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Assessing Narratives of Children From Diverse Cultural/Linguistic Groups

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This article examines issues in the assessment of oral narratives of children from diverse cultural/ethnic backgrounds. First, we argue that narrative contextualization processes are culture-specific and must be considered in assessment. Second, we present an approach to the evaluation of narratives that takes into account differences in narrative experience, exposure to narrative tasks, and assumptions about audience involvement. Finally, we propose dynamic assessment as a method for teaching children from diverse cultural/linguistic groups the context-specific narrative rules that are valued in American schools.

KEY WORDS: narratives, cultural, differences, dynamic, assessment

A substantial number of studies have employed oral narratives as a naturalistic method for examining children's discourse skills (e.g., Culatta, Page, & Ellis, 1983; Johnston, 1982; Liles, 1985; Page & Stewart, 1985; Sleight & Prinz, 1985). However, research on children's narratives rarely has addressed the variability of communicative styles encountered within and across speech communities. Most of the analytical frameworks currently used to evaluate narratives suggest that the structure of stories is universal and that we may apply the same approach to assess any narrative produced by any speaker in any context. Yet, a body of literature reveals differences in narrative performance among various cultural/ethnic/linguistic groups. These differences include variations in (a) narrative information and organization (Clancy, 1980; Heath, 1983; Iglesias, Gutierrez-Clellen, & Marcano, 1986; Labov, 1972; Scollon & Scollon, 1984; Tannen, 1980, 1982, 1984); (b) world knowledge and experience (Ross & Berg, 1990); (c) story elicitation tasks (Baggett, 1979; Cook-Gumperz & Green, 1984; Gibbons, Anderson, Smith, Field, & Fischer, 1986; Griffith, Ripich, & Dastoli, 1986; Heath, 1982; Iglesias, Gutierrez-Clellen, & Marcano, 1986; Warden, 1976); (d) interactional styles (Erickson, 1984; Scollon & Scollon, 1979, 1981; Tannen, 1982; Watson-Gegeo & Boggs, 1977); and (e) the use of paralinguistic conventions (Gee, 1986; Gumperz, Kaltman, & O'Connor, 1984; Michaels, 1986; Scollon & Scollon, 1979, 1981).

In order to assess narratives of children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds effectively, it is necessary to consider (a) narrative variability as a biproduct of cultural and individual differences in interpretive processes of storytelling situations or "contextualization processes" (Gumperz, 1982), and (b) assessment approaches that acknowledge this variability. Knowledge of the influence of both contextual and cultural factors on the production of narratives will allow clinicians to distinguish narrative differences from impaired narrative skills.

This article focuses on issues relevant to the assessment of narratives in children from diverse cultural linguistic backgrounds. The view taken here is that narrative strategies reflect context-specific perceptions and presuppositions that are conditioned by sociocultural norms. Individual differences in children's narrative performance may reflect differences in experience with listening and telling stories, general world knowledge, and assumptions about audience involvement in narrative interactions. Narrative tasks used in assessment do not uncover knowledge of story structure but, rather, familiarity with the discourse rules of the dominant cultural group. Dynamic assessment is presented as a nondiscriminatory alternative to traditional methods of narrative assessment.

CONTEXTUALIZATION PROCESSES

Storytelling is never context-free. Oral narratives are created in contextualized interactions. The speaker and audience engage in a mutual negotiation of meanings and share background knowledge to facilitate the exchange of information. Participants in these interactions employ not

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only their knowledge of grammatical and semantic conventions, but also their assumptions about context and interpersonal relations. These assumptions guide both narrative behavior and interpretive mechanisms (Gumperz, 1982). Contextualization processes have an effect on narrative information and organization, varying according to the speaker's experience with and assumptions about narrative tasks and elicitation topics, and implicating expectations about audience involvement and paralinguistic strategies.

Narrative Information and Organization

Much of what is told in narratives reflects the storyteller's perspective on the purpose and context of the storytelling. This variability has been demonstrated in the different narrative strategies used by Greek and American students in their retellings of a film (Tannen, 1980, 1984). The American students tried to be as detailed as possible in their narrations. In contrast, the Greek students tended to "interpret" the story, guessing at the intentions of the characters, judging their actions, and omitting unnecessary details. Differences in contextualization result in differences in narrative focus and elaboration.

