6 An Ecological Approach to Observations of Children's Everyday Lives

Jonathan Tudge and Diane Hogan

In spite of a long tradition of scientific study of children and their development, little is known about the fabric of children's everyday lives – the activities, social partners, and interactions that form part of everyday experiences. This perhaps sounds a strange way to begin the chapter, given the wealth of attention given to children by scholars in the fields of developmental psychology and sociology. However, the vast bulk of psychologists have conducted their research on children in laboratory or laboratory-like situations or have relied on parents' reports rather than examining children's typically occurring everyday activities (Tudge, Hogan, & Etz, 1999). Sociologists, on the other hand, when they have been interested in children have been primarily concerned with the socializing functions of the family, educational systems, and other major institutions of society rather than with children's experiences (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). This is certainly true of the 'over-socialized conception of man' as Wrong (1961) termed Parsonian structural-functionalist sociology.

Some scholars, particularly those in the relatively new field of the sociology of childhood (Corsaro, 1997; James et al., 1998; Jenks, 1996), have been critical of the 'dominant paradigms' in both psychology and sociology. In our opinion, what is needed is an approach to children's experience that is systemic, acknowledging the multi-directional synergistic aspects of numerous factors that combine to influence the ways in which children develop. To do this one must move beyond an approach that is narrowly based within a single discipline, but find ways to bridge disciplinary boundaries (Kuczysnki, Harach, & Bernadini, 1999). Fortunately ecological theories, with roots reaching back over the past century (Tudge, Gray, & Hogan, 1997) can help us not only integrate psychological and sociological perspectives, but also provide methods that allow us to focus on children's experiences.

In this chapter we describe and evaluate an ecological approach to naturalistic observations that we believe is a valuable tool for researching children's experiences. The method rests on two premises: first, that children are embedded within social and cultural contexts and that the relationship

between child and context is transactional; second, that we can learn a great deal about children's lives by following and observing them within these contexts. As in any ecological approach no attempt is made to separate individual and context. As the focus of observation, children take the observer through the myriad activities and interactions, as well as their inaction and solitude, in the various contexts in which they are situated. In this way information is gathered about the physical environment, activities, social partners and roles that are available to children, through the influence of key adults and through their own actions and choices. Children's agency thus becomes visible and children are given a means of expression through their actions.

We make an assumption here that we can gain some access to children's experiences, that is, to both the content and meaning of everyday life, through observation. Observational methods are typically seen as a means to describe content rather than meaning: the types of activities in which children engage, their social interactions, and characteristics of the settings. The domain of understanding or meaning is more often associated with interview methods. The observational method we describe here, however, is one that permits us to gain insight into the meaning for children of the various activities going on around them and the ways of interacting with others in those activities. It is a relational method that pays as much attention to how children behave *in relation to others and their environments* as it does to cataloguing their activities and the characteristics of their environments. For example, we can infer from observations of interactions between children and parents the kinds of expectations that children have formed and that are guiding their choices of action. However, we also recognize that the method has certain limitations as a means of accessing children's experience, and we address these in the latter part of the chapter.

Before describing these methods in detail, we discuss the paradigmatic and theoretical basis for them. This is important, because the worth of methods cannot be judged independently of their theoretical context. We argue that there needs to be a clear and consistent connection between the basic worldview being used, the theory that constitutes the study's foundation, the methods that are employed and the analytical tools that are used to make sense of the data.

Paradigms

As early as the 1920s, Vygotsky realized that the development of new theories in psychology required the development of new methods. This is because theories have links to different conceptions of the world, the way the world works, how to understand that world: in short, different worldviews or paradigms (Kuhn, 1962; Pepper, 1942). As Guba and Lincoln (1994) argued, a paradigm refers to 'the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways' (p. 105).

Deriving from Pepper's initial discussion, a number of scholars (Goldhaber, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Overton, 1984; Winegar, 1997) have discussed the ontological, epistemological, and methodological consequences of taking seriously a contextualist paradigm. Rather than revisit this discussion, here we will limit ourselves to the consideration of two contextualist theories and the consequences their adoption has for the methods that must be used.

Contextualist Ecological Theories

Contextualist theories are *not* theories that hold that context is the main explanatory variable. Instead, they are theories in which individuals and the contexts in which they are situated are explicitly linked. In this sense they are perhaps better termed ecological theories. We have found two such theories particularly useful in our own work – those of Lev Vygotsky and Urie Bronfenbrenner. Both theories, in addition, help us to bridge the divide that exists between psychology and sociology, providing the crucible in which context and individual undergo dialectical transformation.

