Metacultural positioning in language socialization: Inhabiting authority in informal teaching among Peruvian Aymara siblings

Benjamin Smith*

Department of Anthropology, Vassar College, Box 606, 124 Raymond Avenue, Poughkeepsie, NY 12604, United States

A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

In this article, I give an account of informal teaching among siblings as a caretaking practice among Peruvian, Aymara speaking children. To do so, I draw upon a notion of "metaculture" (Urban, 2001) or a "theory of the cultural" to account for the sense in which informal teaching practices imply a form of authoritative, reflexive positioning toward the normativities qua normativities ("culture") of everyday social life. Drawing on an analysis of interview data, I give an account of an Aymara "folk pedagogy" in which identities like oldest, older, and younger sibling are interpretable as forms of metacultural social positioning. An analysis of a series of video-recordings shows the way in which – that is, through acts of "correction" – older siblings deploy a theory of the cultural as they informally instruct their younger siblings.

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1. Introduction

It is now a truism to claim that, in most sociocultural contexts, older siblings are expected to take care of their younger siblings (Weisner & Gallimore, 1977). In this turn of phrase, "care" or "caregiving" is a surprisingly promiscuous concept: washing a younger sibling, feeding them, carrying them about, punishing them, setting up a game, minding them, directing their labor and instructing them can – to name just a handful of ethnographically salient examples (see Chavez & Loucky, 1981; Gaskins & Lucy, 1986; Maynard & Greenfield, 2005; Pollack, 2002; Weisner, 1987) – all count as instances of caregiving. "Care," then, – the always local sense of being-provided-for and sustained – knows few theoretical bounds – only empirical ones: under its banner, the body, the belly and the mind can all be kept occupied and disciplined.

Caregiving implicates networks of social relationships. In the work of Weisner and Gallimore (1977), the relationship at stake is between an older and younger sibling. LeVine (1994) and Harkness and Super (2001) show the importance of parents as "caretakers." In both of these instances, these relationships are ones in which there is a person-who-cares and a person-who-is-cared-for. This simple relationship oftentimes enters into more complex configurations, however: as Gaskins and Lucy (1986) show, a Mayan child confronts an array of possible caregivers (e.g., an older sibling, an oldest sibling, a father) whose responsibility for caregiving in any moment depends on a number of concerns (e.g., their relative ages, their absolute ages, who is actually the attending the child, etc.).

One type of caretaking and relationship has aroused special interest in the literature: "teaching" or "informal teaching" between siblings (see Cicirelli, 1994; Maynard, 2002; Rabain-Jamin, Maynard, & Greenfield, 2003; Volk, 1999; Zukow-Goldring, 2002). As these authors have shown, caring for younger siblings, in certain contexts, in part means explicitly

socializing them into cultural activities. Part of the great interest in informal teaching lies in the way in which it – in comparison to other kinds of caretaking – directly implicates the imputed intentionalities of its participants: what is at stake, after all, is the issue of whether or not a younger charge is understood to know how to go about some task in a sufficiently effective and appropriate way. Or, to put it as an aphorism: in such cases, it is the mind that is being minded.

Scholars of informal teaching have tended to focus on those characteristics of informal teaching that have consequences for the minding of minds – i.e., the learning process. In her account of sibling teaching in a Puerto Rican family, for example, Volk (1999) classifies the language used by sibling caretakers in terms of how specific utterances function to further the learning of a sibling kindergartner (as, for example, prompting the correct response, evaluating or assessing the correctness of a response, etc.). Similarly, Cicirelli (1994) maintains that sibling caretakers – in and through teaching, among other activities – help to further the social, emotional and cognitive development of their younger charges. Maynard argues that the reproduction of human sociability itself must depend in part on a notion of teaching (2002, p. 969) – i.e., implicitly, via the kind of learning that teaching fosters.