Scollon and Scollon (1984) found that both bilingual English/Athabascan and monolingual Athabascan students intentionally left out information in their story retellings and emphasized narrative events that were salient in their lives. The Athabascan children's stories were brief summaries of events, contrasting with the detailed narratives expected in American schools. Rather than adhering to the original story text, children applied their own sense of the narrative situation and omitted narrative details that they perceived as redundant.

Differences in the type and amount of information included in stories are related to how speakers interpret the contexts of narratives. For some groups, story retelling may resemble a memory test, a style that is valued in American schools. For other groups, valued stories take the form of condensed abstracts, based on a shared sense of negotiated authorship.

Traditional narrative assessment procedures assume that all stories are composed of a series of invariant informational units. Based on this assumption, differences tend to be viewed as anomalous or symptomatic of narrative difficulties (Hedberg & Stoel-Gammon, 1986; Johnston, 1982; Page & Stewart, 1985). Typically, the structure of narratives is evaluated using either a high point analysis (Labov, 1972; Labov & Waletzky, 1967) or a story grammar analysis (Stein & Glenn, 1979). Appendix A contrasts these two approaches.

A number of studies have documented the relationships between children's use of narrative features valued by certain groups in American society and literacy achievement in American schools (Gee, 1991; Michaels, 1981, 1991). Children with language learning disabilities have been found to make fewer references to orientation (Sleight & Prinz, 1985), to include fewer evaluation clauses (Westby, Maggart, & Van Dongen, 1984), and to be more likely to omit information about internal responses, plans, and attempts than normally achieving students (Griffith, Ripich, & Dastoli, 1986; Roth & Spekman, 1986).

However, direct application of this research excludes culture-specific contextualization factors affecting narrative information, organization, and the use of stylistic discourse strategies. For example, a study with Japanese children and adults, using the retelling of a film as elicitation prompt, found that the structure of Japanese stories differed from the prototypical story grammar model. Episodes in the stories contained only two narrative units: a complication and a consequence. Setting and other narrative information tended to be omitted (Clancy, 1980). These differences may be related to the fact that Japanese value discourse that is implicit and that relies heavily on the listener's empathy (Minami & McCabe, 1991). Japanese children's personal narratives were found to be "exceptionally succinct" as compared to the lengthy personal stories of European- and African American children (Minami & McCabe, 1991). Significantly, the apparent "lack of elaboration" found in Japanese children's narratives was congruent with a commonly practiced literary form called haiku, which combines poetry and narrative and limits the number of syllables per verse. Children's exposure to listening, reading, or writing haiku may have been evoked in the structure of their personal stories, which resembled collections of brief experiences. Thus, the use of haiku-like narratives by Japanese children appeared to reflect proficiency in Japanese literate discourse. As such, this narrative style represents one alternative to the prototypical expanded narratives valued in American schools.

There are also differences in the narrative strategies used by European- and African American speakers. Heath (1983) found that stories of African American, working-class speakers contained fewer formulaic openings and less chronicity than those of European American working-class narrators. The African Americans' stories moved from event to event, with the inclusion of many judgment statements about the characters and their ongoing behaviors, with no formulaic closing. In contrast, the stories of European Americans included factual information, ending with a moral statement, a proverb, or a quotation from the Bible.

There is some indication that narrative evaluations (i.e., the ways in which points of stories are indicated) reflect stylistic differences conditioned by sociocultural variables. Labov (1972) found that for European American narrators, the point of telling the story was explicitly stated by remarks such as: "It was terrific." In contrast, African American storytellers embedded evaluations in their stories (e.g., "I was shaking like a leaf"), or they implied evaluations by using paralinguistic cues (i.e., loudness, stress, intonation changes, exclamations, and repetitions). This narrative style, which may be called expressive, was also prevalent in adult Greeks (Tannen, 1980) and adult New Yorkers from Jewish backgrounds (Tannen, 1982), and it was used by a group of Puerto Rican first graders (Iglesias, Gutierrez-Clellen, & Marcano, 1986).

