talk? You said you talk like a White girl--

J: Cause I use words like “whatever” and “loser.”

I: And, other people wouldn’t use those words?

J: Yah, but *the way I say it*. Like “loser” with the “L” thing. [hand sign]

I: So where did you learn how to do that?

J: TV. I learn everything from there.

I: You learn everything from TV, huh?

J: Even my hairstyles. Like at night I go through the channels to see which hair I like and if it’s easy and (fashionable), I’ll do it.

I: Where do you get the things you say...what do you watch to get those words?

J: Like *Boy Meets World*.

I: Oh, I see. People at school don’t watch that?

J: Only Irene and me. We say like the same things.

### **From an Interview With Jovana About Interactions With Friends:**

J: When I got to Luz's homeroom, like last year, ...Paco thought I was **White**, so I told him, "**Soy Mexicana**" like "**I'm Mexican**." He was like "Oh."

I: OK, so you didn't just say, "I'm Mexican" in English, you said "Soy Mexicana" in Spanish.

J: Yeah.

I: So why did you choose to use Spanish instead of just telling him in English?

J: **'Cause he wouldn't believe me.**

Jovana went on to explain that classmates called her White because of her language borrowed from television and because [of her] "freckles, white skin, and my hair was like a little bit lighter." [from field notes on the interview]

### **From Field Notes of Jovana's Interactions With a Group of Young People**

Today we brought two different groups of youth from the school together. They know each other, of course, because the school is relatively small, but they don't typically hang out in school. Both Kathryn and I were surprised to see Jovana wore an **Aztlán** t-shirt to our focus group interview today. None of us has ever seen her wear an **Aztlán** shirt before today, and Kathryn has worked with her in and out of school for almost two years now. Other youth in the group were also wearing Aztlán and Brown Pride t-shirts. [Field notes on focus group interview]

In the exemplars, we see Jovana enacting various identities, including hybrid Mexican *and* hybrid American, "white girl" *and* "Mexican," "light skinned" and Chicana (as signaled by her wearing of the Aztlán, or "borderlands" t-shirt). Each of these enactments was framed by a relationship, a space, an activity, and a time period. For example, when arguing with her Mexican-born brother, who positioned her, in effect, as a non-Mexican and denied her the right to claim Mexican-ness as an aspect of her self and subjectivity, she adopted a hybrid identity, knowing that she could not argue with the specifics of his argument (e.g., her place of birth). Jovana's brother knew her background of birth, situating their relationship in a "history of participation" (Rogers, 2002). He used that history to contest Jovana's right to claim the same ethnicity he claimed—suggesting that, within their relationship, being Mexican offered power and privilege. Jovana, however, employed cultural tools—the traditions that she invoked, as well as her knowledge of her brother's history of living in the U.S.—to substantiate and give weight to her claim of hybridity for both of them, thus positioning them as equals and denying his right to claim a superior power position via his Mexican identity. Whether this move worked in their larger family system of power is unclear from Jovana's talk, although her discussions of annual trips to Mexico suggest that she employed her hybridity strategically there, as well, code switching into English when necessary to emphasize her American-ness, which was considered exotic among her Mexican extended family.

By contrast, as Jovana interacted with her friends at school, she adopted what she labeled a white girl identity. She used this white girl identity as a way of defining herself, making strategic use of her light-skinned phenotype or physical markers, what Gee (2000/2001) would call her nature identity, within her almost all-Latino/a middle school. She also chose language strategically (Ciechanowski & Moje, 2002) from a globally situated popular cultural text (i.e., the television show she named) to enact an identity that distinguished her from her peers, in keeping with a goal she regularly articulated in interviews, that of “getting out of this neighborhood.”

In the next data exemplar, however, when challenged by one of her Mexican school peers, Jovana enacted a self as Mexican-not hybrid, and not white. In doing so, she demonstrated her awareness of how the physical aspect of self gets recognized. Her light-skinned phenotype allowed her to employ a particular cultural tool-code switching across national languages-to enact a different identity. In each of these cases, Jovana represented her agency as she demonstrated the strategic remaking of self via her use of language drawn from popular and traditional cultural texts.