Vygotsky's theory, as we have written elsewhere (Hogan & Tudge, 1999; Tudge, Putnam, & Valsiner, 1996; Tudge & Scrimsher, 2003), involves the mutual consideration of individual characteristics, interpersonal factors, and the broader historical and cultural context. Individual characteristics involve age, gender, temperament, motivation, prior understanding, and so on – in other words, those things that necessarily influence the ways that an individual acts in the course of any activity. Interpersonal factors are those involving the individual, the particular symbolic means and tools being used in the activity, and any other individuals involved in the activity. Most attention has focused on these interpersonal factors, with particular attention paid to Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development, but it is important to remember that this concept is far from the cornerstone of his theory. It is not for nothing that the theory is known as a cultural-historical theory, for it is the broader social and cultural context, as it has developed over historical time, that influences, in conjunction with the individuals involved, the nature of the interpersonal interactions. Experience, in other words, cannot be viewed as something that is an attribute purely of the individual, but involves the individual and the interpersonal and broader cultural and historical context in which that individual is situated.

Children, in Vygotsky's theory, are not simply the passive recipients of cultural or social forces. Although all higher mental functions, in Vygotsky's terms, were social prior to being individual, social does not mean divorced from individual; rather, children learn from actively participating in practices involving them with others. Children experiencing, in different social and cultural contexts, is thus at the heart of Vygotsky's theory.[1] Moreover, new skills, concepts, and knowledge appropriated during the course of collaborative activities are never simply internalized as straight copies from

the other person or persons involved, but are transformed on the basis of the individual's own characteristics, experiences, skills and knowledge.

Bronfenbrenner's theory also requires paying simultaneous attention to aspects of individuals, interactions, and the broader context, both spatial and temporal. This may be something of a surprise to those who continue to refer only to his 1979 book, *The ecology of human development*. Those who only know this book may think of Bronfenbrenner as a theorist who primarily is interested in various layers of context (the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem). From a sociological point of view, the macrosystem is the most important layer of context. Bronfenbrenner defined context as any group whose members share value or belief systems, 'resources, hazards, lifestyles, opportunity structures, life course options and patterns of social interchange' (Bronfenbrenner, 1993: 25). For most psychologists, however, the microsystem is the most important context, as the immediate context in which children are situated and where they can both influence and be influenced by others. From an ecological perspective, both aspects of context have to be considered.

However, it is clear from his later writings (1993, 1995; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) that context, while important, is only one of four interrelated aspects of what he has termed a Process–Person–Context–Time model of development. Proximal processes (termed the 'engines of development') are the core of his theory and constitute the interactions 'between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate environment' (Bronfenbrenner, 1995: 620). Examples cited by Bronfenbrenner (1995) include parent–child and child–child activities, group or solitary play, reading, and so on. In other words, proximal processes are the essence of what occurs in the course of everyday activities between individuals, their social partners, and the other important objects and symbols in their environments. A focus on proximal processes necessarily involves dealing with individuals' typically occurring experiences.

The activities and interactions that comprise proximal processes may be the engines of development, but to understand interactions it is necessary to know something about the particular individuals (the 'person') involved in the interactions. Clearly, although studies of socialization often focus on what parents do with or for their children, it is also necessary to account for the fact that children are the agents of their own experiences. They clearly influence their own environments, for example by initiating new activities, drawing others into them, while at the same time being influenced by those around them.

It is therefore necessary to identify the 'developmentally instigative' characteristics of individuals, such as their directive beliefs, their activity level, their temperament, and their goals and motivations, described by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) as 'force' characteristics, and which are clearly involved in child agency. All of these have an impact on the way in which the context is experienced by the individual as well as the types of contexts to which the individual is drawn. It is also important to consider 'personal stimulus' or 'demand' characteristics, such as gender, that have an influence on

the ways in which other people deal with the developing individual and the goals, values, and expectations they have for that individual.

Finally, because Bronfenbrenner's theory is developmental, it is necessary to also consider the element of time, both by studying development over time (by doing longitudinal studies that allow one to examine development in process) as well as by locating these developmental processes within their historical setting (termed the chronosystem). Bronfenbrenner (1995) approvingly cites studies such as Elder's (1974), that clearly show that developmental processes are not only influenced by the spatial context (the particular setting where the study is being carried out), but also by their temporal context (the historical setting).

