DINNER

In this discussion, we invite the reader to reflect with us on dinner, not as an epicurean event but as a social, linguistic, and cognitive event. Consider the social nature of dinner. During dinner, we consume food and imbibe liquids, yet these physical activities typically are conducted in a social space across the world’s societies. They take place during socially specified times of the day and in socially acceptable spaces. For many people, dinners are also social in the sense that they involve the coordination of more than one person in their preparation, consumption, and cleanup. Meals, as every anthropologist knows, are rituals. We might think of ordinary, not-so-special meals as everyday rituals (Goffman 1959). Like grander ceremonial events, they are shaped in their own way by local social conventions and expectations and are critical to sustaining social institutions. Eating together is a universal modality for constituting domestic, political, religious, and economic forms of social order.*

In looking at the organization of meals across social groups, it is useful to examine the kinds of activities that help to constitute a ‘meal’ for a particular social group. Looking at meals in this way, we can think of them as complex composites of activities, or activity systems (Engeström 1987). While the activity of eating is a universal activity component of meals, what other activities also constitute meals will vary across family cultures and more widely across societies. For many families within the United States, talking is a critical activity component of family meals. In these families, ordinary meals are opportunities for verbal interaction regardless of whether families are eating around a single table or at separate TV tables and chatting during television programming. In this sense, for these families, talking is as important as eating in defining mealtimes.
Just as families and societies may vary in terms of whether or not talk activity characterizes their meals or perhaps more interestingly in terms of the kind and amount of talk activity that characterizes meals, so they will vary in terms of whether or not the cognitive activity of problem solving is characteristic or in terms of the kinds and amount of problem-solving activity characteristic of their eating ritual. In some of the world’s societies, meals are not loci for collective problem solving; in others, participants problem-solve over everything from the logistics of food and children’s expected comportment to family members’ individual and collective dilemmas regarding work, school, and leisure-time activities. Our research examines family dinner meals among mainstream American English-speaking families across diverse socio-economic backgrounds. For these families, dinner is characterized by a high degree of problem-solving talk. These families use dinnertime to work out with one another family plans and/or problems that one or another family member has experienced during the course of the day or in the recent past. For these families, problem-solving talk is at the heart of what constitutes dinnertime.

Another potential function of the activities of eating and talking and problem solving beyond that of constituting dinnertime is that of constituting the family. For certain families, collaborative problem solving around some past or future event is at the heart of what it means to be a family. Kinds of cognition in this sense constitute kinds of social order. One of the most important points of this paper is that complex problem solving constitutes, for many social groups, familiarity. We are familiar either in a personal (e.g., a family member, a friend) or professional (e.g., a colleague, member of a seminar) sense because we problemsolve together. We sustain our familiarity in this way. And when we cease to problemsolve together or reduce the time devoted to problem solving with one another, we index to one another that we are no longer as familiar. We take social distance through cognitive distance. Or conversely, familiarity breeds problem solving, partly in this service of (re)constituting the familiarity. And this kind of familiarity-based problem solving is something we see as valued in domains that would seem far afield from the family dinner arena. This paper is entitled “Science at Dinner” because the kind of social, linguistic, and cognitive activity observed in American family dinners appears to have some affinity with the activity we refer to as science.

SOCIALIZATION OF SCIENTIFIC PRACTICES

When we think of the scientific community, we think of its members—scientists—as persons who devote their professional lives to isolating problems and proposing solutions. But we have recently learned that even amoeba problem-solve, so that this activity is hardly a distinctive characteristic of science. In the course of problem solving, however, scientists sometimes carry out an activity that is not shared by amoebas: they construct theories.
For purposes of this discussion, a theory is defined in terms of two properties:

1. A theory presents an explanation (causal, teleological, or otherwise) of a set of events.

2. The explanation posed by the theory is seen as challengeable, that is, as a posited explanation of actual or possible events.

In this definition, a theory is a version of events rather than a set of taken-for-granted 'facts' about events.

Observations of scientific activity within scientific laboratories challenge the position that scientific theories are constructed by an isolated researcher working out theorems in her or his wing of the laboratory (Latour and Woolgar 1986; Lynch 1985; Traweek 1988). Rather, theories are outcomes of more or less intense collaboration. Theories are 'co-constructed' in the course of ongoing scholarly dialogue, either through face-to-face conversation, electronic mail, preliminary tables and graphs representing experimental results of a group of researchers, or formal publications.