Agency, then, can be thought of as the *strategic* making and remaking of selves; identities; activities; relationships; cultural tools and resources; histories. Agentic acts can also remake relations of power, although we want to assert that acts can be agentic even when they do not remake large-scale structural relations, as in these data clips. That is, Jovana, in many ways, reproduces mainstream discourses about race and racism by “talking like a white girl” as a way of “getting out of the neighborhood,” while speaking Spanish to maintain relationships that might empower her within particular social spaces. Agency is always socially, culturally, and politically produced.

In the last data exemplar, Jovana again demonstrates a particularly subtle agentic move by wearing a shirt decorated with symbols that she recognizes other youth value. In this case, Jovana and the other youths employ a hybrid of ethnic and youth cultural tool by taking up the Aztlán symbolism on their clothing. Aztlán symbolizes the divided identity, or “consciousness,” in Anzaldúa’s (1999) terms, that border Mexicans must negotiate every day. Aztlán, in this case, also represented an affiliation with Latino/a street gangs in Detroit. Street gang youth have employed the cultural symbol of divided identity and resistance as a tool for representing resistance to the mainstream identities young Latino/as often are asked to take up in school and society.

Taken together, these exemplars offer a particularly clear example of what Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain (1998) mean when they talk about “figured worlds” that draw from both the local and global. Jovana’s figured world offered her cultural tools in the local and particular social practices of the youth around her (e.g., the taking up of Aztlán symbolism and particular dress styles as an aspect of street gang culture) and in global cultural practices, languages, and texts (e.g., the Aztlán symbolism, English and Spanish languages, popular television shows).

However, despite Jovana’s agentic moves demonstrated in these exemplars, the exemplars also demonstrate that Jovana is never a *free* agent, unconstrained by macro-power structures. Indeed, her adoption of a white girl image as a way out of what the youth refer to as their “ghetto” community is an instantiation of macro-structures of race, racism, and poverty. It is one small move in the reproduction of whiteness as powerful and Latina-ness as limited and limiting. And yet, her move

is agentic, for in those particular moments, spaces, and relationships, Jovana takes power and makes and remakes her self and her identities. According to our perspective on power, which draws largely from Foucauldian (e.g., Foucault, 1980) and Bourdieuan (Bourdieu, 1980; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) perspectives, power is produced and enacted in and through discourses, relationships, activities, spaces, and times as people compete for access to and control of resources, tools, identities. Power can constrain, but does not necessarily prohibit agency.

## **Extending Sociocultural Theory Through Critical Discourse Analysis**

In this section, we present an exemplar drawn from Cynthia's research, followed by a set of questions that one might typically ask of data from a sociocultural activity perspective (see Engestrom, 1999). We then offer a set of questions from an alternative perspective, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), following Fairclough (1992; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). We present an analysis of the data using CDA and clarifying what CDA reveals about identity, agency, and power relations that an activity perspective alone cannot offer.

### **The Data Exemplar<sup>1</sup>**

The following exemplar is taken from a longitudinal study of a teacher and researcher study group focusing on the reading and teaching of multicultural literature in a rural middle school setting (Lewis & Ketter, in press; Lewis, Ketter, and Fabos, 2001). Over the four-year span of the study, the group included ten members—all white females—the two of us as researcher-participants and eight teachers of grades 5-9. The purpose of the group was for participating teachers to read and discuss multicultural young adult literature in ways that would help them to make decisions about whether and how to teach these works in their community. In order to do this, our work together over the years focused not only on issues related to the teaching of literature but, more importantly, on our individual and collective assumptions about race, identity, and multicultural education in terms of how these assumptions shape decisions about text selection and teaching approaches.

This is an exchange from our discussion of *American Eyes: New Asian American Short Stories for Young Adults* (Carlson, 1994) that took place in April of 2000 (the study group began in June of 1997). A collection of short stories by Asian American writers, *American Eyes* explores issues of assimilation and acculturation among young Asian Pacific Americans.

