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## 10 The acquisition of a child by a learning disability

R. P. McDermott

Conceived as a deficiency in capacity, feeble-mindedness *isolates* the subject by virtue of that deficiency. In seeking a definite cause of feeble-mindedness one is denying that it can have any *meaning* – that is, a history – or that it may correspond to a *situation*.

(Maud Mannoni, 1972, p. 44)

The interiority of pains, afterimages and spots before the eyes cannot impugn the overt, public character of cognitive skills, or the external aims of practical moral decisions. It is only when mental activity regains its place within everyday life, therefore that its outer directness becomes finally clear.

(Stephen Toulmin, 1985, p. 17)

The emergence of institutionalized education is accompanied by a crisis in diffuse education, which goes directly from practice to practice without passing through discourse. Excellence has ceased to exist once people start asking whether it can be taught, i.e., as soon as the objective confrontation of different styles of excellence makes it necessary to say what goes without saying, justify what is taken for granted, make an ought-to-be and an ought-to-do out of what had up to then been regarded as the only way to be and do.

(Pierre Bourdieu, 1977, p. 200)

Sometimes if you try harder and harder, it just gets worse and worse.

(Adam, 1977, third grade)

From 1976 to 1978, Michael Cole, Lois Hood, and I gathered a series of videotapes from one classroom of eight- and nine-year-old

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children in various settings. Our effort at the time was to locate the children "thinking" aloud in the hope that we could identify naturally occurring examples of some mental activities that seemed so well defined in experimental settings. Our concern was that activities like attending, remembering, problem solving, and the like, although often invoked in formal institutional descriptions of our children, in fact had few referents in their daily lives. It wasn't just that no one had ever seen a memory, for various unseen things (electrons, gods, missing stars that fill out a navigator's imagination) have had a useful theoretical career without being seen; it was rather that we had no way to gauge the usefulness of the theories we had available about memory, attention, or problem solving. If experimental psychology was to be useful in the description of individual learners, as different perhaps from the task of modeling how "minds" might work, then a tighter and more systematic fit would have to be achieved between experimental tasks and the demands on people as they lived their lives and plied their learning.

Our suspicion, and ultimately our conclusion, was that little such fit could be expected to the extent that psychology relied theoretically and methodologically on predefined tasks to probe the minds of individual persons. The problem was that in everyday life persons and tasks never quite stand still; the gap between subject and object, between stimulus and response, could not be filled by positing models of what was happening inside the organism, for the reason that neither subject nor object, neither stimulus nor response, was available for analysis as it was sequenced in the experience of persons in the lived world. In everyday life, tasks could be ongoingly altered, reframed, and pushed aside in ways that made it impossible for an experimenter to anticipate or to take systematically into account. Experimental cognitive psychology, we concluded, was condemned to a life of ecological invalidity; there was no systematic way of reasoning from experimental results to a description of individuals living out their institutional lives together (Cole, Hood, & McDermott, 1978). On the basis of experimental data, guesses could be made about how to handle our children, but it was not clear just what informed the guessing or how we might judge its adequacy.<sup>1</sup>

As an offshoot of our main concern, we became fascinated by how we might describe the learning biographies of different children.

There was Nadine, who seemed to know most things and to learn quickly whatever she did not already know; there was Reggie, who seemed to know a great deal about everything but how to get along with his peers; there was Matt, who hid out for the year and seemingly never engaged in any official, school-learning task; and there was Adam, who suffered as an officially described Learning Disabled (LD) child, but who seemed always eager to try. It was this last child who most captured our focus. As soon as we went to tell his story of course, we were immersed once again in the problems of how to do an ecologically valid description. His head did not seem to work very well on isolated cognitive tasks, either on standardized tests given by the school reading specialist or on the more theoretically sensitive tasks we gave him. Did we really want to describe what went on in his head? Just what was the phenomenon under investigation anyway? Where is LD to be found? Is it to be "found" at all? Is it anything more than a way of talking about some children and available for analysis only as a kind of rhetoric? Might it not best be described as a political label, a resource for keeping people in their place, a "display board" for the contradictions of our school system? We tried to consider all the options (Cole & Traupmann, 1981; Hood, McDermott, & Cole, 1980). The present chapter revives Adam's story in order to raise some questions about various approaches to the explanation of learning failures and to provide a focus for an account of notions of context and learning.

### The argument

The title displays the theoretical edge of the chapter.<sup>2</sup> LD is usually assumed to be acquired by children due to some lapse in their development. By the normal line of reasoning, the child is the unit of analysis, and the disability is a mishap that scars a child's road to competence. This chapter suggests an alternative way of thinking about the problem. LD exists as a category in our culture, and it will acquire a certain proportion of our children as long as it is given life in the organization of tasks, skills, and evaluations in our schools. In the daily construction of settings called educative in American culture, moments are put aside for the discovery, description, and remediation of certain children who display particular traits (Mehan,

1992, this volume; Mehan, Hertwick, & Meihls, 1986; Sarason & Doris, 1979). Although the folk theory has it that the traits (an inability to pay attention, an occasional lapse in word access, trouble with phonics, etc.) belong to the child and are the source of both the disordered behavior and the subsequent label, it is possible to argue that it is the labels that precede any child's entry into the world and that these labels, well-established resting places in adult conversations, stand poised to take their share from each new generation. What Goffman (1979) claimed for gender identity is no less true for LD:

What the human nature of males and females really consists of, then is a capacity to learn to provide and to read depictions of masculinity and femininity and a willingness to adhere to a schedule for presenting these pictures. . . . One might just as well say there is no gender identity. There is only a schedule for the portrayal of gender. . . . There is only evidence of the practice between the sexes of choreographing behaviorally a portrait of relationship. (p. 8)

We might just as well say there is no such thing as LD, only a social practice of displaying, noticing, documenting, remediating, and explaining it. This theoretical shift makes LD no less real to the participants of life in schools where occasions for displaying LD are so frequent, but it should at least make us wonder what we all do that makes LD so commonly sensible and ubiquitous in our experiences with institutionalized learning. *Notice that the claim here is not that we have no children who for whatever reason learn much slower or in different ways than others. It is only that without social arrangements for making something of differential rates of learning, there is no such thing as LD.* In America, we make something of differential rates of learning to the point that the rate of learning rather than the learning is the total measure of the learner. In another culture, or in our own if one is rich enough to receive an appropriately protective education, learning problems might slow a person down, but they do not have to destroy the learner.<sup>3</sup> Not all cultures make a fuss over different ways of learning. We seem to be extreme in this regard. There are great constraints on how childhood can be constructed in any given culture (Belmonte, 1989; Chamboredon & Prevot, 1975; Poster, 1980; Ramirez, 1990; Wartofsky, 1983). In allowing schools to become the site of sorting for recruitment into the wider social structure, we may

have gone too far for the collective good. We may have made it necessary to invent occasions – millions of them – to make learning disabilities institutionally and unnecessarily consequential.