Scholars interested in children's experiences do not always look kindly on developmental approaches, believing that the study of development necessarily involves the assumption of progress and that it devalues children as beings still developing and thus not full members of the species (James et al., 1998; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000). This critique does not, however, take account of views of *human* development, in which development is a process that occurs from birth to death and is thus neither inherently progressive nor restricted to childhood.

Nonetheless, researchers who are not interested in studying development per se would not, of course, conduct longitudinal studies designed to examine the effects of particular types of experiences at one age on children's experiences, feelings, or competence at another age. However, given that social and cultural contexts are continually changing (partly thanks to the individuals within them), all researchers working within a contextual or ecological framework should specify the temporal as well as the social context of their research.

The argument that we wish to make is that these two contextualist ecological theories serve a number of important functions. First, they may provide a bridge between sociological and psychological conceptions of children. Second, they provide a systemic approach to children, one that acknowledges their active role in their own development while at the same time showing that development is also influenced by broader social and cultural forces, as they have developed over historical time. In this sense, children's development is truly a co-constructive process (Valsiner, Branco, & Dantas, 1997). Third, these theories support attention being paid to the everyday experiences of children.

Meta-method

What types of methods are appropriate to use with a contextualist theory? Drawing on the insights of Winegar (1997), among others, we want to use the term 'meta-method' (Tudge, 2004) for the explicit consideration of the types of methods that need to be used given the theory of choice. Researchers whose theories can generally be described as positivist use methods that are

essentially experimental and manipulative in an attempt to falsify hypotheses. By contrast, researchers working within a contextualist framework use methods that are dialogical, hermeneutic, or dialectical. Furthermore, the aims of positivist researchers are those of explanation, prediction, and control, whereas the aims of contextualist researchers have more to do with arriving at greater understanding, both for researcher and participants.

What, then, should be the methods that are used by those whose worldview is contextualist? They have to be methods that do not artificially separate the individuals from the contexts in which they are situated. It would thus make little sense to attempt to try to understand individuals better by carefully controlling everything except the one variable to be manipulated, whether that control were to occur in a laboratory or in a 'naturalistic' setting. Instead, as we have argued elsewhere (Tudge, Hogan, & Etz, 1999), use of an ecological theory requires use of ecological methods.

Instantiation of Theory into Method

As we argued above, ecological theories force researchers to pay simultaneous attention to aspects of the individuals who are the focus of the study, aspects of the context (immediate, cultural, and historical), and the interactive processes that are central in Vygotsky's and Bronfenbrenner's theories. It may seem a daunting prospect to think about designing a research project that captures each of these important aspects. The research that the first author has been conducting with various colleagues over the past 10 years, the Cultural Ecology of Young Children (CEYC) project, is one way in which to illustrate the ways in which these theories can be applied.

Observations and proximal process

Naturalistic observations are key for the study of experiences, and fit well within an ecological, contextual paradigm as a way to study proximal processes. However, there are many different types of approaches to observation, from very short observations of what occurs in experimental research to very lengthy observations in natural settings. Within psychology there is a long tradition of observational methodology used in natural settings. We therefore want to discuss briefly some of the different types of approaches to observation prior to talking about the naturalistic observational methods used in the CEYC project.

Among the best-known early studies using detailed observations are Darwin's studies of his own son, and Piaget's research with his own and other children (Piaget, 1928, 1932). Ethologists (Blurton-Jones, 1972; Hinde, 1989) adopted observations of children in natural settings from methods more typically used with animals. Barker and Wright (1951) devised an ecological method that involved the systematic documentation of everything that occurred in a single day in one boy's life.

Most observations in developmental psychology have not been so extensive, however, and have been restricted to a limited number of settings, whether child-care centre (Carew, Chan, & Halfar, 1976; Clarke-Stewart, 1973) or home (Dunn, 1988, Chapter 5 of this volume; Hart & Risley, 1995; Richards & Bernal, 1972). There have also been some excellent observational studies of young children's naturally occurring play (Gaskins, 1999; Göncü, Tuermer, Jain, & Johnson, 1999; Haight & Miller, 1993).

Interestingly, the one area that has seen the greatest amount of naturalistic observation of young children is the field of cultural anthropology, or among developmental psychologists who have been heavily influenced by cultural anthropology. Ethnography is the primary method of cultural anthropology, with its goal of trying to understand how others make sense of their social and cultural worlds (Emond, Chapter 7 of this volume; Weisner, 1996). Cultural anthropologists have spent a great deal of time following and observing children, but largely in rural non- or semi-schooled groups (Super & Harkness, 1986; Weisner, 1989; Whiting & Edwards, 1988), leading some scholars to state that far more is known about children's everyday lives in the non-industrialized world than in the industrialized west (Bloch, 1989; Richards, 1977).

