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Growth to Autonomy

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My task in this paper is not just that of outlining a framework of thought for understanding how a new member of a society, a child, comes to be socialised and to act as those already in his society require him to act; it is to outline how he may, while still making sense to all those with whom he shares his life, come to act as he *himself* requires. In other words, I am interested in how men may develop a degree of autonomy while living within a system of conventions, with how they may become masters of their ways of life rather than being slaves to them - and surprisingly, perhaps, I shall argue that this kind of freedom *is only* possible for us within a community, that only through others can we ever come to know and learn how to control ourselves. Thus as a personality, as a human being with a self and with a persona, able to choose different ways of being and acting, the child does not appear in the world as the effect of a chain of causes; he appears, I shall suggest, as an active agent who, from the moment of his birth, in the course of interchanges with others, is engaged in the task of making himself into a being able to take his own 'place' amongst them.

What is 'always already there'?

In the study of child development recently, we have all been surprised by findings (Fantz 1961; Bower 1966, 1974) which seem to suggest that infants may show characteristic human responses to their environment much earlier than ever before expected. But what, exactly, do these brilliant researches show? While they may certainly be revealing of what is 'already there' in advance of experience for the child himself to call on, the task of understanding how the child learns to use what is 'already there' still remains.

If one is going to be a person, acting in the knowledge of who and what one is and what one is trying to do in relation to the others with whom one is sharing one's life, then something more than merely behaving in ways that others can recognise is involved - one must be able to recognise what one is doing oneself.

In other words, genuine human action is essentially 'reflexive' in a way organic activity is not.

Now while the child as an organism may seem to be provided innately with the capacities to act in many different ways, 'where' might the potential source of knowledge be located about the different particular uses to which these, otherwise rather indeterminate, capacities may be put? Well, the way in which a new member of

a social world finds the structure of it already 'pre-established', seems to me to be rather well put by Berger and Luckman (1971, pp 77-78) who, following Schutz, say:

> *An institutional world . . . is experienced as an objective reality. It has a history that antedates the individual's birth and is not accessible to his biographical recollection. It was there before he was born, and it will be there after his death. This history itself, as the tradition of the existing institutions, has the character of objectivity. The individual's biography is apprehended as an episode located within the objective history of the society. The institutions, as historical and objective facilities, confront the individual as undeniable facts. The institutions are there, whether he likes it or not. He cannot wish them away . . . Since institutions exist as external reality, the individual cannot understand them by introspection. He must 'go out' and learn about them, just as he must to learn about nature. This remains true even though the human world, as a humanly produced reality, is potentially understandable in a way not possible in the case of the natural world.*

In other words, the knowledge which the child must acquire if he is to learn how to put his innate capacities to use, intelligibly and responsibly, is 'out there', in his society, encoded, not as ideas in people's heads, *but in the practical activities of everyday life.*

And this is a really most important point: the classical image of man that we seem to have inherited from the Greeks, is of man as thinking subject, set over against the world as an object. In our new approach, man is primarily a doer, immersed in the world as an agent who has the power to act on the world and to change it to accord more with his own needs and interests (Shotter, 1975). Reflective thought is a secondary activity, occurring if at all only when man is withdrawn from practical activities; and his thinking then may or may not serve to inform his subsequent doings. Thus, in the view I am taking, practice precedes theory of it.

In other words, a mother acts to motivate certain types of activity in her child - Schutz (1953) would say, she provides a *because-motive;* he acts because of what she does. On the other hand, having motivated some characteristically human activity, she now acts to interpret it as having a *meaning:* 'Oh look,' she says, after having got her infant to look at her by cooing and smiling at him, having placed her face in his line of regard, 'he's looking at me'. So she replies to his (?) look with a 'Hello, hello you cheeky thing'. The point here being that whatever she does, she interprets her baby's activity as something which he himself does, not merely as something she has succeeded in eliciting from him; it is thus activity worthy of being treated as an expression in a dialogue, an expression requiring a meaningful reply. She thus supplies him with what Schutz (1953) would call an *in-order-to motive* as well; for here he learns what he can bring about by his actions.