The exchange starts with Carol, a teacher who taught gifted education and had been a member of the group for a little over two years at the time of this discussion. At this point, we were discussing a story about a first-generation Japanese adolescent who revisits Little Tokyo in Los Angeles, where his recently deceased father had taken him many times as a child (Oba, 1994). Seven middle

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<sup>1</sup>The following conventions are used in the presentation of transcripts: [text] indicates descriptive text added to clarify elements of the transcript; text indicates overlapping utterances; ... indicates extracts edited out of the transcript; / indicates interrupted or dropped utterances.

school teachers were present for this discussion, along with Cynthia (Lewis) and her research collaborator, Jean Ketter. (Again, bold face type indicates emphases that we have added to the transcript.)

**Carol:** And it's so funny, too, I think all the way through that that, um, all the way through the book, the trade off that they have to **be an American** and not give up whatever culture is offered, whatever their culture offers them. I'm not explaining this right, but each one of them has kind of a different way, like, like, when you were talking about that seeing ghosts, you know, calling back his uncle, and accepting that he would really appear, and the boy who went back, tried to go back to that Japanese part, yeah, yeah, to find the different stores and everything and they were gone, and, I don't know /

...

**Sarah:** I wonder how many white people are aware in their day to day life how much other people are trying to be like them? You know, **people who are different. I never think of that until I read these stories and see about how important all these things are-the language, the hair color, all of those things-that striving for those things, that we don't even think about it.** Why, why do people feel they have to be just like that in order to be of worth?

**Cynthia:** Yeah, I don't see them as striving for it, I see them as (pause) wanting

**Sarah:** envy?

**Cynthia:** the privilege that comes with that

**Sarah:** Oh, okay.

**Cynthia:** and the power that comes with these things and feeling like **they're completely denigrated and treated with prejudice because they don't have it.** That seems like it's more directed towards *us* than towards the *self* to me, but what do others think?

**Carol:** I think it is whatever that country puts up as their ideal. I know that my friend who came from Bolivia had, has, fair skin and, um, golden eyes, and dark hair. And his skin is not, and he would be my color-he's not, like, very fair. And he was looked down upon, I mean literally, to the point where he was carrying a knife in school to scare them away, because he was not dark. So, it's just, he wasn't Indian enough looking.

**Denise:** He didn't fit in. That must be a sad state of affairs.

**Carol:** Right, and he was looked upon as a foreigner even though he was Bolivian. And his mother came from Chile.

### **Questions for a Sociocultural Analysis: An Activity Perspective**

Activity theory generally focuses on the relationships that are built or deconstructed within a given activity, although any one activity is typically set and analyzed within systems of activity. The questions one might ask of the data, however, are generally focused on the moment at hand, and, as a quick survey of the questions will demonstrate, the analyses generally reveal something about power relations within the activity, but say less about how the within-activity relationships are constituted within and reproductive of larger systems of power.

- What is the activity?
  - b. What are the tools used in the activity?
  - c. Who are the participants?

- d. What are the goals of the activity?
- What is the activity *system*?
- e. Who are the participants?
- f. What are the goals of the system?
- In this activity, who acts/talks? When? How?
- What is the content of their utterances, and how is that content shaped by the activity? The relationships? The tools? The system?
- How does the content of actions/utterances vary across participants?
- What do people learn in this activity?

### **Questions for a Critical Discourse Analysis**

The following questions are those relevant to CDA, a method of analysis informed by critical discourse theory. CDA examines how social and power relations, identities, and knowledge are constructed through written and spoken texts in social settings such as schools, families, and communities. In keeping with the goals of CDA, then, the following questions extend traditional notions of sociocultural theory in ways that take up issues of identity, agency, and power.

- What are some of the features of this social activity?
- What discourses (or ideologies) surface in this discussion?
- What social identities are enacted in this exchange (through language use, discourses, generic features, actions)?
- What relations of power are enacted and/or produced in this exchange?
  - g. How are these power relations locally produced?
  - h. How are these power relations tied to and reproductive of larger systems of power?
- What aspects of the talk, silence, or action could be considered agentic? How? Why?
- What is made and remade in this exchange?
- How, if at all, does the making and remaking destabilize local and global power relations?