Some sociologists, like their counterparts in developmental psychology, have adopted ethnographic methods, in part under the influence of Becker (1971), Denzin (1977), and Goffman (1968). In particular, they have used participant observation as the main way in which to come to understand the group under consideration. Corsaro's work in pre-schools in the USA and in Italy is the foremost example of this method being applied to understanding the experiences of young children (Corsaro, 1985; Corsaro & Molinari, 2000).

In the CEYC project, we are interested in the typical everyday experiences of children. Our approach to observations is that we simply follow the children, putting no restrictions on where the child goes or on the people who interact with the child. We follow each of the children in our study (who are all between 28 and 48 months of age when the study begins) for twenty hours over the course of a week. We do this in such a way that we cover the equivalent of a complete day in their lives, observing on one day when the child wakes up, another day the hours before he or she goes to bed, and on other days during the hours in between. Using this technique, we get a good sense of the types of activities in which the child is typically involved, the partners in those activities, the roles taken, and so on.

Our aim is to gather data over periods of time long enough to ensure, as much as possible, that the participants in the research behave as naturally as they can. We therefore collect the data in blocks of two and four hours, spread over the course of one week. During the first two days of observation, we collect data for just two hours each day. This is a period during which the participants can become acclimatized to the observer's presence and we are prepared, if we see major changes in behaviour, to throw out these four hours of data. Data are gathered on the remaining days during four-hour sessions.

Although each observer observes for twenty hours, data are only gathered during a thirty-second period every six minutes. The remainder of the time

is spent coding and writing field notes, while continually tracking what the participants are doing. Time is signalled in such a way that the participants are unaware of when their behaviours are being coded, and the child who is the focus of attention wears a wireless mike so that the observer can hear what is being said while staying at a distance from the activity.

The last two hours of observation are videotaped. We do this for a number of reasons, the most important of which is that the live coding every six minutes does not allow us to study closely the ways in which children are drawn into activities (or how they draw in others) or how the activities and roles change over time. The videotapes allow us to attend to these processes of initiation and engagement. Although videotapes clearly have their uses, we do not film the entire twenty hours and base our codes on the taped activities. There are a number of reasons for this. One is that the presence of a camera is likely to change people's behaviour more than does the simple presence of an observer. Equally important, however, is the fact that the camera's field of vision is so much more limited than the human eye. Our interest is mostly on the child, but we also need to know what activities are going on that the child is not currently involved in. These are the activities that are available to the child, and it is important to know what these activities are, regardless of the child's participation. Moreover, because we are interested in knowing who initiated the activities in which the child participates, and how the child became involved, we cannot ignore activities in which the child is not yet engaged. We also need to know whether others are watching (or eavesdropping on) the child or whether the child is eavesdropping on an activity out of the camera's field of view. All of these things are accomplished much more easily without a camera.

Our approach captures children's activities in an ecologically appropriate way (children are not separated from context) and it does so over enough time to give, we believe, a reasonable sense of the types of activities that typically occur in these children's lives. The approach also allows us to examine the types of activities that are going on in which the children do not participate, or those in which they would like to participate but are discouraged from so doing. The major activities in which we are interested are displayed in Table 6.1, and are divided into five major groups (each of which is subdivided into numerous subgroups): lessons, work, play, conversation, and 'other' (sleeping, idleness, eating, bathing, and so on). For more details about the coding scheme, see Tudge, Sidden, and Putnam (1990).

Observations and child agency

Our observational method also allows us to examine some key aspects of what the children themselves do to start activities, involve others in those activities, and try to get out of activities that those around them would like them to engage in. In other words, it allows us to focus on the type of developmentally instigative characteristics that Bronfenbrenner believes so important, and that are the essence of child agency. Children are involved in

Table 6.1 Activities

Lessons	Defined as deliberate attempts to impart or elicit information relating to:
Academic	school (spelling, counting, learning shapes, colors, etc.);
Skill/Nature	how things work, why things happen;
Interpersonal	appropriate behaviour with others, etiquette, and so on;
Religious	religious or spiritual matters.
Work	Household activities (cooking, cleaning, repairing, etc.), shopping, and so on.
Play, entertainment	Activities engaged in for their own enjoyment, including:
Academic	play with academic object (looking at a book, playing with a calculator, etc.), with no lesson involved;
Role-play	play involving evidence that a role is being assumed, whether prosaic (mother shopping), mythical (super-hero), or object (animal);
Toys	objects designed specifically for children, such as toys;
Other play	objects designed not for children, such as household objects, natural objects, or no object at all (rough and tumble, chase);
TV, entertainment	watching TV, listening to radio, going to a ball-game, circus, and so on.
Conversation	Talk with a sustained or focused topic about things not the current focus of engagement:
Adult	conversation involving at least one adolescent or adult (someone clearly much older than the focal child);
Child	conversation only involving children.
Other	Activities such as sleeping, eating, bathing, and so on, and those that were uncodable.

activities not simply because others get them involved; they initiate activities themselves, and try to recruit others to be their social partners.

