SOCIALITY

Why read this text…

Sociality commonly refers to social engagement with others in settings outside the home. Drawing on a distinction between public and private, this usage places both sociality and society beyond the domestic sphere. It also affords the idea that children, who conceptually belong to the home, must be rendered social, i.e. prepared for full participation in 'society' by educational regimes (cf. Durkheim 1956). This understanding of sociality is problematic on three accounts: first, the public/private divide is not universal, second, sociality is not domain-specific, and third, children are innately social.

From an anthropological perspective, sociality pervades every aspect of being human. Intersubjective sociality is intrinsically a micro-historical learning process in the sense that when we encounter one another, we always do so as carriers of our own, unique histories, both collective and personal, and we make sense of what others are doing and saying in terms of what we already know (Toren 2012: 64). For all humans, new experiences are assimilated to ones existing structures of knowing (Toren 2012: 64). Thus everything about a person, including genetics, is a product of a long history of social relations – of sociality.

How we understand sociality has implications for how we understand education. Many view education as formal processes of acquiring collectively valued cognitive, practical and social skills and knowledge that allow newcomers to become full members of a society. In this view, sociality is something to be learned. From an anthropological perspective, sociality and learning are two aspects of the same ongoing transformational process of "making meaning for ourselves (i.e., autonomously) out of meanings that others have made and are making" (Toren 2012: 72). Breaking with conventional ideas of education, this view allows us to explore processes of sociality and learning in all venues of life.

Historical context

Scholars often use sociality and sociability interchangeably. Literature on sociality/sociability covers a wide range of fields and disciplines: from human evolution and child development, over computer technology, moral education, urban planning, to sociology, anthropology, history, and moral and political philosophy. Scholars apply sociality to 1) generic human and animal behaviour, 2) socialising with non-kin (friends, acquaintances, colleagues), 3) civil encounters with people beyond one's personal and professional network, and 4) gatherings in voluntary associations, societies and clubs.

Such broad application suggests the significance of sociality. However, usage is inconsistent and the concept is often treated it as if all are familiar with and agreed upon its meaning and application. For many, sociality connotes desirable behavior, peaceable interaction, collaboration and cooperation (Anderson 2015). Studies relying on intuitive understandings such as "the tendency to seek the company of others, to be friendly" (Flanagan 1999: 9) are apt to disregard modes of sociality such as disagreement, conflict, war and exclusion.

In the 1980's anthropologists took up sociality as a tool for studying social process, to get conceptually beyond fixed and ethnocentric understandings of 'society' (Toren 2012). They saw sociality as an open heuristic concept for cross-cultural comparison that would not lead to Eurocentric analytical claims that Melanesian peoples 'lacked society.' The concept of sociality allowed anthropologists to explore processes of social organization and interaction, co-habitation and conflict among peoples everywhere without reverting to deficit thinking.

Another impetus to study sociality grew from renewed scholarly interest in civil society following the fall of the Soviet Union. Referencing modern concerns with social cohesion, concord and citizenship, and focusing on civil society as the mainstay of modern democracy, these studies explored the existence, extent and resistance to grassroots organisation and voluntary association in Post-socialist societies (Hann 1996). In this perspective, voluntary association is considered an iconic site of sociality/sociability.

In recent decades, anthropologists have studied sociality in a wide range of domains, though most often in urban public settings. They qualify their work as *everyday* sociality (Pink 2008: 172), *residential* sociality (Postill 2008), *neighborly* sociability (Birenbaum-Carmeli 1999), *English* sociality (Miller 2015), and *urban* sociability (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2016).

a) **Discussion**

Anthropologists treat sociality as foundational, as *the constitutive potential of always emerging relational fields* at the core of all human life (Ingold 1993). This makes anthropological definitions of human sociality rather abstract. For example, Enfield and Levinson define human sociality as the "particularly intense, mentally mediated and highly structured way in which humans interact with one another" (2006:1). Long and Moore suggest that human sociality is best understood as a "dynamic matrix of "relations with human, non-human, and inhuman others" … "through which persons come into being, and which is navigated by an ethically imaginative and affectively receptive human subject" (Long 2015: 854: Long and Moore 2012:40). Exactly how to delineate 'mental mediation', 'dynamic relational matrices' or fully grasp an 'ethically imaginative person's coming into being' through, for example, classroom sociality is however not straightforward.