The good sense of a social structural and cultural account of LD can emerge from questions about the institutional arrangements served by having so many children designated LD. By institutional arrangements, we must consider everything from the most local level of the classroom to the more inclusive level of inequities throughout the political economy (preferably from both ends of the continuum at the same time). After following Adam for 18 months, we gave up on specifying his traits as the explanation of his behavior and began talking instead about what happened around him daily that seemed to organize his moments as an LD person. Even at this most local level, we could find that many people were involved in Adam's problem. On any occasion of his looking inattentive, for example, it took Adam to look away at just the right time, but it took many others to construct the right time for Adam to look away; it took others to look away from his looking away, and still more to discover his looking away, to make something of it, to diagnose it, to document it, and to remediate it. Whatever was Adam's problem inside his head, we had forced on us the recognition that Adam had plenty of problems all around him, in every person on the scene, in most every scene called educative. Analytically, the inside of his head became less interesting to us. The work that the participants did around Adam's disability and the sequencing of that work with other conversations required of persons in education became the phenomena of interest. It is in this vein that we claimed that Adam's disability was not just visible in the sense that the world was a neutral medium for what he could not do, but that the world was precisely organized for making his disability apparent, that he was the negative achievement of a school system that insisted that everyone do better than everyone else (Hood, McDermott, & Cole, 1980).

#### Context

To gain support for such an account, a description would have to focus less on the traits of the children labeled and more on the contexts for the interactional display and management of the

traits at just the right moments for all to notice. Context becomes a key term, not just in the common sense of the named organizational "thing" in which a "disability" becomes visible, but in the more demanding sense of the analytic device by which members' activities are shown to be constitutive of both the named organizational setting and the disability in ways that make them a function of each other and subject to erasure as units of analysis at any moment in which they cannot be shown to be mutually constitutive (Byers, 1985; McDermott, Gospodinoff, & Aron, 1978; Schefflen, 1973). This is a difficult notion, which has been given a nice image by Birdwhistell (in McDermott, 1980):

I like to think of it as a rope. The fibers that make up the rope are discontinuous; when you twist them together, you don't make *them* continuous, you make the *thread* continuous. . . . The thread has no fibers in it, but, if you break up the thread, you can find the fibers again. So that, even though it may look in a thread as though each of those particles is going all through it, that isn't the case. That's essentially the descriptive model. (p. 4)

In school, Adam is a fiber, or many fibers, if you like. So are those about him. Together, they make up a rope. The category LD can be one way to name the rope, and, at the level of the rope, it might make sense to talk of Adam as disabled. If he spends his day arranging, with the help of his friends, not getting caught not knowing how to do some school task, he might well, however substantial his mind, finish school without having learned much in the way of received knowledge and having been made, in effect, for such tasks under such conditions, LD. But notice that the disability in this case does not belong to Adam. A fiber cannot make a rope, and the very existence of a rope arranges for the fibers to disappear as units of analysis.<sup>4</sup> Adam is a fiber, which, when joined by other fibers, helps to make the rope, or in this case the category LD, into the unit of analysis. It is not so much that Adam is disabled as that he participates in a scene well organized for the institutional designation of someone as LD. In their concerted activities, people arrange LD as a context for the management of persons in situ. People mutually constitute contexts for each other by erasing themselves, by giving themselves over to a new level of organization, which, in turn, ac-

quires them and keeps them informed of what they are doing together. It is in this sense that LD is a context that acquires children.

It is possible to add a visual image to Birdwhistell's insight with the "twisted-cord illusion" (see Figure 10.1a; from Fraser, 1908). It is a set of concentric circles, which, when placed against a particular background, gives the appearance of a spiral (or, alternatively phrased, it is a spiral, which, when not placed against a particular background, give the appearance of a set of concentric circles). The effect is strong enough that, if one is asked to follow any of the circles, one's finger easily follows the eye into the center of the circle; only by a more careful tracing do the concentric circles become apparent. With only a slightly different background, Fraser was able to alter the apparent shape of another set of concentric circles into a set of round-angled squares (Figure 10.1b). The easy point is that the context or background overwhelms the text or foreground. For purposes of an analogy for the human sciences, the more interesting point is that text and context, foreground and background, shape each other. There are only two kinds of fiber in these twisted ropes. The concentric circles are made of alternating streaks of black and its apparent absence, the latter made clear by its contrast to both the black streaks and the black squares in the background. It is not just that the fibers are analytically unavailable when one is focusing on the rope, it is that half the fibers do not exist except in contrast to other fibers and other parts of the background. All parts of the system define all the other parts of the system. Without the background, there are neither ropes nor fibers.<sup>5</sup>

### Learning

The argument put forth about Adam's disability requires not just a shift away from our commonsense notion of context, but a disruption of our most cherished notions about learning. Again we can turn to Birdwhistell (in McDermott, 1980) for a formulation. Note that he uses the terms *teaching* and *learning* interchangeably.

We've always assumed that teaching is a special activity which necessarily goes on in special contexts in which certain orders of learning also occur. In my opinion in

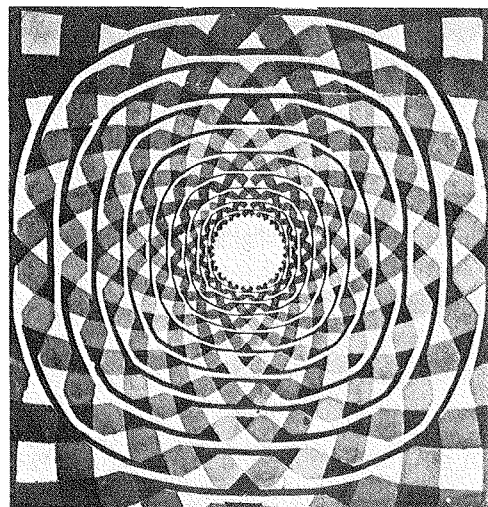
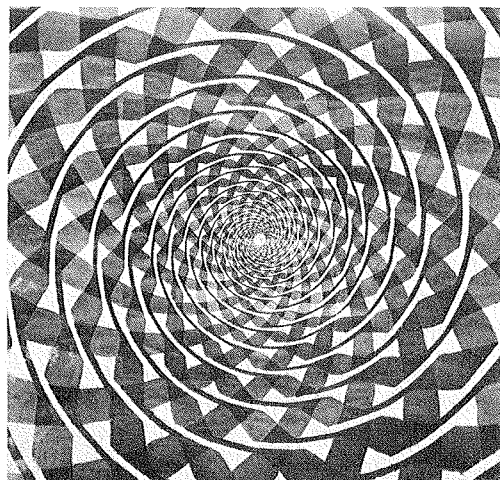


Figure 10.1a and 1b. From Fraser (1908). Reprinted with permission from Cambridge University Press.

organizing such as activity, you are dealing with a calibration in which the behavior is at least as parallel as it is complementary and in which there are acted out, patterned participations, systematic dances which take place.

I've been concerned with the difference between that model of teaching which is seen to come out of a dyadic (the so-called teacher-student) relationship and that model of teaching which comes from a contextually well-defined relationship in which the critical issue is the maintenance of the appropriate contact at the appropriate level. What I am concerned with are the conditions that maintain the contact in which the information not yet stored in specific instructions moves into the system and becomes a part of it so that "learning" can take place. (p. 16)<sup>6</sup>

In order to describe Adam, or better, in order to figure out what we had described after we spent a year trying to describe Adam, we needed a theory of learning that could take into account that learning is not an individual possession. The term *learning* simply glosses that some persons have achieved a particular relationship with each other, and it is in terms of these relations that information necessary to everyone's participation gets made available in ways that give people enough time on task to get good at what they do. If that happens enough, it can be said that learning happens. It probably makes more sense to talk about how learning acquires people more than it makes sense to talk about how people acquire learning. Individually we may spend our time trying to learn things, but this phenomenon pales before the fact that, however hard we try, we can only learn what is around to be learned. If a particular kind of learning is not made socially available to us, there will be no learning to do. This is a primary fact that we have made little use of theoretically. If we can stop focusing on who learns more or less of particular, culturally well-defined fragments of knowledge, and ask questions instead about what is around to be learned, in what circumstances, and to what end, learning achievements would become statements about the points of contact available to persons in various social settings (Lave, 1988a, b). What could LD be in such a world?