As an example of the way in which the intelligent adjustment of the adult to the child's own activity may function to elicit complex human action from him that he might not otherwise express, Newson and Newson (in press) have described well, I think, the task of getting a supine 4-week old infant to follow visually a dangling ring:

In this superficially simple task, the test demonstrator will carefully attend, not just to the general state of arousal of the infant, but to his precise focus and line of regard. Having 'hooked' the attention of the infant upon the ring, one then begins gingerly to move it across his field of vision in such a way that the infant's eyes continue to hold the object with successive fixations until eventually the head follows the eyes in that co-ordinated overall movement pattern which denotes successful tracking. If the test object is moved too suddenly, or is left static too long, the visual attention of the infant will flag and the attempt will have to begin all over again from scratch. In this instance, what is in fact happening is a highly skilled monitoring by the adult and a consequent adjustment of the dangling object, moment by moment, depending on the feedback which is being obtained from the spontaneous actions of the infant.

Thus, as they go on to say, 'the resulting action sequence of the infant is therefore a combination of his own activity and an intelligent manipulation of that activity by the much more sophisticated adult partner'. It is in the sense then, that the child can be a competent participant in interactive exchanges such as these that he may properly be counted as 'one term in a personal relation'.

Lock (1975a) points out how the way in which a child raises his arms just before being picked up, comes to be used by him as a gesture meaning 'I want to be picked up', just because his mother treats it as such. But all kinds of movements may be institutionalised between people as gestures. In another paper, Lock (1075b) describes how he chose to respond to the arm flapping that was manifested as a part of an infant's excited reaction before an out of reach object as if it meant 'I want it'. Acting as if that was its meaning, Lock induced the child to address him with an arm flapping gesture whenever there was something he wanted Lock to fetch for him. Such examples may surely be multiplied; but whereas these gestures are rather idiosyncratic, micro-institutions, existing between just two individuals, other forms of gesture - like pointing - that the child may learn at an early age, are part of the institution existing between us all in our society. And in learning it, the child is learning not just to communicate with his mother, but with us all; he is learning to be one of us.

Mothers as investigators and negotiators

Let me move on now to discuss more extensive enterprises involving connected sequences of acts; and in particular, I want to describe how mothers investigate their children's actions for their meanings, and how they *negotiate* possible meanings with them.

In an incident Shotter and Gregory (1976) describe, a mother is attempting to show her young child (Samantha, aged 11 months), how to place shaped pieces on a form-board. Having just physically helped her little girl place one of the pieces correctly, Samantha's mother then said 'Oh, clever girl'. But Samantha did not pause in her activity and signal by eye contact and smiling that she *knew* that she had just done something of significance, she just went straight away on to manipulating another piece. So her mother leant forward, caught her eye, and repeated her 'marker' more

emphatically: 'AREN'T YOU CLEVER'. Samantha then stopped, and smiled at her mother for a moment, and then her mother continued to try to help her once more.

Now the point I want to make in describing this episode is that mothers are not satisfied with their children just doing the tasks that they require of them. The children must also give indications in their actions that they did what they did as a result of trying to do it, that they knew what was required of them, that their actions were based in some knowledge of the socially defined requirements of the situation. They must come to show in their actions, not just an awareness of their physical circumstances, but a *self*-awareness; that is, an awareness of the nature of their relations to others. And thus mothers 'analyse' the knowledge in their actions by testing it for its implications - 'If she (Samantha) knows that what she's just done is significant then she should expect or at least accept acknowledgement for me . . . I will give it . . . She doesn't accept it . . . .Therefore she does not, perhaps, yet know', says Samantha's mother, in effect. And as she doesn't yet seem to know about these things, her mother provides her with yet another occasion on which she may learn. Mothers can be seen then to be actively investigating their child's activities to see if they have put the correct interpretation upon them.

So far, in discussing the interpretations that mothers put upon their child's activities, I have tended to present it as if it were a 'one-pass' affair; as if a mother just arrives at an interpretation and then acts upon the basis of it. But the example presented above tends to suggest a more complex process. It must be a matter quite often of an initially wrong or inadequate interpretation being modified in the light of subsequent 'investigations' until a result acceptable to both parties is achieved. In other words, there is a social process of *negotiation* involved. And the point about the negotiation of interpretations here is really quite general: the meaning of an action (or utterance) is not just a matter of the intention it expresses, it is also a matter of how it is taken. The character of people's activities is something to be negotiated amongst those who are concerned with the meanings being communicated and the projects to which they relate - the same activity being seen as having any one of a number of different interpretations according to the overarching project in which it is included.