These findings suggest that much of what one considers relevant to be told, emphasized, or explained is dependent upon cultural assumptions about the reportability of narrative information and the assumed role of the audience in deriving unstated meanings. Thus, an analysis of narratives based on discrete informational units or story constituents may not be a useful indicator of narrative ability across cultural/linguistic groups.

Effects of Experience and World Knowledge

Different contexts (personal experiences, films, retellings of original stories, or pictures) may generate different types of narratives, based on previous world experience and assumptions about the narrative task. Knowledge and experience have an impact on script reports (see Ross & Berg, 1990, for a review). For example, children who are not familiar with restaurant scripts may have difficulty retelling a story that assumes previous knowledge about restaurant events and participants. A study in which Puerto Rican preschoolers were asked to retell the film "Frog Goes to Dinner" found that unfamiliarity with a restaurant script hindered comprehension of the original story and its retelling. Some children substituted more familiar words such as "store" for restaurant, "handkerchief" for napkin, "book" for menu, "policemen" for waiters (Gutierrez-Clellen, 1990). These changes reflected the children's interpretation of a restaurant script based on their experiences. Contexts such as those in which stories are elicited from books are likely to reflect the child's familiarity (or unfamiliarity) with storybooks (Cook-Gumperz & Green, 1984). Similarly, probes such as "Tell me a story" or story stems are relevant only to children with exposure to rehearsed storytellings, such as "bedtime stories" (Heath, 1982). Thus, one cannot expect that these contexts will generate similar narrative performance from all children.

Narrative Elicitation Tasks

There is evidence that the methods selected to elicit narratives have an effect on the type of information recalled. For example, the recall of a book tends to generate descriptive information, whereas movie recalls tend to elicit story actions (Gibbons, Anderson, Smith, Field, & Fischer, 1986). Movies are more likely to elicit elaborated causal sequences than are stories presented auditorily (Baggett, 1979). Stories elicited using pictures tend to exclude information about a character's internal responses and intentions, along with information shared with the listener (Griffith, Ripich, & Dastoli, 1986). New referents also may be treated as "old," regardless of whether the pictures are viewed by the listener (Warden, 1976).

In addition to these task-specific effects, the examiner also should consider the "naturalness" or cultural relevancy of the methods used to elicit children's stories. For example, a study that evaluated the stories of personal experience of Puerto Rican first graders found that the information included in the children's narratives varied with the topic prompts used (Iglesias, Gutierrez-Clellen, & Marcano, 1986). The experimenter told a variety of personal stories as prompts and then asked the child: "Has anything like this ever happened to you? Tell me about it." This paradigm was based on procedures used previously to facilitate the production of personal narratives in English-speaking children (Peterson & McCabe, 1983). The probes (i.e., accidents, hospital visits, holidays) generated a chronology of action routines with no evaluations or resolutions in the Puerto Rican children's stories. Children included abstracts and evaluations in their stories only for topics they felt were worth telling (i.e., street crime stories and "scary" movies).

Audience Involvement

Storytelling is a social event governed by cultural norms and values. These extralinguistic rules dictate appropriate narrative behavior. Current narrative assessment approaches expect narrators to carry on a monologue (Roth, 1986). However, the cross-cultural literature shows that stories also are produced cooperatively *with* the audience in a conversational fashion. Scollon and Scollon (1979, 1981) found that Athabascans (in Alberta, Canada) expect their listeners to complete or comment upon the story as it unfolds. Similar audience participation was described for Hawaiian children (Watson-Gegeo & Boggs, 1977). In these interactions, children acted out the behaviors of the characters in the story as a strategy to attract audience attention. The audience responded to the displays of the storyteller by challenging and contradicting, thus jointly building a "contrapuntal" story line. Narratives constructed in conversation also have been described in African Americans (Erickson, 1984) and New Yorkers with a Jewish background (Tannen, 1982). Similarly, children from Native American and Hispanic communities who are taught to respond by providing minimal information are not likely to engage in storytelling monologues (Phillips, 1982; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Schieffelin & Eisenberg, 1984).