Before extending the arguments about context and learning in a discussion of various approaches we have available for the description of children like Adam, it is necessary to introduce Adam in the various settings in which we came to know him.

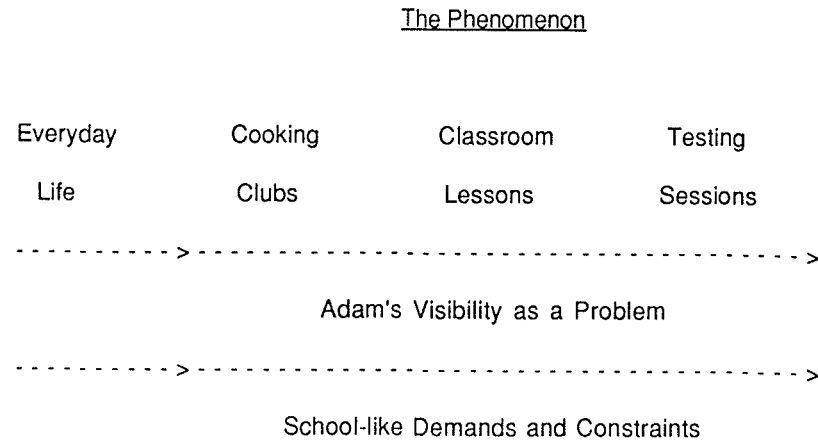


Figure 10.2. The phenomenon.

### Adam, Adam, Adam, and Adam

Because we were interested in the social organization of learning and thinking, we followed the children in Adam's class across a number of settings. When the class went away to a farm for a few days, we went with them. We used school holidays to take individual children around the city. We videotaped all the children in their classrooms, in some one-to-one testing settings, and, most extensively, in afternoon activity clubs that we set up for them two days a week. We were often struck with how much some children varied across the different settings. Adam stood out as the child who varied the most, and we can use the order in that variation to organize our discussion.

There were four settings in which we knew Adam fairly well: Everyday Life, Cooking Club, Classroom Lessons, and Testing Sessions. We can roughly gloss them along a continuum displaying either Adam's visibility as a problem (from invisible to a source of constant embarrassment), or schoollike demands (from fairly loose to very constrained). Figure 10.2 tries to capture that Adam was least visible as a problem in Everyday Life situations. He appeared in every way competent, and, more than most of the children, he could be wonderfully charming, particularly if there was a good story to tell. In the Cooking Club, Adam was only a little more visible as a

problem. When he worked with his friend Peter, he got his cake made without any trouble. When he had to work with someone else, there were often some arguments, some tears, and some taunting from others before he could get his work done. Classroom Lessons presented the same story, although troubles were more frequent, and the adults seemed to be drawn more obviously into his problem in the sense that they would try to reframe the task he was facing or they would chastise him for his misbehavior. Finally in the Testing Sessions, Adam stood out from his peers not just by his dismal performance but by the wild guesswork he tried to do.

As the settings differed in the degree to which Adam stood out as a problem, so they differed along a continuum to the extent that they were schoollike in their constraints and their demands. Our question about how to describe Adam turned into a question about how to describe the settings in which the different Adams could emerge. Our initial efforts focused on identifying how these different settings could call the different Adams forth, and to that end we transcribed our tapes and worried about the details of the conversations that were made available for Adam's different displays of competence. For the purposes of this chapter we need to ask a subsequent, and yet more primitive question that, although having emerged from much data analysis, demands much less in the way of data display. Our effort in this chapter is to identify some of the approaches one could take to the description of the continuum, to point to some of the pretheoretical assumptions each makes about the nature of context and learning, and to extract what might be the most useful notions for our own purposes. The first approach focuses on the inadequacy in Adam's head, the second on the arbitrariness of the tasks Adam is asked to work on, and the third on the interactional dilemmas thrown in Adam's way as he moves through school.

### The continuum of difficulty and deficit

The approach most immediately available to common sense describes the continuum from Everyday Life to Testing Sessions in terms of difficulty. Everyday life is popularly understood to be the least demanding of the various settings we occupy during the course of our days. There is the argument from Bartlett (1958), rarely

challenged, that in Everyday Life one can get away with all sorts of sloppy reasoning, forgetting, and losing track in a way that schools, and other institutional settings similarly constrained (courtrooms, accounting offices, etc.), would never allow. By this way of theorizing, Testing Sessions stand at the opposite end of the continuum from Everyday Life, because they demand so much precision in calculation and clarity in argument. There is no "ya know" clause possible on a test; the reader cannot be expected to fill in the blank spaces or to make sense of what the test taker does not make clear. Testing Sessions are hard. Classroom Lessons only sometimes less so. Cooking Clubs generally less so. And Everyday Life generally undemanding. In comparison to tests, it takes fewer mental steps to get through our daily chores; we do not have to keep as much in mind. So it is argued.<sup>7</sup>

By our most popular line of folk reasoning, Adam becomes more visible as we move across the continuum because he is performing less well in the face of increasing demands. Under the loose constraints of Everyday Life, Adam can blend into the crowd and do what he has to do without anyone worrying about the quality of his mind. In the Cooking Club, this is equally true when he can work with Peter, who can read the recipe and oversee the step-by-step planning of the cake. When he cannot work with Peter, he has to work hard to arrange for someone else's cooperation, and, if that is not forthcoming, he begins to stand out. In Classroom Lessons, the tasks can be even more demanding, and Adam appears even less adequate to meeting the challenge. A close inspection of the classroom tapes showed Adam acting out on those occasions when he could be called on to perform. For example, while the teacher was asking the class questions and calling on children for answers, Adam could be found crawling under his work table, giving the finger to a friend, and so on; when the teacher switched to the next part of the lesson and called the children forward to see a demonstration, Adam would join the crowd. When the going gets cognitively demanding, Adam stands out; otherwise, he is part of the crowd.

This approach has its attractions. It is coherent enough to support the bulk of professional interpretations of our children's learning troubles in and out of school. Adam had not been spared professional labels. His LD was well documented not just by the school, but by a

university reading clinic that he attended for tutoring. As much as he seemed fine in Everyday Life, school work seemed terribly hard for him. Although Adam's case was extreme, this is an experience that we all recognize. That Everyday Life seems easier than Testing Sessions is a basic fact of life for us all, and tying it to cognitive difficulties makes great intuitive sense. In addition, once questions about children are framed in these terms, once our inquiry is narrowed down to the question of what is wrong with this or that child, support for a deficit theory can be found wherever one looks. If we go to our tapes of Adam and his friends, they constantly behaved as if they avoided tasks that were too difficult for them, and they worried about looking like they could have a deficit of some kind. If they did get caught not knowing something important, they offered excuses. In the Testing Sessions, Adam hardly seems to address the tasks at hand. Given that they are so hard, he simply uses what extratask information he can get to guess at the answer. If he has to choose between cup and spoon for the answer, he says, "Cu- um-spoon" slowly enough to pick the answer that the tester seems to respond to; it is easier to use Everyday Life cues than to think out the questions. In the Cooking Club, if isolated from Peter and faced with thinking demands, he goes off to play with a friend; if there is no choice but to confront the task, he can feign crying or an allergy attack until someone comes to his aid. He can also be quite clear about his troubles; in a Classroom Lesson, he throws down his pencil and says that he can't do it - "It's too hard." Cognitive difficulties separate those who can from those who cannot and make the deficits obvious.