### **The Data Analysis**

A bit of background is required before we examine the conversational exchange. One prominent discourse that frequently surfaced in the discussion transcripts over a four-year time span was the discourse of liberal humanism and individual choice taken up by the teachers. In analyzing the transcripts, Cynthia and Jean found that this discourse was often paired with a discourse that they themselves espoused—that of critical multiculturalism with a focus on systems or structures of inequality (Lewis & Ketter, 2003). The discourse of liberal humanism represents the individual as unified, coherent, and possessing freedom of choice. The discourse of critical multiculturalism represents the individual as a socially, culturally, and historically-produced subject. The intersection of these discourses often suggested conflicting world views that had implications for how group members interpreted and evaluated multicultural texts.



The conversational exchange started with Carol struggling to explain her sense that these short story characters were caught between American culture and the culture of their ancestry. One could argue that Carol's use of the word "American" revealed an experiential value (Fairclough, 1989) or ideological stance toward first generation ethnic minorities that marks them as immigrants or non-Americans and assumes white people as unmarked "Americans." Yet, in the context of her entire turn, it seems more likely that the phrase "American culture" referred to "dominant" American culture, and that Carol was interested in how this individual's life was shaped by a larger social and cultural framework. An interdiscursive moment, this speaker turn held traces of both discourses under discussion—the individual and the structural. Given that before Carol's turn, we had been discussing something entirely different (nuclear family narratives), Carol took control of the topic, a move not typical of the teachers in earlier transcripts.

The next section, starting with Cynthia's turn, followed directly after a quick series of turns that responded to Carol, turns I have omitted because they are not relevant to this discussion. Here, Sarah began by asking a question about white privilege, but seemed to do so from a position of dominance that served to marginalize those whom she refers to as "people who are different."

It was difficult for Cynthia and Jean to be generous in their first stab at analyzing Sarah's turn in this transcript. Sarah's comment came nearly three years into the study group at a time when they had hoped the group had progressed beyond such comments. They believed that Sarah's first sentence was inscribed with the very white privilege her comment, at some level, sought to challenge. Moreover, by indexing white people as "them," she seems not to acknowledge her own implication in this system of privilege. Later in the turn, Sarah uses repetition of an article ("*the*" language, *the* hair color, all of those things") to refer to characteristics of white people that she believes are seen as desirable. Her use of "the" and shift from "these things" to "those things" further serves to distance her from this system of privilege.

Indeed, there are some characters in *American Eyes* who measure themselves against Eurocentric standards of beauty; however, they do so with an awareness of the power differences that privilege these standards. One can read into Sarah's turn the now familiar discourse of liberal humanism (and the individual psyche). She was concerned that this "striving" toward white characteristics could be damaging to one's self worth.

Cynthia channeled her frustration into a response that directly opposed Sarah's discourse of whiteness, attempting to disrupt the way that Sarah conflated white privilege with what she perceived as the desire to be white. Even as Cynthia paused to consider the best way to finish her sentence about not seeing people of color as "striving" to be white, Sarah jumped in to finish Cynthia's sentence with the word she thought would fit—"envy," further revealing her belief that white people serve as objects of desire for people of color.

Cynthia explicitly states her opposition, claiming her position, in part, through the use of repetition ("I don't see them as striving for it, I see them as ..."). Having had control of the floor for three turns, Cynthia opens the floor to others in a very teacherly manner ("but what do others think?"). She spoke those words, as teachers sometimes do, as though she were completely open to other perspectives, but we now suspect that everything about her words and intonation suggested otherwise. Vocabulary such as "privilege," "power," "completely denigrated,"

and “prejudice,” make the discourse of critical multiculturalism very clear, and this discourse, it seemed to us when we first analyzed this episode, stands in stark contrast to Sarah’s discourse of liberal humanism and self worth.

However, as Cynthia and Jean read and reread Sarah’s words, placing them in the context of historical understanding of Sarah and her position in the group, they came to see her contribution differently. Sarah was reared in a Midwestern town where she lived in what she described as a “working class town with much prejudice, including [her] parents.” Many times in the group’s years together, she commented, often derisively, about the way her home community would have treated a particular character. She was proud of her participation in this group, calling it a “class,” and reporting that her friends, family, and fellow teachers asked her questions about why she belonged to the group and what its value was to her. She kept count of the books read and shared short articles and bibliographic entries about multicultural literature taken from teaching magazines. Her social identity as a member of this group was tentative and insecure, whereas her social identity as derived from participation in the group was elevated. She often referred to the strong bonds we had developed as a collegial learning community.