Paralinguistic Strategies

Narrative assessment must consider the broad range of paralinguistic conventions used in the production of narratives. The use of certain paralinguistic behaviors, unexpected in some groups, may be indicative of discourse proficiency for other groups. For example, analyses of the narratives of African Americans have indicated that narrative statements can be connected prosodically by using rhythm and high, elongated pitch, instead of the rising and falling intonation contours characteristic of the discourse of European Americans (Michaels, 1981, 1986). There is evidence that paralinguistic strategies, such as repetition (of sounds, words, and phrases), changes of rate, loudness, stress, and pitch, are used by some speech communities as discourse markers to signal focus, per-

spective, and emphasis (Gumperz, Kaltman, & O'Connor, 1984; Gee, 1989). In addition, unexpected false starts, hesitations, pauses, and silence, which sometimes are viewed as signs of disfluent discourse and which have been proposed as criteria for identifying children with pragmatic disorders (Damico, 1985; Damico, Oller, & Storey, 1983; Prutting & Kirchner, 1987), may be indicative of narrative proficiency for some groups. Scollon and Scollon (1981) found that Athabascan narrative boundaries are marked by an increase in false starts and hesitations that function as internal organizers of the text. There is also much stylistic variation in the use of pauses and silence in oral storytellings. Pauses of different lengths can be used rhetorically to provide thematic information. For example, a slowing of the narrative pace through repetition, redundancy, and silence may be used to mark the end of the story and its point in certain social contexts (Gee, 1986, 1989; Scollon & Scollon, 1979, 1981).

In summary, cross-cultural and ethnographic research has described a wide range of context-based communicative strategies that result in differences in narrative performance. Therefore, the role of contextualization processes in the information and internal organization of narratives, and the ways stories are delivered must be addressed when assessing narratives of children from diverse cultural/linguistic groups.

The next section discusses alternative strategies to traditional means of narrative assessment. We argue that the assessment of narratives must go beyond testing what the child presumably has experienced or learned about storytelling (static approach). Assessment should evaluate the child's current contextualization processes and ability to learn new contextualization rules (dynamic approach).

A PLURALISTIC APPROACH TO ASSESSING CHILDREN'S NARRATIVES

The increasing cultural and linguistic diversity of the school-age population requires a search for unbiased approaches to narrative assessment. Changing the language used to elicit narratives (e.g., assessing narratives in the native language) is not an effective "alternative" to traditional assessment procedures. An assessment made in any language within a model that assumes universals in narrative behavior and discourse relevance may not be clinically useful.

Feuerstein, Rand, Jensen, Kaniel, and Tzuriel (1987) discussed the implications of different assessment models for populations from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. They presented three options available to the assessor that are relevant to the present discussion. One option is to conclude that observed differences in performance simply reflect cultural differences. This position, however, risks associating particular forms of narratives or narrative styles with specific ethnic or social groups, (stereotyping) and implicitly accepts the notion of narrative deficiency relative to the dominant group.

A second option is to adapt narrative tasks and elicitation procedures to those familiar to the child. For example, one could use "inner-city" or "crossing-the-border" themes in highly familiar social interactions. Yet, this option limits the scope of assessment to contexts unrepresentative of school narrative expectations (i.e., book retellings and prose-like narrations). Restricting the contexts and conditions for assessing narratives may not be useful, given that the child is expected to perform successfully in the school environment. It also makes the assumption that the assessment of narratives must be based on specific experiences and rules, rather than on processes of change and adaptation to different communication contexts. These two approaches focus on what the child presumably has learned (static approach), rather than on the child's ability to learn new narrative strategies (dynamic approach).

The third option, dynamic assessment, examines the child's learning potential or "modifiability" by teaching the child to respond to the challenges of the assessment task (Feuerstein et al., 1987). The process includes an analysis of the child's narrative style and the contextualization processes that may have affected the child's narrative performance during assessment. In addition, the dynamic procedures provide an indication of the amount and type of investment necessary to teach the child a repertoire of contextualization rules that may be applied to a variety of contexts. We propose the use of the dynamic model for the nonbiased assessment of narratives of culturally/linguistically diverse children.