The deficit approach rests on a number of assumptions of questionable validity, however. Although it is true that Everyday Life *seems* easier than life in school, there is no reason to assume that the difference has only to do with increased cognitive demands. The tasks do not have to be cognitively more complex for us to experience them as harder. The trouble could lie along other dimensions; for example, school tasks could be harder simply because they are more arbitrarily constructed, or because an inadequate performance on school tasks could lead to a degradation ceremony. Experience is a good beginning place for an analysis, but we cannot risk the assumption that our experience can deliver the categories we need to complete an analysis. Apparent cognitive difficulty could be a cover for



other realities, a fact that could make deficit and disability inappropriate words for describing Adam.

If we examine the notions of context and learning inherent in the deficit approach, we can gain a little more insight into what we are getting ourselves into when we describe someone as LD. In the deficit theory, as in all commonsense uses of the term, context refers to an empty slot, a container, into which other things are placed. It is the "con" that contains the "text," the bowl that contains the soup. As such, it shapes the contours of its contents; it has its effects only at the borders of the phenomenon under analysis. Notice how different this image is from Birdwhistell's image of the fibers and rope. In the static sense of context, the fibers remain fibers, each unto itself, no matter what their relations with the other fibers or how they are used in a rope. Adam is Adam, and, though different contexts might shape his behavior with different demands, he is what he is. Behind the moment-to-moment relations between things, there are the things, and it is the things that count. The soup does not shape the bowl, and the bowl most certainly does not alter the substance of the soup. Text and context, soup and bowl, fiber and rope, Adam and the various learning scenes, all can be analytically separated and studied on their own without doing violence to the complexity of their situation. A static sense of context delivers a stable world.

Accompanying this sense of context is a static theory of learning. By this account, knowledge and skill enter heads, where they wait passively for situations in which they might prove useful. School-derived knowledge and skill are supposed to generalize and to make children ready for a wide range of adaptive behaviors. The learner is a passive container, filled up by his efforts in school, slowly gathering up the skills purportedly essential to some jobs that will eventually have to be tackled. The problem with LD children is that they enter school without some rudimentary skills for paying attention and processing information. They are hard to fill. Some school situations are easier on them than some others, but in the long run their inability to keep pace with their peers forces them to stand out and fall even further behind. They are what they are; learner and environment are separable, and they do not greatly alter each other.

These static assumptions about context and learning are supported by static notions of both language and culture. The deficit theory

assumes that language and culture are storehouses from which children acquire their competence. Some children get more and some get less. These are assertions about which we should be most uncomfortable. Language it seems is not available to the species just for purposes of expression, but for purposes of social alignment, for purposes of getting people into the necessary configurations for certain cultural jobs to get done (Bilmes, 1986; McDermott & Tylbor, 1986; Volosinov, 1929/1973; Wieder, 1974). When language is systematically unavailable to some, it is important that we not limit our explanation to the traits of the persons involved; it is equally essential that we take into account the interactional circumstances that position the people in the world with a differential access to the common tongue (McDermott, 1988). Similarly, it has become increasingly clear that any seeming lack of culture on the parts of some represents a systematic position within a cultural continuum of display only; that is, one way to be a perfectly normal member of a culture is to be a person who seemingly lacks what other members of the culture claim to have (Drummond, 1980; Varenne, 1983; Varenne & McDermott, 1986). Language and culture are not a gold-standard currency with only so much to go around; they are more like phonologies, in which each sound, each position in the mouth, is significant only as it is defined by the other sounds, and no sound is any more real, any more rich, or any more privileged than any other.

The social policy that flows from these static notions of context, learning, language, and culture are easily recognizable to us. Those who do not get enough knowledge from home or school need to be encouraged to get some more. They need to acquire more language and culture in order to be ready for more situations. They cannot afford to learn on the job; they cannot afford to assume that they will be shaped by new contexts, or that the language and culture that they need will be available to them in situ. They need to get more things in their heads to cut down their deficits in the face of difficult demands.

When we line up for consideration the assumptions about context, learning, language, and culture, we have to wonder whether we have available in the deficit theory a way of describing anything that is alive. Certainly, these static models have given us some predictive powers; for example, children called LD early in school generally



continue to do badly. But we must remember here Gramsci's (1971) warning that we are not seeking a science of people that only predicts behavior; if things are not good today, there is little use for a science that simply tells us that they will be the same tomorrow.<sup>8</sup> Science should not assume that people are dead; nor should it help to choke them to death with categories that do not reveal the rich lives and struggles of all who appear left behind. In choosing an approach to Adam, we must be careful that we do not trust our common sense too much; if it were as sturdy a guide as we would like, why are we and many of our children in so much trouble. The same facts that we have suggested as support for a deficit approach to Adam's problem can be understood in other ways, and possibly with better results.

#### **The continuum of arbitrary demands and left-out participants**

The second way of looking at the range in Adam's performances has us focusing less on Adam and more on the tasks he is asked to perform. In *Everyday Life*, Adam can use any resources to get a job done. If he has to remember a telephone number, he can memorize it, write it down, call information, or ask a friend. School tasks are different from this in that a person is often restricted in what he can make use of; procedure is of the essence. On tests, this trend is exaggerated. What else is a test but an occasion on which you cannot use any of the resources normally available for solving some problem; memory notes or helping friends are now called cheating. Is it possible that Adam is better understood as a child who is faced not by increasingly more difficult tasks, but increasingly more arbitrary tasks? We were quite sensitive to this possibility at the time when we first looked at Adam. At the very least, cross-cultural psychology had been extraordinarily clear in showing how various kinds of smartness could be reduced to apparent ignorance in the face of culturally arbitrary and cross-culturally foolish tasks (Cole & Means, 1981). We were interested in the possibility that the same problem existed in our own schools, most obviously for children from culturally and linguistically different minority groups, and more generally for us all at different times in our school career.

In *Everyday Life*, Adam found the resources at his disposal more than adequate. In the Cooking Club, he had an equivalent freedom if he was working with a friend. If, however, he was working with someone who was not willing to help, or if the people around him were trying to outdo him, then the task of cooking suddenly became more difficult. It is not just the case that Cooking Club can be made easy by someone helping Adam to do what he cannot; it is rather that, under the gentle circumstances of working with the friend to make a cake together, he can do what he cannot do if the task is both to make a cake and not to get caught not knowing how to read a recipe. In the Cooking Club, we quite by accident organized some confusing circumstances for children of this age: for example, a two-cup cup, teaspoon and tablespoon, baking soda and baking powder, ingredients on one side of the page and instructions on the other side. Adam's friend Peter is one of the children who could sort out these problems; when working with Peter, Adam not only followed the directions Peter reads to him, he sometimes reads the recipe himself. When working under less gentle circumstances, he will rarely look at the page. The task is obscured by the social work he must do to arrange not looking incompetent. In this way, reading "teaspoon" for "tablespoon" becomes more likely, not because Adam's head does not work, but because he barely looks at the page and ordinary resources for the solution to the problem are disallowed. In the Testing Session, Adam is so preoccupied with getting the answer that it is not clear he even hears many of the questions. He might be handling more mental steps avoiding the questions than he would have to handle if he addressed the questions. Arbitrary demands make him stand out. There may be more to LD than disability.