In the course of these oral or written dialogues, scientists not only collaboratively propose theories but challenge and transform theories as well. A hallmark of the scientific community is that it thrives on challenging matters of fact, procedures, and ideological tenets that are associated with a theoretical enterprise (Laudan 1984).

We suggest that, while theory building is highly elaborated in scientific settings, the activity is not exclusive to those settings. In particular, we propose here that family dinner interactions are also settings for complex theory construction in the course of problem solving. Like scientists, family members define problems and propose possible solutions to those problems. They offer theories of what did or could take place and theories of why some set of actions did or could occur. These theories revolve around personal experiences rather than the impersonal events of concern to scientists. Family members tend to talk about what did or could happen to them or people they know. Scientists tend to talk about physical events in the world or events that are generalizable beyond the individual events. Nonetheless, both social contexts are characterized by the practice of theory construction as integral to problem-solving talk.

If family dinnertime is a locus for theory construction, then this setting is an important milieu for the socialization of cognition. The family dinners we observed all involved young children as participants and all evidenced some degree of collaborative theory construction. Thus, while Vygotsky (1986) placed great emphasis on the school as a social environment that enhances the development of scientific thinking, our observations lead us to conclude that children are socialized into the rudiments of scientific communication and, by implication, the rudiments of scientific thinking, long before they enter formal school. The family dinner is potentially an opportunity space for involving children as interlocutors in and observers of the activity of collaborative problem solving.
DATA BASE

The generalizations presented in this discussion are based on observations of twenty families varying in socioeconomic status. The families are Caucasian, English-speaking Americans living in the southern California area. All the families in this study had at least two children—a five-year-old and at least one older sibling.

Each family was both video- and audiotaped on two evenings from about five o'clock in the afternoon until the five-year-old went to bed. During the dinner meal, the video camera was placed on a tripod near the eating area, and the researchers absented themselves from the immediate area. Two additional evenings were audiotaped by the families themselves. The data base for the present study consists of transcripts of twenty-four videotaped dinners drawn from twelve families.

PROBLEM SOLVING THROUGH NARRATIVE

While problem-solving talk takes many forms, the focus of our research has been on the relation of problem solving to narrative activity. We consider narrative activity to be the socially organized telling of temporally ordered past, present, or future events from a particular point of view. For example, reporting and storytelling focus on past events, whereas planning and setting up agendas focus on future events.

While all narratives have an element of temporal ordering and a point of view, some narratives center around events that are posed as problems. These problematic events are in turn seen as causing some set of psychological or external physical events. We refer to narratives that center around past problematic events as story narratives. We refer to narratives that center around present or future problematic events as planning narratives. To understand these narrative types, consider two narrative storytelling and planning interactions taken from our corpus of family dinner narratives:

1. Excerpt from First Week of School Story (round 2 of a 3-round story)

   M = mother
   J = Jacob (4 years, 4 months)
   L = Lily (5 years, 7 months)
   A = Martha (7 years, 10 months)
   R = Fred (10 years, 9 months)

   M: ((addressing Lily)) Miss (Green) said ((Lily looks up from her spaghetti, momentarily pausing in her eating)) you cried and cried at nap time?

   L: ((Lily nods her head yes several times))

   A: she did - she wanted (her) Mama
M: She said that was because - this was your first day to be at school without me?

((Lily is engaged in eating and spilling food))

M: but honey? - I only work - this - it was only this week that I worked there all week? because it was the first week? of school but -

A: she cried at three o'clock too

M: but after this - it - I only work one day a week there and that's Tuesday

The central problematic event of this story narrative concerns Lily's first experience of a school day without the presence of her mother. Both mother and older sister Martha voice this problem ("She wanted her Mama"; "She said that was because - this was your first day to be at school without me?") This problematic event was first introduced by Lily herself earlier in the meal in the course of Lily's saying grace:

(Round 1)

L: = kay - Jesus? - plea?:se - um - help us to love and .hh um - thank you for letting it be a n:ice day and for taking a (fine/fun) nap? - a:nd - for (letting) Mommy go bye and I'm glad that I cried today? cuz I like crying .hh and =

A?:

((snicker))

L: = I'm glad (that anything/everything) =

A?:

((snicker))

L: = happened today in Jesus name ((claps hands)) A:-MEN!

