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Sense of agency and everyday life: Children's perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a socio-culturally informed study on children's sense of agency regarding their everyday lives. The empirical data comprise of open-ended interview situations where four elementary school children (age 9–10) reflect on their everyday life with the help of photographs they had themselves taken. The results highlight variation in the children's accounts of their sense of agency. In all, the results provide a nuanced understanding of how the children's own aspirations, beliefs, and competencies, from their perspective, were related to engagement in different practices in their everyday life.

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1. Introduction

The importance of understanding and promoting children's sense of agency has been emphasized by a number of scholars (Bandura, 1989; Bruner, 1996; Rainio, 2010). Given the challenges posed by the collision of permanent and changing environments in the lives of today's children, this goal seems more vital than ever (e.g., Kumpulainen, Lipponen, Hilppö, & Mikkola, 2013). Although existing studies on children's agency (e.g. Barton & Tan, 2010; Bjerke, 2011; Markström & Halldén, 2009; Rainio, 2008) point to the value of the reflexive aspect of agency, uncovering the way in which children fathom themselves as agents has seldom been the focus of inquiry. For example, questions regarding the way in which the children's own aspirations or competences play a role in evoking action, or how children see possibilities available for action in different situations remain largely unaddressed. Moreover, current conceptualizations concerning agency fall short in providing conceptual tools to describe and elaborate on the relation of individual actors with various practices and communities they engage in (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Prout, 2005; Stetsenko, 2008). Thus, at present our research knowledge is limited in explaining how different settings and situations play into children's sense of agency.

This paper discusses a socio-culturally informed study on children's sense of agency regarding practices of their everyday lives. We will begin by elaborating on our theoretical stance towards children's sense of agency. Then, we will present our empirical work, that is, how we worked with four children (age 9–10) Anna, Liisa, Erno and Eetu to document and talk about their everyday lives. Thereafter, we present the results of our investigation, viz., which modalities characterize children's accounts of their sense of agency as they reflect on different practices of their everyday life, and what these identified modalities tell us about children's sense of agency. We will end with a discussion on the relevance of our results and the possible implications of our work.

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1.1. Investigating children's sense of agency from a socio-cultural perspective

Sense of agency, within philosophy and psychology, is often defined as the individual's subjective awareness of being an initiator or executor of actions in the world (e.g., de Vignemont & Fourmeret, 2004). In this study, our focus is on sense of agency talked into being when children reflect on their everyday lives. Building on socio-cultural theoretical frameworks, we argue that such reflections are socio-culturally mediated and distributed (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, Tulviste, & Hagstrom, 1996). That is, when reflecting on our actions we make use of different cultural tools such as language and various complex semiotic resources which, in return, influence how we interpret those actions within a specific cultural context (Gillespie, 2007; Valsiner, 2001). Furthermore, we argue that such reflective accounts are always produced in certain situations and thus subject to the various social aspects of those situations via which the accounts emerge. Accordingly, reflections of one's actions produced, for example in interviews, should be understood as being embedded in that particular situation and as being produced for it in joint activity (e.g., Roth, 2008). More fundamentally, the socio-cultural perspective emphasizes that actions in themselves are complex formations constituted by different cultural tools, personal endeavors and collective motives. Hence, in contrast to cognitive or phenomenological frameworks (e.g., Gallagher, 2012), our stance highlights the situative, distributed and socio-culturally mediated nature of sense of agency.

However, despite a rich array of conceptualizations and empirical analyses, current socio-cultural theories on agency have evoked critical voices concerning the lack of theorizing of the individual actor (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013; Nardi, 2005; Roth, 2007). Stetsenko (2008, p. 481) explains:

“... a number of approaches tend to collapse the individual dimension onto the social realm of everyday practices while undertheorizing the former, as in participatory learning and discursive theories where individual subjectivity is explained as being equivalent to, or a replica and sometimes a correlate of, the social-level process such as discourse, collaborative activity, or participation in shared practices of communities (e.g., Harre 2002).”

In other words, the more nuanced dynamics of individual agency, which contribute to the emergence of these practices, are not adequately addressed by current research. For example, the way in which the actor's own aspirations, beliefs, or acquired and physical competencies relate to concrete actions taken in social situations, are not accounted for. To answer these critical claims, we draw on the narrative semiotics, and especially the notion of modalities of agency (Greimas & Porter, 1977).

1.2. Narrative semiotics and modalities of agency

In the semiotics of A.J. Greimas, modalities of agency refer to the underlying structure of different cultural narratives that constituted the actors of the story, and their intentions in relation to an object or a given course of action (Fontanille, 2006; Greimas & Porter, 1977). In his work on Finnish senior citizens' agency, Jyrkämä (2008) has drawn attention to six basic modalities commonly used in narrative semiotics and in this study we elaborate on their function in discourse as follows: *to want*, positions the person in question as wanting to do something; *to know*, ascribes the person with certain knowledge and know-how; *to be able*, characterizes the physical abilities and limitations of the person; *have to*, ascribes a must or something that the person has to do; *to feel, experience, appreciate*, positions the person as being able to feel and experience, and lastly; *to have the possibility*, ascribes the person as having possibilities to do something in a given situation. Although these kind of modal descriptions of agency are frequently used in both everyday and academic discourses to note an actor's orientation to a given state of affairs or practice, there are few, if any, empirical research studies that would have used the conceptualization of modalities of agency as an analytic tool.

In our research, we see potential in investigating children's sense of agency in relation to their everyday life via modalities of agency. In accordance with the socio-cultural perspective, we understand these modalities as discursive tools which people use, and so socially construct into being their relating sense of agency within a social setting. Moreover, we regard sense of agency not solely as something people feel or provide a narrative account of, but also as something people invoke, or choose not to invoke, in certain situations (e.g., Wetherell, 2005). In sum, sense of agency is analyzed in this paper as a socially constructed relation between an individual's capabilities, aspirations, and perceived opportunities and limitations to take action with a given practice.

Our research is guided by the following questions:

- How do children draw on different modalities to characterize their own agency when reflecting on different practices of their life?
- What kind of insights can we, as analysts, draw from these reflections regarding their sense of agency in these practices?

2. Study

The study took place in the Helsinki metropolitan area during autumn 2010. Our work is embedded within a larger, co-participatory research initiative to study children's agency (Kumpulainen et al., 2013).

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