Understanding Adam by way of the arbitrariness of the demands placed on him represents an advance over the blind ascription of the deficit approach. It encourages, for example, a more careful look at the child and his circumstances and insists that we be more sensitive to what might be going on in the child's surround. However, to the extent that it leaves our commonsense assumptions of the relation between learner, task, and setting undisturbed, it quickly falls back into a deficit theory. Why is it, one could ask, that Peter can handle all the arbitrariness and Adam cannot? It is understandable why immigrants to the country run into these troubles for a few years, or

even for a generation or two. But everyone should be able to adjust. Now consider that Peter is black and from a poor, tough neighborhood and Adam is from a wealthy, white family from the right part of town. It still comes down to one head against the world a few times a day, and Adam's head does not measure up. What are arbitrary demands anyway? What aren't arbitrary demands?

Upon careful examination, the continuum of arbitrariness leaves us with the same sense of context, learning, language, and culture as the deficit account. The conceptual assumptions remain the same. Contexts and their demands are still static, although there are more of them than allowed by the deficit approach. Adam is still Adam, and tests are tests. Contexts and their members are still separable. Learning still sits inside the student waiting to be called forth, although now in the form of specific sets of skills that must be used in situationally specific ways. Language and culture are still the sorts of things one can have more or less of, as if those who had less were not a systematic version of the culture everyone else had.

#### **A continuum of degradation and labeled children**

A third approach to Adam's behavior focuses on how much and on what grounds a person is liable to degradation in the different settings. What is at stake here is an appreciation of how much each setting organizes the search for and location of differential performances and how much that search further organizes the degradation of those found at the bottom of the pile. Garfinkel (1956; Pollner, 1978; see also Pollner & McDonald-Wikler, 1985, for a stunning reverse case) has shown how degradation is always a ceremony in which public agreement on what one can be degraded for is displayed and directed against the total identity of others. This means that it takes much work across persons to make an individual liable for some part of their behavior; a person must not only do the wrong thing, but exactly the wrong thing that everyone is looking for someone to do and then at just the right time.

By this line of reasoning, Adam is a problem in Everyday Life, primarily because everyday life is well organized for the systematic location of problems (Scott, 1985). Cooking Club is mostly about cooking, and only occasionally a source for a learning-related degra-

gradation ceremony. On one occasion, Adam and a friend made a green cranberry bread (a physical possibility, we are told, in an aluminum bowl with ingredients inserted in just the wrong order). When the others gathered around to see and laugh, he simply said, "So I made a goddamn mistake, so what." The issue passed. Other occasions for degradation do not move along so easily, no matter Adam's response. Classroom Lessons, for example, can be so well organized for putting the spotlight on those who are doing less well than the others that hiding becomes a sensible strategy for all of the kids some of the time and for some of the kids all the time. Adam seemed to suffer in the classroom, and this is in part how he became visible to us. During one small-group reading lesson, Adam was having a difficult time matching words with accompanying pictures. Reading "fake" for "face," he became tangled in a complex conversation with the teacher as she walked in and out of his group with occasional tips for the kids. It took us days of looking even to guess at the ways they seemed to be not understanding each other. What kept us curious was the attention paid to Adam's disability by the other children in his group. Adam's LD generally played to a packed house. Everyone knew how to look for, recognize, stimulate, make visible, and, depending upon the circumstances, keep quiet about or expose Adam's problem. Occasionally, they tried to explain it; "cause it's hard for him," explained Peter to the other kids. Occasionally, they wondered aloud about it; while walking behind him on a day when things were not going well, René shook her whole body, stamped her foot, and yelled after him, "Ohh. Why can't you read?" Testing Sessions, of course, exacerbate these problems, and Adam was at his least functional under these conditions.

There may be more to LD than disability. There may be many other people involved: certainly everyone in Adam's classroom, in various ways everyone in the school, everyone in the schooling business, all of us. This fact hit us hard the day Adam was asked to make banana bread in the Cooking Club. The adult showed them how to do it, and the pairs of children were then to do it on their own. Adam and Peter stayed close to each other as was their pattern when they entered the room. They then played ball on the side of the room as the adult did the demonstration bread. When they came to do it on their own, Peter announced he was allergic to bananas. Adam would

have to go it alone or with someone else. Adam worked on getting others to help, but, to make a long and fascinating story unfortunately short, it came down to Adam against the recipe, his head against the world. The adult was annoyed with Adam for not watching the demonstration and was actively unhelpful. The other children were either making their own cakes or busy exposing Adam's not being able to work on his. In the first 10 minutes, from the time he first picked up the recipe, he asked for information from others 12 times, but each time came away unsure of what he needed to know. He looks at the recipe a few times, but it is not clear that he ever reads it; either way, it is perfectly clear that whatever he picks up from whatever source, he tries to double check it with those around him. After these 12 requests for information, he makes a crucial error. He is putting the ingredients into the bowl as they are listed in the ingredients section, and not in the order specified in the directions. This has him putting in yogurt second instead of fourth, and before the more efficient workers finish with their third entry, namely, bananas. Quite aside from using the list of ingredients as instructions, his error was in seemingly going faster than Nadine's group. Nadine liked to finish her cake first. Adam might be ahead of them, or he might be wrong. Either way, his disability might be a good way to focus on the problem. It might be time to spotlight Adam. It might be time for LD to make it into the room. For anyone needing to know who is doing what, how fast, and how well, the ascription of LD might offer an appropriate guide to perception. Let's listen to how a moment is organized for a conversational display of LD:

(The girls are screaming and Adam whimpering. The double vowels in Lucy's talk are chosen to show that she is reading to Adam as one would read to a child in a phonics lesson. The scene opens with Adam returning from the adult with the sense that he knows what to do next.)

- Adam: Finally!  
Where's the yogurt. Oh.
- Nadine: You're *up* to yogurt already.
- Adam: Yeah.
- Nadine: Where's the bananas.
- Adam: We, uhm, they didn't give us bananas yet.
- Nadine: Well, go get 'em.
- Adult: The bananas are here on the shelf.

- Adam: But this is our second page.
- Lucy: That is a teaspoon. That is a tablespoon.
- Adam: This is a teaspoon, and it says
- Lucy: It says tablespoons, twoo taablespoons.
- Adam: We're right here, Lawana. Lawana, we're right here.
- Lucy: That's
- Nadine: That's the ingredients, not the instructions.
- Lucy: That's baakiing powder.
- Adam: What do you mean, baking powder?
- Nadine: You go in this order.
- Adam: (Oh my God). What do you mean, in what order?
- Nadine: Look! This is the instructions. That's what you need to do all this.
- Adam: Ai yai yai.
- One . . . Cup . . . Mashed . . . Fresh

(Everyone looks away, and Adam returns to the adult for more advice.)