M?: amen

J: amen

((Lily dives in))

Embedded in this grace is a little story centered around the problematic event ("Mommy go bye") and the subsequent event it provoked ("I cried today"). This example is somewhat complex in that the problematic nature of the event "Mommy go bye" is at cross purposes with the conventional demeanor of thankfulness appropriate to saying grace. Thus at the same time as the narrated events show Lily to be sad ("I cried today") at her mother's absence, these events are reframed within the activity of saying grace as events for which Lily is thankful and glad.
Example 2 displays a planning narrative:

2. Eating Beets Plan

M = mother  
S = Sharon (6 years, 2 months)  
((Sharon tries to stuff a fork load of food into her mouth))  
M: Those are really hard to stay on the fork aren't they?  
S: ha ha - yeah:  
 |  
M: you want a spoon?  
S: mhm?  
M: You can use this spoon - it's right in the bowl if you need it  
((Sharon stretches over to get spoon))  
(pause)  
M: hhh ((deep sigh))  
(pause)  
((Sharon eats beets directly out of bowl))

"Eating Beets" illustrates a plan for the immediate future and concerns a current central problematic event, namely that Sharon cannot seem to get the beets she is attempting to eat to stay on her fork. This problem is initially voiced by her mother ("Those are really hard to stay on the fork") and subsequently confirmed by Sharon.

Although both storytelling and planning are problem-solving narrative activities, the present discussion will address only storytelling and its relation to the activity of constructing and evaluating theories.

STORIES AS THEORIES

Stories as Explanations

As defined earlier, a theory includes two properties: first, it constitutes an explanation and second it contains an element of challengeability. An explanation that is treated as God's truth or common sense or as an otherwise undisputed fact about the world is not a theory. Theories are posited. They are tentative and disputable. Let us consider how each of these properties applies to ordinary storytelling at family dinnertime.

Consider first the relation of explanation to storytelling. We have noted that stories are distinguished from other types of narrative in that they focus on a central problematic event. This central event is referred to as the "initiating event"
(Stein and Glenn 1979) in the psycholinguistic literature on storytelling and as the 'inciting event' among screenwriters. As these labels suggest, such central problematic events initiate or incite at least one and usually a series of subsequent events. In this sense, the relation of the initiating/inciting event to subsequent events is causal. For instance, in example 1, the initiating/inciting event of Lily's mother's absence from school is seen by the narrators as causing Lily to cry. Example 3 also displays a cause-effect explanation within a story narrative.

3. Amy's Shot Story

\[ \text{M} = \text{mother} \]
\[ \text{F} = \text{father} \]
\[ \text{J} = \text{Jason (7 years, 5 months)} \]
\[ \text{A} = \text{Amy (5 years)} \]

\[ \text{M:} \text{ You know what Amy said that was really - I thought really smart? - and really good?} \]
\[ \text{J:} \text{ what} \]
\[ \text{M:} \text{ She said. - she couldn't stand to wait for the shot til the last thing} \]
\[ \text{A:} \text{ ((speaking straight at Jason)) so I - got it first} \]

\[ \text{ (pause) \text{ M:} \text{ so she asked for her shot first - and that way she didn't have to wait - (and then) - I thought that was really - a terrific thing for her to do} \]
\[ \text{F:} \text{ ((nods yes)) I agree} \]
\[ \text{M:} \text{ (what do you think?)} \]

\[ \text{ (pause) \text{ J:} \text{ ((nods yes)) If you let me go out then I think it's great} \]
\[ \text{F:} \text{ no} \]
\[ \text{M:} \text{ ((smiling)) And if we don't you think it's really dumb huh?} \]
\[ \text{J:} \text{ mhm?} \]
\[ \text{M:} \text{ unun that's interesting} \]

This story concerns a problem that Amy faced that day, namely that she had to have a shot at the doctor's office and she hated waiting for it to happen. This problem is articulated by Amy's mother ("She said - she couldn't stand to wait for the shot til the last thing"). This problematic circumstance in turn provoked at least one subsequent event, namely that Amy asked for her shot first. These two events are related causally in that the earlier circumstance is the reason for the subsequent event. In other words, the earlier circumstance explains why Amy asked the doctor to give her the shot first.