Dynamic Assessment Procedures

In a dynamic approach, familiarization with different narrative contexts and contextualization rules, and verbal mediation are used to expand the child's repertoire of narrative styles. Two steps are involved. First, the examiner collects samples of spontaneous narratives in varying narrative contexts. The examiner assesses whether the child uses the contextualization rules appropriate to each narrative context based on an overall assessment of the narrative's temporal, causal, referential, and spatial coherence. Appendix B presents a narrative assessment checklist designed to guide the narrative analysis. The checklist reflects areas typically included in the assessment of children's narratives (Gutierrez-Clellen & Iglesias, 1989; Lahey, 1988). Given that narrative strategies are dependent on context-specific rules that may be unfamiliar to the child, clinicians should be careful not to draw any "diagnostic" conclusions at this stage. Unexpected differences in performance may *not* be indicative of narrative deficiencies. The assessment checklist is used to identify the child's narrative "style" for the targeted contexts.

Second, the examiner *mediates* for the child by describing to the child the contextualization rules of different narrative situations (e.g., storytelling with familiar and unfamiliar audiences, talking "like a book" in school and test situations, telling a story conversationally in informal

social contexts) and by providing examples and practice with them. The child is given a goal (e.g., "to talk like a book" by introducing characters by name or profession or by indicating the different location of narrative events in elicited school storytellings). Then the child is instructed to tell a story applying the context-specific rules. Verbal cues and modeling can be used to optimize learning. Cues for clarification, more information, relevance, and reference facilitate the child's awareness of the demands of targeted contexts (e.g., school narrative contexts). Both the frequency of cues and the child's responses are recorded (see Appendix C for a sample coding sheet). Modeling is used whenever the verbal cues do not elicit the targeted responses. Appendix D illustrates the process.

Cuing through modeling and prompts helps children adapt to the different demands of narrative contexts and can be done in collaboration with the classroom teacher (Westby & Rouse, 1985). The child's modifiability is assessed during mediation, using two or three different narrative tasks. Measures of modifiability include a decrease in the number of prompts needed to elicit the targeted narrative behaviors. A child who is highly modifiable would produce targeted narratives with little examiner effort and would adapt relatively easily to a variety of narrative contexts.

The examiner may be guided by the following questions:

1. Has there been a change in the narrative behaviors displayed by the child in targeted contexts?
2. What types of narrative strategies did the child learn?
3. If initial assessment revealed that narrative behaviors were specific to one context, has there been a transfer of mediated skills to a variety of contexts?
4. What types and frequencies of verbal cues were needed to facilitate the use of new narrative strategies?

There is evidence to suggest that differential responses to mediation and the ability to transfer the newly learned skills to novel situations are the best predictors of an individual's competence (Campione & Brown, 1987). Accordingly, children who do not adapt their narrative style, based on context-specific rules and who require a substantial number of cues and modeling during mediation are judged to have problematic narrative skills and low modifiability (Feuerstein, 1980). For these children, it will be necessary to develop an individualized intervention plan. Alternatively, the ability to learn new narrative strategies and to adapt to different contexts would demonstrate that (a) the child is highly modifiable and (b) that previous narrative performance was related to insufficient experience with the rules of specific narrative contexts.

Efficacy of Dynamic Approach

The effectiveness of dynamic assessment procedures on the test performance of children from diverse sociocultural backgrounds has been documented in a number of studies (Babad & Budoff, 1974; Budoff, 1987; Feuerstein, 1979, 1980; Lidz, 1987; Sewell, 1987). Differences among ethnic student groups on cognitively-based measures at the onset became insignificant when the principles of the task were explained and the reasons for response adequacy were provided. This approach also can be a viable option to traditional language assessment methods. A study that compared the vocabulary skills of Puerto Rican preschool children on a word confrontation task found that children's differential responses to the examiner's cues were more clinically significant than their initial responses to the test items (Peña & Iglesias, 1989). Normally developing Hispanic preschoolers needed fewer and/or less explicit verbal cues when a system of dynamic scoring was used. Children with delayed vocabulary skills required a greater number and more explicit cues to respond, and they were less modifiable during mediation.

Summary

The purpose of this article was to examine issues in the assessment of narratives of children from diverse cultural/ethnic backgrounds. We have shown that narrative contextualization processes are culture-specific and must be considered in assessment. The increasing cultural linguistic diversity of the school-age population requires the development of alternative assessment models that acknowledge differences in narrative experience, exposure to narrative tasks, and assumptions about audience involvement.