When Adam takes the recipe back to his bowl, he holds the paper in front of his face, and offers a public, but mock reading (with the actual words from the ingredients list): "One . . . Cup . . . Mashed . . . Fresh." Then he is off to the adult for some questions and a little crying. Walking back into the group, he cries out, "I was right, stupid" to no one in particular and then calls his nominal partner, "Ah, c'mon, Reggie. Wouldjya." Reggie attends to the tears, "Crying?" and, after a few seconds, says, "Here, I'll help ya."

How many people are involved in Adam's visibility? Reggie, Nadine, Lucy, the adult, of course. In addition to all the people in the room, did it make a difference that we set up the club to see what the kids could do with a minimum of help, or that we were all getting paid on government grants to figure out the nature of school failure? More of course. Could Adam be disabled on his own? Only if he could work on a task that was not culturally defined and had no consequences for his life with others; that not being a possibility, he can only be disabled through his interactions with others. Culture is a sine qua non of disability. Could he be disabled without LD being a part of the communicative resources available to the Cooking Club members in their dealings with each other? Why couldn't he be wrong just about how he was making the banana bread? There was something else in the air. There was the issue of his skill and how it

measured up to the skills of others. Was he up to yogurt already? There are basic questions asked in all scenes called educative in America: Who can do it? Who can't? Who is smart? Who is dumb? These are not the dominant questions that are asked in all scenes in America; they can leak by way of school into homes and onto some jobs, much less in school yards, and not at all in singles bars, but they are ubiquitous in schools. How is it, Goffman (1979) once asked, that a young man cannot know a word in school and feel dumb and not know a word in a car garage and have not his intelligence but his masculinity put on the line? An identical cognitive absence can be interpreted different ways depending on the scene. For Adam, school scenes often result in everyone's recognition that he can't, that he has "got it all wrong," that he may never be able, that he will always "can't." These questions acquire their answers, and in the process, with the help of tests, diagnoses, specialists, and government-sponsored budgets, LD acquires its share of the children.

The degradation account of Adam's behavior along the continuum of scenes relies on a different sense of context, learning, language, and culture than the previous approaches. If the assumptions of this approach are a little better tuned with our experiences, and possibly a little less lethal to our children, then we may have grounds to prefer a degradation approach to the others.

### *Context*

Context is not a fixed entity to Adam, for it shifts with the interactional winds. Each new second produces new possibilities along with severe constraints on what is possible. So it is with the rest of the people in Adam's world. Everyday Life, Cooking Club, Classroom Lessons, and Testing Sessions all come stacked with limits on what can be accomplished together, while at the same time each scene is constantly on the verge of being something else. Generally, each scene turns out to have been approximately what it started out to be, but only because everyone worked to help each other to such an ending. Along the way, they followed each other's instructions and constructed a new day like the one before. In this sense, context is not so much something into which someone is put, but an order of behavior of which one is a part. In this same sense,

fibers are not so much put into ropes as they participate in an organization of fibers that makes their every move relevant only to the extent that they play out the life of a rope. Similarly, Adam was a contributing member of various organizations that made his behavior relevant to the life of LD; this happened more often in Testing Sessions and Classroom Lessons than it did in Cooking Club or Everyday Life, and this was made possible by people, including Adam, organizing these scenes in ways that made LD differentially available in the different scenes.

Adam's LD is made available for all to see, because everyone was looking for it. In the Cooking Club, it is not so much the difficulty of the material as that Adam cannot address the material without worrying about whether he can get it straight or whether anyone will notice if he does not. This is not paranoia; everyone is often ready to notice, and, depending on the situation, ready also to look away or to make Adam's problem even more public. In the quoted transcript, Adam's LD is made public. Looking for Adam's LD has become something of a sport in Adam's class, a subset of the wider sport of finding each other not knowing things. In the Cooking Club, many kids get things wrong without too much worry; their wrong moves speak only to not knowing how to follow a badly organized recipe. The same mistakes are for Adam a source of degradation. They speak to his LD. Adam spends his day arranging not to get caught not having information that he could get from print. His every move is designed not to have LD again ascribed to him, and, as such, his every move confirms and recreates the possibility that the label of LD will be available in the classroom for anyone to ascribe to Adam. "Where is the LD?" Behaviorally, the answer is clear. It is all over the classroom as an interactional possibility. Everyone stands in some relation to it. Everyone is part of the choreography that produces moments for its public appearance. LD is distributed across persons, across the moment, as part of the contextual work members do in the different scenes. Neither Adam, nor his disability, can be separated from the contexts in which they emerge.

### *Learning*

By taking such a radical stand on context, the degradation approach relies exclusively on the description of the *organization* of

behavior for subject matter. Neither Adam nor his disability are analytically available as entities; they are only intelligible as relations, and then only moments in relations.<sup>9</sup> What then of learning? Learning traditionally gets measured on the assumption that it is a possession of individuals that can be found inside their heads. By the degradation approach, learning is not in heads, but in the relations between people. Learning is in the conditions that bring people together and organize a point of contact that allows for particular pieces of information to take on relevance; without the points of contact, without the system of relevancies, there is no learning, and there is little memory. Learning does not belong to individual persons, but to the various conversations of which they are a part. What we call learning, warns Birdwhistell, is simply the other side of an institutionalized dance called teaching. We all know how to do it, to look like either learners or teachers, but the actual relation between taking on roles in the teacher-learner dance and the contexts in which we do learning seems obscure at best. Birdwhistell, in fact, hints that they might be mutually exclusive, that it takes so much attention to do the teacher-learner dance, there is little room for new information to enter the system.

When Adam works in the cooking club with Peter, he gets his cake made, and he reads the recipe. Conditions were ripe for new information to be made available to Adam, information that had him taking language from a printed page. When he has to work on his own, under the possibly degrading eyes of others, a quite different kind of information enters the system. Under these latter conditions, he gets no time to read, but he gets constant instruction on how to look LD. The instructions stored in the system are not simply about how to read. Reading to get the cake made is not Adam's only point of contact with the other members of the class. The instructions stored in the system are also about who is to finish first, with the best banana bread, with the recognition that they are the most competent. Given this more inclusive agenda, information about how to read can get lost easily, and Adam can get acquired by LD. It is the business of degradation and not education that seems to organize selected moments in the Cooking Club, even more moments in Classroom Lessons, and more still in the Testing Sessions.

*Language and culture*

The language and culture that Adam encounters in his daily round may not be what most of us assume them to be. Language is easily understood as a neutral tool of expression that helps us to say and write what we like and to interpret what others have said and written for us. On these grounds, Adam needs more language. Like most children called LD, he loses his words at various important times, and reading and writing are pure torture for him. More language for sure. By the degradation stand, however, Adam's language may be quite complete. Language is not a neutral medium; it comes to us loaded with social structure. It comes to us loaded with sensitivities to the circumstances under which it was born and maintained in previous encounters. It comes to us biased with the social agendas of a school system that pits all children against all children in a battle for success. What is true of the contexts in which Adam finds himself called LD is no less true of the English language that we use in schools and in our interpretation of children in schools; they are well organized for the systematic creation of behavioral absences, which are carefully monitored by all in the system for use in their accounts of how the world works. Indeed, all of American culture seems well poised to have Adam and millions of others failing in school. By this standard, Adam has exactly the language required of his position. Culturally, he is taking one of two perfectly normal pathways through school: He is failing. There is a language waiting in every classroom in America for anyone who might take that road, and Adam has done his job well. He acquired and was acquired by a culturally recognized and mandated absence. He had achieved school failure. Adam had been acquired by the language of LD that was in place before he was born.