The inciting/initiating event may cause not only an external event such as crying or asking the doctor to give a shot first thing. It may cause internal
psychological responses as well. In example 1, the external event of crying implies an internal response of sadness. In example 3, the external event of asking for a shot first thing implies an internal response of anxiety.

Stories are full of cause-effect propositions beyond those involving the initiating/inciting event. For example, external events induced by an initiating/inciting event may in themselves cause psychological responses or other external action responses. Thus in example 3, Amy's external response to her problem in turn caused her mother's psychological response at the time the narrative events took place (“I thought [what Amy said was] really smart - and really good?”; “I thought that was really - a terrific thing for her to do”) and a set of subsequent psychological responses at the time of the story's telling from father (“I agree”) and from the ironic older brother (“If you let me go out then I think it's great”).

Explanations, central to story narratives, are not the product of a single family member monologuing through a set of sequential events. Rather, as shown briefly above, different family members coauthor storytelling (Duranti and Brenneis 1986) and in so doing co-construct explanations dialogically.

**Stories as Versions of Events**

Theories are not only explanations; they are possible explanations, versions of what could or did or will occur. But not all storytellers treat their stories in this light. In some cases, the explanation within the story is taken for granted. Indeed that seems to be the case for the story related in example 1. In other cases, how someone sees the narrated problem and responds to the narrated problem is questioned. In some cases, the relation of problem to outcome is doubted because the problem is seen as incorrectly defined or because someone doubts that the problem provoked a particular set of responses. In these cases, the explanation is challenged because it does not match what at least one person considers to be the true state of the world. We can call such challenges *veridical challenges*. Examples 4 and 5 illustrate veridical challenges:

4. Excerpts from Jacob and David Story

\[ M = \text{mother} \]
\[ J = \text{Jacob (4 years, 4 months)} \]
\[ A = \text{Martha (7 years, 10 months)} \]

\[ A: \quad \text{Jacob ran out!} \]
\[ M: \quad \text{Jacob?} \]
\[ J: \quad ((\text{from dining room, seated})) \quad \text{NO I DIDN'T!} \]
\[ M: \quad \text{Jacob - did you hit David . . .} \]
\[ : \]
\[ A: \quad \text{all I know is Jacob pushed?} \]
\[ : \]
In this story narrative, Jacob is implicated in an inciting event that caused David to cry. Among other actions, Jacob is said to have pushed David, an action that for the mother seems to constitute hitting him. In this story, Jacob’s older sister Martha presents one version of the problematic event (“all I know is that Jacob pushed”) that explains why David was crying, and Jacob’s mother elicits Jacob’s version, which turns out to directly contradict that of his sister. Here we have a case of opposing views of the ‘facts’ of the situation. Eventually the mother adopts Martha’s version of the facts, as indicated in her question to Jacob “Why did you push him?”

Example 5 also displays a veridical challenge. In this example, the spouses disagree on the facts of the events which transpired when a friend of Mom’s, Susan, came by earlier:

5. Excerpt from Photo Negatives Story

\[M = \text{mother (Marie)}\]
\[F = \text{father (Jon)}\]
\[J = \text{Janie (5 years, 11 months)}\]

\[M: \text{Jon - do you have those negatives from the (pony?) pictures}\]
\[F: \text{Yeah - they're all in your cabinet ((pointing))}\]
M: ((clears throat)) I wish you woulda told (Janie) cuz that's why I sent her down (cuz Susan) wanted em - when she came? so (she could) go (if) she took my roll of film =

F: - Sorry - I told Janie I didn't have time to come in - Janie didn't ask me that
 - What Janie asked me was - Can I get the negative for Susan’s picture - That meant I had to go through all those negatives and I was - I said “Hey I - I don't - tell her I don't have time to do that right now”

In this story, the father and mother of the family have different versions of the initiating/inciting event involving their daughter Janie’s relaying of the message from the mother to the father. (Janie is co-present to this narration but only listens.) The mother implies that she asked Janie to ask her father where the negative to Susan’s picture was, whereas the father claims that Janie did not request information but rather requested the father’s services (“What Janie asked me was - Can I get the negative for Susan’s picture”). In this way, the father challenges the mother’s cause-effect account of what happened earlier in the day. Her account falls apart because the description of the problem is inaccurate, according to the father’s experience. As the addressee of Janie’s message, the father presents his alternative version as having the weight of an eyewitness ‘factual’ account of the events.