If a child is involved in a specific activity during our coding thirty-second 'window', we code whether the child (alone or with someone else) initiates the activity, and whether the child or another person gets the child involved in the activity. For example, imagine a situation in which the girl's father is preparing dinner and the child is helping to cook by stirring the contents of the frying pan while her father helps by holding the pan steady. If the father starts the cooking and asks his daughter to help, we code that the father initiated both the activity and the child's involvement in that activity. However, if the child comes over and asks to help we code that the father initiated the activity and the child initiated her involvement in it.

We are also able to examine differences in other types of person characteristics, such as gender. We can examine, for example, whether girls are involved in different types of activities from boys and, if so, whether that stems from differences in encouragement to get involved in different activities or differences in the extent of initiation. We therefore code how the activities started and how the child became involved in them. We are thus able to see, for example, the extent to which boys and girls differentially start (instigate) the

activities themselves, and draw others into those activities, compared to the extent to which the boys and girls are drawn into activities that others start.

Observations and context

Context is necessarily implicated when examining children's activities in the locations in which they are situated. We therefore observe in any of the settings in which the children are situated, and observe any of the social partners with whom the children interact. This means that we observe in the home, child-care centre if a child goes to one, with friends or relatives, at the park, in the streets, or at the shops if the child goes there. The data are gathered in any setting in which the child spends time because we believe that it is important to know more than what goes on in the home or child-care centre, the most usual locations where observational data are gathered. We therefore not only follow the child wherever he or she goes during the observational session, but also find out where the child is scheduled to be for the next session, so as to be in that place at the appointed time.

Observations and roles

These observations allow us to view more than the activities in which children are involved and the settings in which these activities take place. We also are able to see the roles played by the children and their partners in these activities, revealing both the interactions and the expectations for interactions that the children (and their typical partners) have developed. In the example given earlier the child is *participating* in cooking and her father is *facilitating* his daughter's engagement. Other roles included trying to *manage or direct* the activity (actively trying to make the activity occur in a certain way), trying to *resist or stop* the activity (telling the child that she can no longer help cooking because of the mess she's making), and *observing* the activity (if the child were closely watching what her father was doing, but not involved in a more active way). We also include as a role *eavesdropping*, similar to observing but from a greater distance and with no assumption that the person being watched is aware of being watched. Through these codes we create a chronicle of the actions and responses of children and their social partners. The chronicle contains the details of the ongoing adjustment and negotiation of relationships that forms the fabric of children's everyday experiences. A shortened version of the coding sheet used in the project is provided in Figure 6.1.

However, in both Vygotsky's and Bronfenbrenner's theories, context involves not only the immediate setting, but also the broader sociocultural context. It is at this level that we hope to see culture-relevant differences in the types of activities in which children engage, differences in the extent to which children are encouraged to, and discouraged from, participating in different activities and in initiation of those activities.

	Lessons	Work	Play	Conv.	Other
Time/activity					
Child's role					
Initiat. of activ.					
Initiat. of involv.					
Partner #1					
Partner's role					
Attention					
(Similar spaces for partners 2–5)					
Age and number of available partners	Field notes here				
Mother in locale					
Father in locale					
Location					

Figure 6.1 **A shortened version of the coding sheets used in the Cultural Ecology of Young Children project**

How do we instantiate culture using this methodology? In part this depends on the definition of culture; we define culture as any group that can be differentiated on the basis of its values, beliefs, and practices, its social institutions, and its access to resources. Furthermore, the members of the group should identify themselves as being part of that group, and should attempt to pass on the values, beliefs, and practices to the next generation. By this definition different societies constitute different cultural groups, and we gather data in different societies. Data were initially collected in the USA, where the first author works. Because of his experience in the former Soviet Union, it made sense to gather comparative data in Russia and Estonia, two distinct cultures in which the parents had been raised in a single society. We also were able to gather data in Finland, culturally and linguistically similar to Estonia but without the Soviet experience, and in South Korea, Kenya and Brazil. In each case, the first author trained members of the respective countries to collect these data. These societies, of course, vary on many dimensions. Our goal was therefore to choose a single city in each society, of

medium size by the standards of that society, with a range of cultural, educational, and professional possibilities.