Languages help us to build the scales along which we calculate our pluses and minuses. So it is with culture. The poet John Montague grew up without a mother and was taunted by the members of his culture for not having what was prescribed for all children. Bad enough not to have a mother, but to be taunted for it as well is a double loss. "There is an absence," he warns, "real as presence" (Montague, 1983, p. 29). Cultures do not just promise mothers; they require them, or worse, they require just one, your own. Nothing less

than your own mother is acceptable, and nothing less than a perfectly normal cognitive development is acceptable either. To grow up unable to learn as fast as others is a loss in a school system that emphasizes and measures comparative development, and to be taunted for it is a double loss.

These are important distinctions. Mothers precede their children like languages precede their next generation of speakers. Cultures and languages fill the world before any given child's arrival, and they define what must be present and what must be noticed as absent. Montague had to go it without a mother, and, as a stutterer, he had to go without a full compliment of English for some time, "until the sweet oils of poetry eased it, let the light in." That was tough on Montague, but the overall cultural system sounds gentle enough, particularly if we supply proper services for the orphaned and the inarticulate. Culture and language define what each of us needs, force us to attend to those of us who are left short, and ideally equip us to help them over their disabilities. Unfortunately, cultures are never so magnanimous, nor can they be. As a series of ideal types, *cultures are defined most essentially by the inability of all to live up to their directives*. Cultures offer only "collective illusions," prescriptions that give us a way to talk about how we should live together in exchange for an inarticulateness about how we actually do live together (Murphy, 1971, 1987). Cultures cannot supply the resources members need in order to live in them without exposing the arbitrariness of their particular way of life. They exist by their promises, and they feed off each of us to the extent that we try to follow them and fail.<sup>10</sup> They give us mothers and fathers without letting us think that mothers and fathers have to be many other things as well (e.g., spouses, siblings, workers, lovers, and in each of these roles possibly neurotic, pained, bored, oppressed, and even dead); and they give us language to express ourselves without letting us know the limits of expression, without telling us that inarticulateness is endemic to the human condition. And so too they give us LD.

Mothers acquire their children. Languages acquire their speakers. So disabilities acquire their learners. Who is there first? Long before Adam was born, we had LD – or an equivalent: strethosymbolia, for example, or just plain stupidity. It is an absence we know how to look for. American culture makes the absence of learning real as presence.

Before any teachers of children enter the schools every September, failure is in every room in America. There is never a question of whether everyone is going to succeed or fail, only of who is going to fail. Because everyone cannot do better than everyone else, failure is an absence real as presence, and it acquires its share of the children. Failure and success define each other into separate corners, and the children are evenly divided as if by a normal curve, into successful and failing. Among those who fail are those who fail in ways that the system knows how to identify with tests, and these children are called special names. LD acquires its share of the children.

The degradation approach alters considerably our commonsense resources for understanding our problems. Context and learning no longer have individual subjects as variables, but refer instead to the organizing devices people have available for dealing with each other. Similarly, language and culture are no longer scripts to be acquired, as much as they are conversations in which people can participate. The question of who is learning what and how much is essentially a question of what conversations they are a part of, and this question is a subset of the more powerful question of what conversations are around to be had in a given culture (Goodwin, 1991). To answer these questions, we must give up our preoccupation with individual performance and examine instead the structure of resources and disappointments made available to people in various institutions. To do this job, we may not need a theory of individual learning, and, given its use in our current educational system, we may not be able to afford one.

## Appendix

*The problem of ecological validity: A summary in 1990 of Cole, Hood, & McDermott (1978)*

Our effort was to specify the relation between tasks well defined in experimental settings and apparently similar tasks as they appear in everyday life. What might the literature on models of memory or attention be about if one cannot find some way of applying the models to people remembering and attending in their daily activities?



We tackled our question with four bodies of evidence, each displaying different assumptions about the world and forcing different methods of analysis. First, we went to the literature to look for speculations about how thinking is done in everyday life. Throughout psychology, we found a strong bias that everyday-life thinking is an impoverished version of what can be elicited in special and more demanding settings such as tests and experiments. This makes great common sense, but leaves unspecified just how tests and experiments demand more mental steps of us or just how everyday life can proceed without logical precision.

Our second body of evidence came from the efforts of experimental psychologists to use experimental data to reach conclusions about minds at work outside the laboratory. Their results seem to show that people thinking in everyday life have many supports on their side; the world is well structured and redundant in a way that eases the demands on their thinking. Individual thinkers can be sloppy, but the world will carry them. In experimental settings, they have less support, and their thinking processes become both more efficient and more visible.

For our third and fourth bodies of evidence, we turned to videotapes of children and adults engaging in complex activities together, for example, making cakes, setting up a nature laboratory, or giving and taking intelligence tests. The difference between the third and fourth approach turned on how each organized a description. For our third case, we looked at the videotapes through the descriptive categories of experimental psychology. When we saw what we thought might be an example of remembering, we wrote it down. The same for attending and problem solving. By restricting our language and insights to the rules of experimental psychology, that is, by assuming that the people were offered tasks that could be reasonably well defined and stable enough to last through the duration of the problem solver's effort, we found considerable evidence for the good sense of both the speculations and the experimental evidence for the characterization of everyday life as easier in its demands on thinking.

For our fourth body of evidence, we used the same behavior, but looked at it in a different way. Instead of deciding beforehand what we were looking for, we looked at the tapes to see how the participants were organizing each other. Whether or not a person was trying

to remember something was not our immediate concern, for we wanted to stay open to the possibility that any apparent act of remembering could well be a subordinate part of another activity (instances of people really trying to remember something actually being rare outside of school); we were also interested in the possibility that much of what passes for remembering in everyday life is nothing but a display of memory, that is, a socially well orchestrated interaction in which looking like one is remembering is socially consequential, but with likely little relevance to actual psychological processes glossed in the literature on memory. Looking in this way, we saw little that looked like psychological events and little that would require the description of the ghost in the machine for an explanation of how the behavior of the participants was organized.

In Figure 10.3, under the four columns listing our four bodies of evidence, are three positions about the difficulty of thinking in everyday life and the possibility of specifying thinking in laboratory settings in any way that would be relevant to the lives of people in their institutional worlds. The first story has it that thinking in everyday life is almost too easy to be interesting, and it is only by challenging people with the rigors of careful laboratory experimentation that one can capture minds at work. The second story has it that everyday-life thinking is well supported by the world, which makes thought processes invisible enough that can only be apprehended in the less supportive world of the laboratory. The third story has it that thinking in everyday life is likely more complicated than any category system we can impose on its study, and, given the reflexive nature of all task environments, any science that relies on predetermined tasks for analysis is necessarily distorting the description of people's thinking in ways that render such descriptions systematically invalid in ecological, historical, or institutional terms. In the chart, each of the three stories is put against each of our four bodies of evidence for support.