Studies of sociality can be broken down into two main sets of concepts: 1) *action, interaction and social interaction* and 2) *sociation, sociality, and sociability*. The first set focuses attention on action, joint action and social exchange *between* people. The second focuses attention on relationality, relational quality and form, as in *socius – companion.*

Drawing on the first set of concepts, interactionist theory posits that collective behaviour is a complex achievement. Social forms like 'classroom teaching' or 'school assemblies' are fashioned out of the joint action of individuals, who routinely come together and share in exchanges of common symbolic forms (language, concepts, moral tenets). Coordinating joint activity is subtle and demanding work. Participating individuals must constantly monitor turn taking, gaze orientation, verbal timing and rhythm, thematic sequencing and progression. They must recognise what others intend to say/do and help repair misunderstandings. They must identify conventional types of activity, styles of speech, body language and tonal

framing (irony) and cooperate and collude about what to attend to and what to ignore. Many anthropologists use video recordings to help them grasp this level of fine-grained detail (cf. Varenne and McDermott 1998).

Drawing on the second set of concepts, the study of sociation and sociability focuses on questions of whose company one keeps and on form: 'good' form, valued forms, and aesthetic appraisal of appropriate 'fit' between form, relationship and context (Simmel 1950; Anderson 2015). Ethnographic studies have shown that 'friend' and 'neighbour' sociability is both highly valued and highly monitored (Amit-Talai 1995; Birenbaum-Carmeli 1999). 'Friendship' sociability is based on a restricted social exchange between 'just us,' and high investments of time and energy. 'Neighbour' sociability usually comprises a more generalized exchange of friendly greetings, sprinkled with weather, car or garden talk. Neighbour relations are usually less exclusive, less confidential, and less time-consuming.

People constantly assess the contextual appropriateness of the sociable behaviour of others. Do they have a sense of when and where to draw close or keep their distance? Do they display fitting behaviour, not being 'too loud' or 'too withdrawn' at an office party, 'too friendly' a neighbour or 'too aloof' a friend? Does, for example, one's beloved husband' understand that 'loud' works better at a beach party than dinner at his mother-in-law's?

Questions of sociability are often political. School districts may be drawn up to restrict or stretch the company children keep, to recruit 'all kinds of children' or to exclude 'undesirable elements.' While most schools proffer an ideology of generalized sociability, the idea that 'all should socialize with all,' schools in reality restrict the company children keep by segregating them in age-grades and sorting them on the basis of academic aptitude or gender. They may also restrict the amount of time children have each day to ply friendships (Amit-Talai 1995). For their part, parents may choose schools for their children according what kinds of 'other people's children' are enrolled.

b) Ethnographic Example
Detailed studies of social interaction are useful for analyzing how school children (and teachers) coordinate simple routines of standing in line or elaborate routines of teasing a substitute teacher. They call our attention to children's responses to classroom dilemmas, for example the subtle efforts of a poor reader to 'miss' her turn to read (Varenne and McDermott 1998). They allow us to feel the uneasy to-and-fro of an Inuit three-year-old whose mother asks: "Are you good?" and whose aunty asks: "Would you rather come live with me?"(Briggs 1998). Comparative descriptions of mothers interacting with toddlers just learning to speak show clearly that language acquisition goes hand in hand with appropriating understandings of social hierarchy (Ochs and Schieflein 1993).

Fine-grained descriptions of social interaction may also help develop methods for working with children with special needs. In *What a Dog Can Do: Children with Autism and Therapy Dogs in Social Interaction* (2010), Olga Salomon presents two case studies of children's interaction with therapy dogs to better grasp the social potentialities of children with autism spectrum disorders. Using video-recordings of dog-child interaction that detail nonverbal social behavior and the structure of social action, Salomon demonstrates how therapy dogs

afford children opportunities to practice nonlinguistic social actions and to coordinate these with others. She shows how children apply social competencies developed with therapy dogs in interaction with family members. Solomon's study of children with autism spectrum disorders and their families illustrates that interaction with dogs mediates social engagement and thus greater capacity to participate in family and community life. Based on this, Solomon suggests that we should not view sociality as "a quality of an individual, but as a capacity realized through certain kinds of social interaction" (2010: 144).

Thinking further:

In carrying out these exercises, please remember that 'sociality' is not 'out there' in the world. Rather it is an open heuristic concept, useful for exploring the many ways people interact with each other (and talk about their interaction) in daily life.

1. Which forms of social interaction have high pedagogical value? Discuss why this is, and what kinds of interaction the valued form entails. Also discuss what children *may actually* be learning (not what they *ought to* be learning) from their participation in a particular form of social interaction.

2. Make a 3-minute video recording of a simple social interaction. Download a video transcription program and transcribe the video in as much detail as possible. Based on this material, discuss the 'work' each participant is doing to accomplish this joint action (not as it *should* be, but how it *is*).

3. Discuss the meaning of Solomon's claim that we should not see sociality as a quality of an individual, but rather as a capacity realized through certain kinds of social interaction. How might this speak to how you manage a classroom?

KEY-WORDS/ CROSS-REFERENCES
World-making, meaning-making, sociability, social form, social interaction, learning

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