We propose that a dynamic assessment approach be used to identify such differences and to teach children the context-specific narrative rules that are valued in American schools.

A dynamic approach to narrative assessment gives children the opportunity to demonstrate that they can perform as expected when they understand the demands and rules of the context. Dynamic assessment offers an alternative to traditional narrative assessment approaches; it recognizes the sociolinguistic variations in contextualization processes that are inherent in the nature of storytelling. As such, the application of dynamic methods to narrative assessment warrants continued discussion and research.

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APPENDIX A

UNITS OF HIGH POINT VERSUS STORY GRAMMAR ANALYSIS*

High point	*Story grammar*
Abstract (a short summary)	
Orientation (place, time, characters)	Setting
Complicating Action	Initiating Event
Evaluation (e.g., "It was a bad experience.")	Internal Response (e.g., "He was angry.")
	Plan (strategy for achieving goal)
	Attempt (actions to obtain goal)
Resolution	Consequence (success or failure of actions)
Coda (e.g., "the end")	Reaction

*Adapted from Labov, 1972; Labov and Waletzky, 1967; and Stein and Glenn, 1979.

APPENDIX B

NARRATIVE ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST*

Describe the narrative context (i.e., materials, participants, type of story, etc.).

1. Temporal Coherence
- Is there a temporal order to the events in the story?
- Are temporal connectives necessary to link the events in the story? (e.g., *and then, when, while*)
- Are temporal connectives used whenever necessary?
- Are shifts in time marked? (e.g., *in the beginning, at the end, before*)

2. Causal Coherence
- Do children intersect physical or mental states to interconnect the story actions? ("He had a big car/he took them home." or "They gave her a doll/she was happy.")
- If not, can we infer those connections easily?
- Are causal connectives necessary to mark cause-effect relationships? (e.g., *so, because*)
- Are causal connectives used whenever necessary?

3. Referential Coherence

a. Participants
- Does the narrative make adequate reference to the participants involved?
- Are new characters clearly introduced? ("There was *a man* working in the kitchen.")
- If not, are characters introduced as if a referent were given elsewhere in the text? (e.g., using demonstratives or pronouns)
- Are character(s) reintroduced ambiguously? (Are there several potential referents in the text?)
- Can the identity of the referent be inferred from general world knowledge? (In "Last summer they took me to Florida" one can infer that "they" refers to "parents.")

b. Props
- Is specification of objects necessary?
- If so, are props mentioned adequately?
- If not, are props introduced with gestures or deictics, such as "a thing"?
- Can the identity of props be inferred from function or description? (e.g., "a thing to play music like this")

4. Spatial Coherence
- Is information about location necessary?
- If so, does the narrative contain information about location?
- Are shifts in the location of events clearly specified?

*Adapted from Gutierrez-Clellen and Iglesias, 1989; and Lahey, 1988.

APPENDIX C

DYNAMIC PROCEDURES: SAMPLE CODING SHEET

Adult Cues	*Frequency*	*Child Responses*	*Context*
Clarification			
Information			
Relevance			
Reference			

Clarification cues: signal "local" communication breakdowns (e.g., inadequate loudness, dialectal differences).
Information cues: elicit unstated information (e.g., setting, motivating events, consequences, or conclusions of the story).
Relevance cues: ask for a linkage between the topic of an utterance and the preceding utterances or story topic.
Reference cues: elicit referents when the child uses pronouns, demonstratives, or unspecific vocabulary without having introduced a previous antecedent.

APPENDIX D

EXAMPLE OF CUEING AND MODELING

Context:	Telling a personal story to unfamiliar listeners (the class)
Goal:	To talk like a book (i.e., assume no shared knowledge of protagonists)
Child:	Everybody's pretty upset. So, my friend turns around and leaves . . . and . . . So, then, he gets mad.
Adult:	Who? (cue for reference)
Child:	The guy. And says: "Hey!"
Adult:	Remember, when you tell *us* this kind of story (context), no one else knows anything about people in the story, so you have to tell us (goal). Tell us more about the guy (cue), like: "The guy who owns the restaurant" (model).
Child:	The guy who works in the store says: "Hey! You can't just leave."