In scientific communities, a theory sometimes is challenged not because it does not match real world conditions but because the theory is in some way inadequate relative to some other theory. Let us call such challenges adequacy challenges. In storytelling among family members, one or another family member may similarly challenge a particular characterization of a story problem or story response because it is based on weak argumentation or entails a morally inadequate point of view. This is often the case in talking about cause-effect relations involving a psychological response. One party may feel that an event or set of events provokes or should provoke a particular psychological reaction whereas another party does not, as illustrated in 6 below:

6. Excerpt from Eating Chilies Story

M = mother
J = Jason (7 years, 5 months)

J: Wasn’t it funny? when wa- wasn’t it funny when - wasn’t it funny when you - thought that thing was a pickle? and I ate it?

M: No that wasn’t funny. - I thought it was uh um:: ((looks at father)) - a green bean

In this story excerpt, Jason begins to tell a story about a time when he mistakenly ate a hot chili pepper that his mother thought was a green bean (or a pickle). Jason’s mother challenges not only veridical aspects of the story problem (correcting his version of the facts that she did not think the chili was a pickle but a green bean) but also the appropriateness of the psychological response Jason
presents as the outcome of the whole set of events. Jason opens the story with a request for confirmation ("Wasn't it funny when . . .") concerning the resultant psychological response to eating a chili pepper. In response, Jason’s mother flatly rejects Jason’s attempt to see humor as the psychological outcome ("No that wasn’t funny"). She is socializing Jason into her view that these kinds of events (where pain is involved) should not be seen as funny. Through her subsequent turn, Jason’s mother reframes Jason’s initial story as only a version of the events, one that is both inaccurate and inadequate. In this manner, Jason’s mother is socializing him into the activity of building justifiable theories of the world. One socializing message is that, for a cause-effect explanation to hold up, it must match what others believe to be true about the world and must be ideologically acceptable as well. Jason is confronted with veridical and adequacy challenges that in turn may entail redrafting the initial story line.

Example 7 below represents another adequacy challenge. In this example, the mother, Marie, challenges her own responses to a problematic event. Marie runs a daycare center and the problematic event concerns Bev, mother of one of the daycare children. Bev has given Marie a sum of money beyond what she owes for her child. Marie voices her doubts to her husband as to whether or not her actions were legitimate.

7. Excerpts from Bev Story

M = mother (Marie)
F = father (Jon)

M: Bev walked up? and handed me three twenty?

F: mhm

(0.6)

M: And I thought she only owed me eighty - and she said she didn’t want a receipt - and I went in and got the receipt book (n::) she only owed me eighty

Here Bev’s handing her the money is the initiating/inciting event that explains Marie’s responses—checking her ledger and giving back what she determined was ‘overpayment.’

However, the story is more complex in that Bev is pulling her child out of daycare without providing the required two weeks’ notice. Marie relates this suddenly, several minutes later in the dinner:

M: Well, you know what - you know what though-
((points index finger to Jon, hand extended from elbow))

F: It’s gone to even to the extreme?

[ ]

M: I started questioning was the fact she gave me - no - notice - she just called up after the accident and said
Yeah "I'm not coming anymore"

"That's it" - no - no two weeks' pay - not =

(Marie)

= no: consideration - (without ever)

((wiping mouth)) She did a:ll that when she paid you the three hundred and twenty dollars - she didn't do that =

((Marie with hand to mouth, reflective; daughter Janie gets up and goes to kitchen))

= by mistake - she wanted to see how you felt about it n she felt she owed you

No: way - no no no no - no ((shaking head and hand also to say 'No'))

Thus Marie could have seen the money as what was owed to her, but she chose not to do this. The challenge eventually is not to the facts of the events of handing over the money or Marie's response but to the adequacy of Marie's response. Should she have given the money back? Should she have kept the money and reminded Bev of the stipulated two weeks' notice? After several minutes of unrelated talk, Marie again probes this narrative:

((head on hand, elbow on table))

You know Jon - I verbally did tell Bev two weeks' notice Do you think I shouldov stuck to that? or (to have) done what I did?