Culture and society are not synonymous, however, and within any society can be found a variety of different cultural groups, given our definition of culture. Different ethnic groups may therefore constitute separate cultural group, and so may members of different social classes. In this study we examined, in every city, children from two groups – those who were defined as either working or middle class on the grounds of their parents' education and occupation. In the city in the USA, in addition, we examined children from black and white families, equally divided by social class.

Observations and time

If one wishes to study development one has to study individuals over time. In our research we gather the types of observational data discussed above when the children are of preschool age, and then gather follow-up data once the children have entered school. We are interested in examining the relations, if any, between 3-year-old children's initiation of and engagement in different types of activities and their parents' and teachers' perceptions of them during the early years of school (Tudge, Odero, Hogan, & Etz, 2003).

However, as noted earlier, we believe that we need to situate our children not simply in their physical context (both microsystem and macrosystem, in Bronfenbrenner's terms) but also in their temporal context. The way in which even young children experience their environments depends in part on what is happening, in historical time, in the culture of which that child is a part. This is true for children in a society that is rapidly industrializing, in an industrialized society in the midst of recession or boom or, as in the case of our research, in societies struggling to adapt to the changes wrought by the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Even if one is simply interested in trying to capture a sense of children's experiences one should not ignore time, however. The beauty of observations, rather than interviews or questionnaires, is that researchers are necessarily examining those experiences as they happen, over time, rather than getting a retrospective accounting of what has already happened. Only with observations is it possible to examine the ways in which a child draws a friend into an activity with her or examine the changes in roles as a father first insists that his daughter reads with him, only to have her completely take over the process.

Some Results of Naturalistic Observations

This method allows us to capture, as much as possible, the types of activities in which children engage, their manner of engagement, their extent of initiating the activities and getting others to engage with them, and the roles taken by them and by their social partners. The value of the method as a

means of describing children's experience through recording the activities and social partners they encounter in everyday life is illustrated by some key findings (Tudge, 2004). For example, in each of the societies work was going on around the children in about 25–30 percent of our observations, but the children varied greatly in the extent to which they were involved in it (those in Kenya, particularly the working-class children, were most heavily involved in work). Play occupied the bulk of the time (between 50 percent and 70 percent of the observations featured the children in play), but there were clear variations in the types of play, with Korean children far more likely than those from other groups to play with school-related objects as well as with toys. By contrast, the Kenyan children were more likely to play with objects that were not specifically designed as toys (found objects, no objects at all, or things from the adult world). The children in Estonia and Russia were far more likely than other children to be involved in lessons about how things work and about the natural world.

But within each group we also found differences as a function of social class. For example, in most of the groups, middle-class pre-schoolers were more likely to be involved in lessons about how things worked and about things related to schooling than were their working class counterparts, and girls were more likely to be involved in lessons about how to get along with others than were boys (Tudge, Hogan, Lee et al., 1999).

In part, these variations reflect the ways in which the adults around the children arrange their social worlds for them. But it is also clear that the children themselves are highly involved in the process, not simply as actively engaging in the activities, but initiating them and getting other people to join in the activities that they started. It is interesting to note that in many of the communities, children from middle class backgrounds were more likely to initiate the activities in which they were involved than were children from working class backgrounds (Tudge, Hogan, Lee et al., 1999). However, the relations between initiation of activities and subsequent competence at school varied dramatically across the different societies. In the city in the USA, children from both working-class and middle-class backgrounds who were more likely to start conversations with adults were perceived by their teachers as being more competent, three and four years later, than were children who were less likely to initiate (Tudge et al., 2003). By contrast, Estonian children who were more likely to initiate conversation were actually perceived as being less competent. Only by understanding the differing cultural backgrounds is it possible to make sense of what otherwise might be viewed as contradictory findings.

Methodological Challenges

Much of this chapter has been devoted to showing that the approach that we use to research children's experience fits well within a contextualist paradigm, and specifically within the theories of Vygotsky and Bronfenbrenner.

As such, the method allows us to treat children as active agents in their own experiences and development, co-constructing reality with others in a world that provides sociocultural meaning, developed over historical time. The method may thus be one that helps bridge the divide between psychological and sociological approaches to children and their development.