This history of identities, relationships, and connections (Gee, 1999) moved Cynthia and Jean to re-see Sarah’s turn about “other people” striving to be like white people. In the context of Sarah’s evolution in this group, they began to realize that the lens through which they had interpreted Sarah’s words was shaped by the way academic discourse communities tend to talk about race. Thus, they did not consider that Sarah’s words could be read as an awareness of whiteness as a race rather than a taken-for-granted norm. As she put it, “I never think of that until I read these stories and see about how important all these things are—the language, the hair color, and all of those things—that striving for those things that we don’t even think about it.” Here she moved in a new direction, tentatively considering the construction of race in relation to self and other, before the next sentence when she returned to a focus on the psychology of individual self worth. This move was in keeping with research findings (Helms, 1990; Lawrence & Tatum, 1997) suggesting that becoming aware of one’s own whiteness is an early stage of white racial identity development.

Although Sarah could be said to “other” those who are “different, she also represented white people as other in her first sentence. Later in the turn, she used the pronoun “we” to refer to white people, but in the first sentence, she referred to white people with the pronouns “their” and “them,” setting herself apart from those white people who live their lives day to day naturalizing race. She, on the other hand, had begun to denaturalize race, and reading the literature under discussion has helped her to do so. Sarah’s way of representing the discourse of structural inequality was different than ours. She embedded the discourse within a story—the story of her thinking and reading processes.

After Cynthia asked what others thought, hoping, at the time, that someone else would challenge Sarah, Carol continued the episode with a turn that displayed a common feature of the book talk genre—the personal story. Here, as in the case of Sarah’s turn, the personal story was being used in ways that were quite different than one might expect. Rather than feeding into the discourse of the individual, Carol told a story from which the listeners were expected to extract significance: it is the larger structures of privilege that determine who will be marginalized, and those structures are somewhat arbitrary (changing from country to country).

Perhaps having read Sarah's comment as a privileging of whiteness, Carol's story served to contest that privilege. Some readers might suggest that her discourse was too quick to assume that the structure of power and privilege is arbitrary rather than historical, political, and economic. However, coming on the tail of Sarah's comment, it served an important purpose in this local scene-to gently challenge within the framework of story. And Carol maintained this position in her last turn, despite Denise's attempt to focus on the individual circumstance of Carol's friend ("He didn't fit in.").

The questions asked in the process of a sociocultural-activity analysis would not have led to an examination of the ideological underpinnings of language use as do the CDA questions, many of which focus on ideologies and social identities. In a more fully developed analysis of this and other transcripts (Lewis & Ketter, in press), more time is devoted to analyzing participant structures and linguistic features of the exchange in ways that index the power relationships among members of the group. Although CDA covers that ground as well, it is a feature of analysis that can be arrived at by applying the sociocultural-activity theory questions we have posed.

However, such questions would not reveal the larger systems of power that shape the form and function of the utterances, including the ways in which social identities and agentic stances were enacted in relation to the macro-sphere as well as micro-interactions. As we pointed out earlier, agency-defined as the strategic making and remaking of selves, identities, activities, relationships, cultural tools, and or histories-is possible even when one's acts do not remake large-scale structural relations. Carol's and Sarah's comments do not break down the norms or privilege of whiteness, for instance, but applying CDA makes visible even small challenges to dominant frames of reference related to race and white privilege. When such analysis is combined with sociocultural activity perspectives that look at the history of the activity setting and system (in this case the setting of a book group within the system of professional development), it is possible to consider the identity work that occurs through participation in communities of practice, communities "created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise" (Wenger, 1999, p. 45). CDA shows us how this participation shapes and is shaped by larger systems of power. What has been implicit throughout our analyses of data in this paper is the role that identity, agency, and power play in learning and in the study of learning. Given that learning is of central importance to those of us in the field of education, we will end with a discussion of what we mean when we talk about learning.

### **The Role of Identity, Agency, and Power in the Study of Learning**

With these perspectives on identity, agency, and power in mind, one might also ask how attention to questions of identity, agency, and power inform one of the primary questions of sociocultural theory, that is, how do people-in interaction with one another-produce knowledge, make meaning, and learn new ideas?