Now in acting like this, as an investigator and negotiator of her child's activities and their interpretation, the mother might be said to be acting as a 'double-agent': for she is acting both on her own behalf and also her infant's behalf in what goes on.

At first, an infant clearly has little power to satisfy his own needs. But to the extent that a mother can interpret her infant's behaviour as having an intention to it (no matter how vague and indefinite it may be on his part), she can help him to complete or fulfil it, and in the process 'negotiate' a satisfaction of his needs with him. The child's action is thus made to eventuate in a consequence that is at least intelligible to her; and she does it by rendering herself available to him as an 'instrument' or 'mechanism' acting to produce a result which she feels may be one 'intended' in his activity - whether it is the actual, precise intention in his activity, no one can say, least of all the child, for his activity is so diffuse and uninformed that any intention there may be in it at all must be presumed to be, at this stage, really indeterminate.

As a result of her help, as a result of the way in which a mother completes the realisation of what might possibly be her child's intention, his actions may become incorporated into the circle of reciprocal exchange between them both. Thus he learns to act, both in expressing himself and in manipulating the things about him, in such a way that *at least it makes sense to her* - the child himself not understanding till later the nature of *what* it is that he is actually doing, it being enough at first that he understands *how* to do it. And thus the process continues, with the child being 'helped' by his mother in this way to retrospectively evaluate his states of feeling and the consequences of his actions. Now it is not so much in this process that he experiences new states of feeling or performs new patterns of action that have never ever occurred to him before, that would otherwise be biologically unavailable to him, but that he learns *meanings or socially significant uses* for feelings that he may have or movements that he might make any time. He comes to learn the way other people fulfil the meaning in his movements, so that later he may fulfil their meaning himself - as Mead (1934, p.46) puts it: 'the . . . gesture becomes a significant symbol . . . when it has the same effect on the individual making it that it has upon the individual to whom it is addressed . . . and thus involves a reference to the self of the individual making it'. In acquiring knowledge of how to order his activities in relation to others, the child *himself* learns how to act; he learns, gradually, how not to act like a child, reliant upon others to complete and give meaning to his behaviour, but to relate what he does and what he feels to his own knowledge of his own momentary 'position' in his culture; he relates his own activity to his *self.*

The non-causal process of child development

This is what a child may learn, then, in his exchanges with others; but then again he may not. The work of Bernstein (1971, 1972) and Hess and Shipman (1965) suggest some reasons for this. For Bernstein too takes it that practice precedes theory. And that in learning language, in learning how to mean, one is not learning to grasp a general *idea* of language which, once grasped, may be put to use to inform any utterance, for any use, at any time. One is learning simply to participate in a great rag-bag of different linguistic institutions. And what particular linguistic practices one learns depends upon one's particular, everyday life linguistic exchanges: one may learn to joke and to commiserate, for instance, but fail to learn to describe or to command others - at least, in some contexts. Thus if one is going to learn theorising as a practical skill, especially theorising about the nature of one's own social life in order to deliberate upon, and to plan one's future courses of action, one must engage oneself in exchanges with those in whom this is already an everyday life activity; being instructed in the theory of a practice is of little use if one is not being also instructed at the same time in the practice itself. Thus it is that children may fail to learn things if they miss the opportunity to engage in certain kinds of social exchange.

But even with such opportunities, the child may still fail to learn. For the child is not just a passive recipient of all the ministrations of others, inevitably shaped one way or another by what is done to it - as some purveyors of educational theories seem to suggest (and hope). The child seems to be an active agent in the process of his own development. A mother cannot *cause* him to do anything (like one may cause one

billiard-ball to strike another if one hits it appropriately with the cue); she can only intelligently interlace her actions with his in an attempt merely to help his development. How he responds to what she does is up to him and the extent to which he has learnt to use what he can do in ways which make sense to her. So, although we might hope that one day we will know *for certain* how to educate our children, know in fact how to *cause* their development, if children really are agents in their own development, then that will be impossible. The best we can hope for is a realistic understanding of what will actually help. And this is surely better than the illusory hope that we can find certain ways of causing their development, thus misleading ourselves and them in all kinds of quite irrelevant and positively unhelpful ways.

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LAURA DILLON

TALKS TO THE EDITOR

How did you start?

How did you get into this?

Well, I was pretty unturned on to a lot of things through high school and then when I went to college in Boston . . . you know from a suburb to a big city and it was like