In this article, I ask a different – albeit compatible – kind of question about the informal teaching process: what kind of actor is understood, ideologically, as authorized to teach and how do they actually lay claim to this kind of authoritative identity (i.e., as a "teacher") in social interaction? To the extent that this kind of question has been pursued in the literature, it has been analyzed in terms of a "caregiving hierarchy" (Gaskins & Lucy, 1986; Ochs, 1988). The idea is that, in a specific sociocultural context, a given kind of caregiver (e.g., a father) is – in comparison to other kinds of caregivers (e.g., an older sibling, a mother) – understood to bear more or less responsibility (and, therefore, more or less authority) with respect to a young child (an authority enactable as an instance of informal teaching). In certain contexts, these relationships are presupposable enough that analysts can produce an ordering of social kinds ranked according to the degree to which some kind of actor bears responsibility for caregiving (that is, a "caregiving hierarchy").

I argue in this article that the presupposability of a "caregiving hierarchy" in informal teaching depends on two more basic kinds of social facts[1]: ideologies about the kind of actor that is authorized to teach (in other words, a "folk pedagogy" [Olson & Bruner, 1996]), and the interactional performance of that authoritative identity (understood as a process of "authorization" [Bucholtz & Hall, 2004]).[2]

The analysis of ideologies of pedagogy and their enactment raises issues of considerable theoretical import: when, for example, older siblings administer a younger sibling's everyday labor task (bringing water, washing), they mobilize a reflexive or metacultural awareness of the way-things-are-regularly-done – i.e., they mobilize a "theory of culture." In other words, the authority that an older sibling performs through teaching depends on laying claim to – or, developing and deploying a theory of – the purportedly conventional character of social life (that is, as something that can be taught). In doing so, they take up a task that, as we will see, is oftentimes highly regulated by ideologies of pedagogy. Within some community of (informal) pedagogy, ideologies specific the kinds of persons (e.g., a parent, sibling, peer, etc.) thought to be capable and sufficiently authorized to represent the way-things-are-regularly-done.

These theoretical insights make possible the following empirical questions. How does some ideology of pedagogy carve up a social world in terms of who may lay claim to the allegedly normative dimensions of everyday life (either as a "teacher" or "learner")? To what extent does the identity "older sibling" depend on a style of theorizing and deploying an account of normativity (qua Normativity)? These questions lead to a set of broader, theoretical ones: How does this kind of ideologized, metacultural appropriation warrant an actor's "authority" as a socializer across historical and sociocultural contexts? What are the psychosocial complexities of learning to deploy a "theory of culture" in interaction and how does such a theory relate to other interactionally consequential dimensions of social cognition (e.g., "theory of mind" [Astington & Baird, 2005; Levinson, 2006; Perner, 1991; Wellman, 1990])?[3]

I take up these questions in the context of Andean, Aymara-speaking Peruvian families – a context in which sibling caretaking and informal teaching is a central feature of everyday life. My substantive empirical task is to sketch out the sense in which authoritative identities like "oldest sibling" and "older sibling" are meaningful precisely because of the way in which these actors – using language in characteristic ways – are metaculturally positioned with respect to the allegedly normative or conventional dimensions of Aymara childhood life. Doing this requires an account of Aymara ideologies about who can assume the role of "teacher", the privileged authority of the oldest sibling, and the empirical material that is of central interest: the way in which older siblings, through a kind of informal instruction that I call "correction", come to occupy their authoritative position within folk pedagogy as an "older" and "more expert" instructor. First, however, a word is in order about the role that language plays in informal teaching.

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[1] Of course, a focus on these more basic facts does not necessarily mean that one cannot conceptually map out the loci of expertise in some sociocultural context (for example, in the form of a caregiving hierarchy); it means that such hierarchies are immanent to (and contingent on) ideologized forms of discursive activity.

[2] By gesturing toward the concept of "authorization", I mean to signal that the task a parent or older or oldest sibling faces in the course of informal instruction is in part a discursive or even linguistic one: they must effectively mobilize linguistic and non-linguistics signs that are understood in some sociocultural context as indexes of an authoritative identity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004; Chafe, 1993; Matoesian, 1999).

[3] One way of reading this article is as an anthropological attempt to develop a concept analogous in some ways to the concept of "theory of mind." See Luhrmann (2012) for a different take on an anthropological theory of mind.