Jon takes issue with Marie's initial attitude that her response was morally justified and pushes her to accept a different moral framing of Bev's money in terms of 'contract ethics'.

When I say something I stick to it unless she: - s-brings it up. If I set a policy and I - and - they accept that policy - unless they have reason to change it and and say something? I do not change it... I should never have set the policy if I didn't believe in it...

Eventually Marie hesitantly accepts this ideological reworking of the story events:

I guess I just wish I would have said - I'm not upset with what happened - I just wanted - I think I would feel better if I had said something.

In examples 1 through 7, the challenges to cause-effect explanations have involved opposing views of family members. One family member's explanation has been challenged by another family member. In other cases, however, it is not a co-
present family member whose views are challenged but a non-present third party who is the target of the challenge. In these cases, family members sympathize with the version of the events presented by one of those present and collectively oppose an 'outsider,' as illustrated in 8 below:

8. Excerpt from Detention Story

M = mother
F = father
L = Lucy (9 years, 7 months)

L: I don't think Mrs. um Andrews is being fair because um
M: ((high-pitched)) (?do you?) =
F: = (about what?)

L: When we were back at school um - this girl? - she pulled um - Valerie's dress up t'here ((gestures to chest)) in front of the boys
M: mhm?
L: she only - all she did was get a day in detention
M: mhm? - you think she should have gotten suspended?

(0.6)
L: At LEAST - that's

(0.4)
M: mhm?

L: (it's) not allowed in school

In this story excerpt, Lucy challenges the response of the principal of her school, Mrs. Andrews, to a problematic event. Her challenge is not to Mrs. Andrews' rendering of the 'facts' of the problematic event, but to Mrs. Andrews' rendering of the seriousness of the problematic event. Mrs. Andrews' view of the problematic event is, from Lucy's point of view, inadequate, a view which her mother supports and extends ("you think she should have gotten suspended?"). When family members get together to challenge the moral adequacy of others' views of the problem or their responses to a problem, they collaboratively articulate family values and world views. Thus challenges to a third party's version of the events socialize children into local family culture.

Regardless of whether the challenge is to a co-present family member or some non-present third party, regardless of whether the challenge is to the facts or to the adequacy of the explanations, challenges are fundamental to scientific communication. In the world of science (which may not be so separate a world as
we have tended to think), each scientific account can be thought of as a kind of story, not a story of personal events but a story of impersonal scientific events. And each story can potentially challenge and redraft another scientific 'story' and itself be subject to challenge.

This form of scholarly discourse has its roots in everyday storytelling in which interlocutors do not stand idly by, but actively question and modify how a story problem is characterized and assess the adequacy of protagonists' responses to it. Challenging and redrafting stories socializes children into metacognitive thinking in that interlocutors often step outside the narrated events to question and recontextualize them. These activities also socialize metalinguistic thinking in that interlocutors treat the telling of a personal experience as a version of experience. Both of these aspects of perspective taking are complex cognitive processes that are integral to scientific practice.

THE COGNITIVE CONSTITUTION OF DINNER

We began this paper with the argument that for many households, dinnertime is a moment in the social day not only for fueling bodies with calories but also for collaborative talk and collaborative thought. In the corpus we have collected, all the dinners were occasions for conversation and in each instance the conversation involved some degree of problem-solving narration. In all the dinners, the problem-solving narration was collaborative and involved challenging, defending, and reworking the facts and the moral stances of the problematic events narrated. Of course, some dinners and some narratives involved more of this sort of challenge and revision than others. Nonetheless dinners as we observed them are constituted by some measure of this complex cognitive activity. For those who regularly participate in these dinners, proposing and critiquing problems and responses is part of their cultural definition of dinnertime at home. Children as participants are socialized to varying degrees into this expectation, an expectation that serves them well as they enter scholarly activity systems.