We do not think that the method we have described is the only appropriate ecological or contextual method. Ethnographic approaches, including participant observation, and interviews, particularly with the children themselves, may also qualify to the extent that they are able to deal adequately with the interrelations among individual, interpersonal, and cultural-historical factors. There remain, however, a number of challenges that should be addressed. One is that this method is extremely time-consuming, not simply because of the fact that each child is observed for twenty hours. Learning to observe in this way also takes a good deal of time and effort; observers have to be able to identify the various activities going on around the child, how the activities were started, how the child became involved, the various partners involved with the child, and the roles of the various individuals involved. The process takes well over a month of daily training sessions, using a mixture of live observation and observation of previously coded videotapes of naturally occurring activities. We acknowledge that this is a somewhat daunting prospect but one that, we believe, is well worth the expenditure of time and effort.

Is it enough time? We cannot deny that the longer one spends with the participants in one's research the more one may be accepted, the more one knows of the relevant contexts and the participants' roles in those contexts, and the more one is likely to understand the meaning to the participants of the experiences in which they engage. We can only say, weakly perhaps, that we believe that observations over the course of twenty hours may be sufficient to get a reasonable sense of the types of activities and interactions that are important in children's lives.

Another challenge has to do with the extent to which observations of children necessarily treat children as passive objects, specimens under the scrutiny of the scientist (Greene, 1999; Hogan, Etz, & Tudge, 1999; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000). But what is important in the determination of whether the child is treated as object is the position that the researcher takes vis-à-vis the child and context. Putting the child into a contrived situation to see how the child responds to that particular variation in context may indeed imply that the child is simply the object of investigation. However, observing children engaging, in as natural a way as can be arranged, in the types of activities that would be a typical part of their everyday lives, is surely a way for those children to be participants in the study rather than objects of study. They, after all, control what it is that they do, when they do it, and with whom – at least to the extent that they are allowed by the their social partners and the pre-existing constraints of the setting.

Nonetheless, the children themselves are clearly not the people who are constructing the meaning of their experiences. Instead, the observer, using a coding scheme that has already been developed, in essence provides the

meaning from what it is that the children and their social partners are doing. In this sense there is not only a distancing of observer and children, but a privileging of the former. This separation is something that may only be partially overcome by participant observation or open-ended interviews. We are mindful of the fact that the use of preset coding categories might disenfranchise children, since experiences important to them might not fit within our categories and therefore be excluded. In the CEYC project this potential does exist, but we deal with it through the use of field notes that always accompany the more formal coding of activities. These notes allow for the inductive creation of codes (we were able to expand our codes for types of work, for example, from the field notes), as well as for use in more qualitative analyses.

There is an assumption among some who are interested in children's experiences that the only valid route to understanding children's inner worlds is to study the language that they use to describe and explain them, usually in direct conversation with the researcher. It is not clear to us, however, why interviews should necessarily be viewed as being a more valid way of understanding children's experiences than observations. As Westcott and Littleton's chapter (Chapter 8 of this volume) makes clear, interviewing children involves a host of difficulties, not least of which is the fact that the talking about what one does is not the same as the doing thereof. It is our view that, although when observed children are not being given a voice through language directed at researchers, they are given a voice – a means of conveying a description of their lives and how they live them – through action observed.

Is it the case, however, that interviews, particularly with children themselves, are the only way to learn about the inner world of children, to find out what they are thinking and feeling? Interviews can certainly focus on these things in a way that observations never can. Gifted interviewers who have established the trust of the interviewees, whether children or adults, can certainly gain remarkable insights (Bearison, 1991; Westcott & Littleton, Chapter 8 of this volume). However, most of us (and here we mean 'us' not simply as researchers but as people) do not spend our time interviewing children as a way to find out what they are thinking and feeling. We talk to them, listen to them, watch them, engage with them, listen to them talking to other people. As people, we make sense of those around us by attending to both verbal and nonverbal cues, and if our interpretations are incorrect we are likely to get clear feedback when we act on those interpretations.

Observers do not lose these skills when observing young children. More important, by observing children in their natural settings with their typical social partners, we (as researchers) can be privy to the understandings and misunderstandings demonstrated by those we are observing. Interviews about experiences require a removal from engagement in the very experiences in which we are interested; observations of children experiencing allow us, as observers, to get insight into the minds and feelings of those we are observing via the children themselves and via the behaviours of those with whom they are engaged.