Even this question reveals the gap in sociocultural theory that we hope to address: The social and cultural in sociocultural theory has traditionally revolved around people interacting with one another in micro-level interactions, and less around the *systems* of meaning and power that people build, reproduce and contest in and through their interactions with one another. Although it is tempting to think

that macro-systems of power are built or contested in large-scale and explicitly strategically ways (e.g., power blocks in political races or antiwar protests of Vietnam era), we argue here that systems of power actually get built, reproduced, and contested in subtle and usually invisible ways during everyday processes of learning, producing knowledge, and making meaning, and that we need to develop tools for analyzing how macro-systems are tied to micro-systems, practices, and processes.

To address this lack of attention to larger issues of power (and to identity and agency in relationship to issues of power) in traditional versions of sociocultural theory, we offer a perspective on learning that makes evident the role of power, at both the micro and macro levels. Learning, we argue, is the acquisition or appropriation of, the resistance to, and/or the reconceptualization of skills and knowledge that have the potential to make and remake selves, identities, and relationships. More important, however, is the recognition that learning is always situated in participation within discourse communities. If learning is situated in discourse communities, and discourse communities produce and struggle over cultural tools, resources, and identities (both within and across communities), then it follows that learning is shaped by power relations, even-or especially-those relations that are not obvious acts of power. Therefore, agency, which is about the power to control how one's self, identity, relationships, and activities are made and remade on a daily basis, is critical to understanding learning and to mediating learning environments. Learning, as Voloshinov (1986) argued about language, is a site of struggle, struggle over control of one's making and remaking of self. For some, the struggle is minimal, as the self one is asked to re/make is in close keeping with the self one brings to formal learning spaces, relationships, and activities. For others, such as Jovana, the struggle is greater, but the physical, cultural, social, and materials at their disposal provide them with a habitus (Bourdieu, 1980) that allows them room to navigate among many possible identities. And for still others, the struggle is immense because the tools-the habituses-they bring to learning are not valued in formal learning spaces. And that's where power, identity, and agency become crucial to understanding how learning and meaning making occur.

Most mainstream versions of sociocultural theory offer great potential for examining the microprocesses of power, agency, and identity building, but fail to connect to larger systems of power. Likewise, as Grossberg (1995) argues, cultural studies purports to study the relationship between micro and macroprocesses, but typically focuses on one or the other. What we propose here are analytic methods that combine the best of both approaches to move us closer to a thorough examination of the articulation of macro-systems within everyday micropractices and processes. We propose applying critical social theories to develop sociocultural perspectives that explicitly articulate the dynamic and dialogic power relationships between the social and individual, the global and the local, the institutional and the everyday.

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Sociocultural Theory. Author: Sarah Scott | Annemarie Palincsar Source: The Gale Group. The work of sociocultural theory is to explain how individual mental functioning is related to cultural, institutional, and historical context; hence, the focus of the sociocultural perspective is on the roles that participation in social interactions and culturally organized activities play in influencing psychological development. While much of the framework for sociocultural theory was put forth by Lev Vygotsky (1931/1997), extensions, elaborations, and refinements of sociocultural theory can be found in Critical theory emerged in Germany in the decade after the First World War. Its leading names included Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse, who were greatly inspired by Marxist authors such as Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg and Bujarin. These figures were deeply influenced by the events surrounding World War One. Each perspective is a reflection of different philosophical, national and intellectual contexts. However, they all place particular emphasis on language and communication, on classification systems, on what is symbolic and expressive and on culture, and address the issues of subjectivity and human perception. socio-cultural theory in second language acquisition (SLA). Moreover, this study also critiques the basic concepts of the theory and how far these concepts have been implicated in the domain of research. Socio-cultural theory has made a great effect on learning and teaching languages. It also regards learning second language as a semiotic process where participation in socially. According to this perspective, tasks are viewed as devices that provide learners with the data they need for learning; the design of a task is seen as potentially determining the kind of language use and opportunities for learning that arise. Three different psycholinguistic models are discussed: Long's Interaction Hypothesis, Skehan's cognitive approach and Yule's framework of communicative efficiency.