THE COGNITIVE CONSTITUTION OF FAMILIARITY

We also began this discussion with the unusual proposal that familiarity has a cognitive underpinning. Collaborative problem solving is for the families in our study a constitutive activity carried out by families. For these people, to be a member of a family is to problem-solve together. Members of a family, within this cultural perspective, have the right and obligation to not just listen to a narrative account of some problematic event and the responses it incited but to question and probe and propose alternative versions. It is also the case that family members can become involved in the interpretation of the story events because they have at least some background knowledge about the story events and protagonists even if they did not directly experience the narrated events.
We think that families are not the only institutions that can be so constituted. For many people, friendships are also constituted by the kind of collaborative cognitive activity we have just been describing. Friends, within this cultural perspective, are persons who don't just listen to a narrative about a problematic event and its aftermath; friends help one another to understand those events in different lights and to weigh one view of the events over others. In this cultural framework, a friend can challenge another friend to a certain extent, because of the affective bond between them. Further, as with family members, a friend can challenge another friend because they have a communicative history together that gives each a data base for introducing information that may reinforce an existing perspective or trigger a shift in perspective.

Within this cultural framework, immediate family and friends are typically those whom we consider familiars or even intimates. We are used to them; we have shared time together; we are in communicative contact with them; they know a good deal about our lives and we know a good deal about theirs; they can count on us to help them and we can count on them; we can trust each other. When these features do not characterize family and friend relationships, then we say they are not or are no longer intimate. When one or more of these conditions weaken, it is an index that the parties are taking greater social distance.

Our hypothesis is that, in mainstream American society, it is precisely this sort of social familiarity that encourages complex collaborative problem solving. Where participants know one another well, they can rely on accumulated shared knowledge in telling a story and don't need to spell out the background details needed to understand the story's point. Where participants know one another well, they may be less hesitant to express uncertainty or perplexity over the problematic affairs in the narration and more open to invite the help of others in explaining the narrated events. Where participants know one another well, they are able within limits to enter into the other's telling of events and reconfigure the other's version without dissolving the relationship. They are able to do this in part because a familiar has elicited their involvement. If a familiar puts limits on the kind of narrative involvement, for example, by permitting only supportive involvement, then the familiar is defining the relationship in a certain light. If the "climate" is more "open," with familiars inviting others to help explain a set of events and helping others to explain some set of events they have drawn to their attention, then the familiars are defining their relation in a different light.

We suggest that these personal, familiar relationships establish the intellectual groundwork for collective problem solving. Following this suggestion, environments conducive to collaborative explaining and critiquing are those marked by familiarity, the very quality that most arenas of formal education lack. The large class size, the tendency to organize problem solving in terms of individuals rather than small, familiar groups, and the continual shift in class composition at least from year to year are some of the ingredients that sabotage a sense of mutual reliance and shared experience.

This suggestion that familiarity and complex cognition are linked is at odds with the suggestion that children learn critical cognitive skills such as decentering from interactions with strangers and unfamiliars in the context of writing and
other school activities. We argue that it is familiarity not social distance that best promotes cognitive decentering. We are more willing to take on the perspective of others, even when that perspective contradicts our own, when we and the other have a relationship of trust and share some background and interest in one another's experiences. We are more willing to hear another's story version out or to invite another's participation in our story, to work on unresolved elements of a story if story collaborators have a solid background in the setting of the story events. It is exhausting to present and to wade through the background necessary to make sense of the story events, as writers and readers of theses and dissertations well know. The effort is so great that sometimes complex problem-centered stories don't get related among those who are not familiar. What schooling and literacy activities in particular ideally do is to train children and other novices to overcome this hurdle and relate/wade through the complex details of setting necessary to evaluate events and points of view. But this training hardly means that impersonal relationships promote cognitive decentering. Impersonal relationships may well inhibit decentering. Schooling ideally fortifies novices to break through the barrier of unfamiliarity and create some measure of familiarity from the ground up. Schooling trains novices to establish familiarity (at least in the sense of shared background knowledge) within the confines of a written or spoken text by laying out relevant history then and there. We should not lose sight of just how cumbersome a task establishing familiarity with unknown readers and audiences is and how different it is from the more complex forms of decentering displayed when familiars take another's point of view, work it through, challenge it, and transform it. These forms of complex cognition go on right under our noses in the most mundane environments, in the comfortable ambience of our homes, and even during hectic, seemingly chaotic family dinners.

ENDNOTE

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