Woodhead and Faulkner criticize observational approaches in which the aim of the observers,

> is to render themselves invisible to the immature members of the human species they want to observe. Observers may be found backed-up against the corner of the classroom or playground, trying to ignore children's invitations to join in the game, and kidding themselves that they can appear like the metaphoric 'fly on the wall'. (2000: 15)

The aim may not be invisibility, however, but a desire to change children's regularly occurring behavior in as minimal a way as is possible – to allow them the freedom to behave without the expectation that the observer will intervene to change what they are doing (which is not quite the same as doing exactly as they would were the observer not present). Corsaro's (1985) participant observations with pre-schoolers (in which the children define him as 'big Bill', an 'untypical adult') similarly allow the children the freedom to behave without concern that Corsaro will act like a teacher. And if we are interested in not separating children from context (the essence of an ecological-contextual approach) the type of observations we do are extremely helpful.

As with any ethnographic approach, time is important to help children know that the adult's role is *not* to alter, in any deliberate fashion, what they might otherwise do. This is the main reason that we observe for twenty hours over the course of a week, in lengthy blocks of time.

Because the children are approximately three years of age, they appear to adapt quickly to the observer. For the most part, they do not treat the observer as someone with whom they could interact (the observer has earphones in both ears and often is writing on a clipboard), and to help ensure this the observer chats with the child prior to the start of the observational session and then says that it is now time to 'work', and puts on the earphones. The length of time of observation makes it easier for the children to ignore the observer's presence, and to behave as normally as possible.

We are under no illusions that the other participants (particularly adults) could 'forget' the observer's presence so easily. Indeed, as children become more self-aware, observations may become more problematic; we do not think, for example, that we could have observed adolescents and expected them to have gone about their typical activities with as little evidence of influence as with young children. However, there are reasons to believe that even the behaviours of the adults that we observed with the children were not totally untypical. First, with observational sessions lasting so long, typically occurring activities (getting the child up, preparing meals, taking the child to a child-care provider, for example) have to happen. Second, if the parents behaved in ways that were not at all typical it seems reasonable to suppose that their children might signal that fact. Finally, if parents behave differently from their normal behaviours, it is likely that they do so in the direction of the things that they value. In other words, if they think that it is important to help their children behave independently they may do so more

often than is typical; if they believe that it is important to discipline their children, they might do this more often. Since we assume that parents' activities may bear some relation to their values, their exaggerated behaviours, if this was what we were observing, were interesting in themselves.

In summary, this approach to naturalistic observations has a number of methodological challenges, but we do not believe that any of them are sufficient to discredit this method as an important way in which to understand children's experiences and development.

Conclusions

We had four main goals in this chapter. The primary goal was to describe an observational method that we have used to gather data on young children's everyday experiences in the typical settings they inhabit and with their typical social partners. This method allowed us to focus on the ways in which children, in conjunction with the sociocultural world, actively create their own world. However, the worth of a method can only be judged by reference to the theoretical and metatheoretical framework within which it is set. For this reason, a second goal was to describe the contextualist paradigm, and two ecological theories that fit within that paradigm. This allowed us to show the metamethodological connection between metatheory, theory, and method. The theoretical frameworks that we have found useful may serve to allow us to fulfil a third goal, namely that of bridging the divide between sociological and psychological approaches to children. A focus on child-in-activity allows us to examine both what the child brings to the setting as well as what the social world provides for that setting, with social world including both culture, as developed over historical time, and interactions with social others as well as the objects and symbols that are full of sociocultural meaning.

The fourth goal was to examine some of the methodological challenges of this method. There are, of course, some serious challenges – although the criticisms of naturalistic observations may not be as great as some might think. We do not wish to imply that this method is the only method appropriate to these types of contextualist theories. Nor do we wish to say that the method is problem-free. There may be other methods that are better suited to an understanding of the meaning that children give to their own experiences; with this method, we are restricted by what the children do and by what they say to others, their typical social partners, rather than directly to us as researchers. The mere fact of being observed may well change children's behaviours, too – although given our age group of interest and the length of time that we spend with the children we feel that the changes may be minimized.

Despite these challenges, we believe that this theoretically driven observational method lets children speak to us via their actions and interactions, uncovering for us their experiences of the worlds they inhabit.

Note

1. The importance of stressing 'experiencing' as a continuing action rather than 'experiences' as a noun is similar to the change of title of Vygotsky's best known book from *Thought and language* in the 1962 and 1986 translations to *Thinking and speech* in the most recent translation (Vygotsky, 1987). Only the latter translation accurately captures the dynamic nature of the words used in Russian.

Recommended Readings

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