The result is a hopefully useful snapshot of the range of claims that can be worked on and verified by different methods. To the extent that the field relies on predefined tasks against which to measure people's performances, experimental cognitive psychology can only detail the lack of complexity in the thinking people do in everyday life; nor is there any way for it to take into account the

	Speculations	Experimental Evidence	Observational Evidence	Natural History Analyses
Story 1	Simple and sloppy	Simple and sloppy	Simple and sloppy	Indeterminate on many levels
Story 2	Redundant, structured, and socially organized	Redundant, structured, and socially organized	Redundant, structured, and socially organized	Structured by the work people do; indeterminate and possibly difficult
Story 3	Difficult to do or to specify	Unverifiable by experimental procedures	Unverifiable by experimental procedures	Endlessly complex; hard for participants and specifiable only with rigor and respect

Figure 10.3. Ways of theorizing and studying psychological tasks, their appearance in everyday life, and their relative complexity.

ecological, historical, or institutional situations in which and with which people do their thinking (and further constitute and reflexively organize those same situations). A more contextually sensitive description of people's behavior would deliver us a much more complex and lifelike *dramatis personae*, but would offer us little reason to continue the study of memory, attention, and problem solving as that study is presently phrased. We have a choice between the precision study of well-established topics with little relevance to the ongoing world or the rigorous study of the as yet undefined things people do with each other in their collective lives. This chapter urges that we choose the people over the topics, rigor and respect over misplaced precision. Others may choose otherwise, but we cannot forget Wittgenstein's (1958, p. 232; see also Skupien, 1990) warning that in psychology "the existence of the experimental method makes us think that we have the means of solving the problems which trouble us; though problem and method pass one another by." We have reached the point that this mistake has been institutionalized. Ecological invalidity has become a requirement of most available interpretations of our own children. It is part of how children are acquired by learning disabilities.

*Story 1: Everyday life is sloppy and easy. Educational professionals know better*

Everyday-life tasks are generally assumed to be simple in the sense that they require fewer mental steps than laboratory tasks. Participants are allowed a wide range of mistakes and are not held accountable for errors and oversights. Everyday-life tasks are not usually studied by psychologists, but the general assumption of simplicity can be found in various speculations, and can be supported, tangentially, by experimental studies and by observational studies restricted to the analytic language of experimental cognitive psychology. Once the world is studied with full attention to the complexities of people's lives, tasks become hard to define and the speculations and their verification seem to be precarious.

*Story II: Everyday life is complex but well organized.  
Educational professionals understand how to make the most of  
an environment*

Everyday-life tasks are complex, but easy to perform because they are embedded in the structure of discourse and the stuff of social interaction; for example, free recall of isolated items may be hard, but items structured in narrative seem to enhance memory skills. Inside the assumptions of experimental cognitive psychology, everyday life and its inhabitants are analytically available as more or less efficient structures for moving through the world attending, remembering, planning, and problem solving in experimentally interesting ways. Outside the logic of predefined tasks, actors become capable of acting in much more complex ways that can be predecided by psychologists; everyday-life tasks become analytically indeterminate and everyday life exhausting.

*Story III: Everyday life is an adventure. The people know more  
than we can yet imagine about what they are doing*

In everyday life, tasks are reflexively defined and constituted from one moment to the next. There is great risk in assuming that the world will stand still long enough for us to analyze it; if it were that easy, we would not need to study it. Appropriating tasks from ongoing activities for purposes of analysis must be justified in terms of the ecological, historical, and institutional validity of the analysis. Conclusions about how people think and with what degree of efficiency are unverifiable without a supportive institutional analysis. By this standard, most contemporary psychology is invalid. Experimental methods can only document variation in what people cannot do in relation to supposedly well-defined, frozen tasks. That may be useful for delineating how the mind in some general sense might work. It is not useful, and cannot be useful, to the description of our children as they live complex institutional lives. Theoretically, at least, our children can be freed from being acquired by disabilities.

## Notes

1. See the Appendix summarizing the arguments of the earlier work. We were to finish a book on the topic, but our lives have diverged enough to make the task impossible. The working paper we circulated in 1978 has enjoyed some notoriety and is still cited in the literature. Only excerpts have been published so far, and in the Appendix, I offer a summary of that paper's overall intentions and results.
2. The title is adapted with appreciation from Cicourel (1970) and Sankoff and Laberge (1973).
3. We should never forget Margaret Rawson's (1968) account of the remarkable accomplishments of dyslexic boys who receive an education directed to their strengths rather than weaknesses.
4. Because the conference focused on context, it makes sense to use Birdwhistell (1970; McDermott, 1980) for a key formulation. The tradition of which he is a part, including the work of Bateson (1972), Schefflen (1973), and Kendon (1982, 1990), has been principled in the use of the term. Compatible ideas (cited throughout this volume) are available in Soviet activity theory and American ethnomethodology and cognitive anthropology. For example, compare the similarities in Birdwhistell's formulation of context with the following quote from Schegloff (1984, p. 52):

Taking sentences in isolation is not just a matter of taking such sentences that might appear *in* a context *out* of a context; but that the very composition, construction, assemblage of the sentences is predicated by their speakers on the place in which it is being produced, and it is through *that* that a sentence is context-bound, rather than possibly independent sentences being different intact objects in and out of context.

What is true here of sentences is true of any behavior we might want to use as a unit of analysis.

5. For a psychology founded on the possibility that such "illusions" are in fact the key to the ways we perceive the most mundane aspects of the world, see Kohler (1969); in the same mold, Lewin's (1933/1935) paper on the feeble-minded makes a number of points relevant to the argument of this chapter.
6. There is an obvious similarity between Birdwhistell's "conditions that maintain the contact" in terms of which new information (learning) enters the interactional arena and Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" (1978, 1934/1986; Engeström, 1986; Minick, 1985, this volume; Newman, Griffin, & Cole, 1989). By distancing his formulation from ordinary, dyadic theories of teaching and learning, Birdwhistell makes essential what is often not appreciated in Vygotsky, namely, that one person cannot *do* a zone of proximal development to another; at their pedagogical best, people can only *participate* together in a zone of proximal development. Cole and Griffin (1986) offer one stunning example and Lave and Wenger (1991) an exciting overview of the issue.
7. There is of course no descriptive foundation to the assumption that everyday

life is "easier." No one who has ever looked carefully at films of human behavior could claim that. The question of comparative difficulty, as different from comparative usefulness, for example, will hopefully become uninteresting. Assumptions about comparative ease play a dominant role in contemporary psychological theory and are called into question in the Appendix.

8. The following lines show that Gramsci is making both an epistemological and a political complaint about prediction as a criterion of excellence in social science description:

But the fact has not been properly emphasised that statistical laws can be employed in the science and art of politics only so long as the great masses of the population remain (or at least are reputed to remain) essentially passive, in relation to the questions which interest historians and politicians . . . in politics the assumption of the law of statistics as an essential law operating of necessity is not only a scientific error, but becomes a practical error in action. (1971, pp. 428-429)

The inappropriateness of prediction as a goal in ethnography is well claimed in the essays of Frake (1980).

9. Much the same point is offered in the tradition of Soviet activity theory (Cole & Griffin, 1986, p. 127):

We should be trying to instantiate a basic *activity* when teaching reading and not get blinded by the basic *skills*. Skills are always part of activities and settings, but they only take on meaning in terms of how they are organized. So instead of basic skills, a sociohistorical approach talks about basic activities and instantiates those that are necessary and sufficient to carry out the whole process of reading, given the general conditions for learning.

10. Another formulation to the same point is available in Suchman (1987). The dialectics of life in a culture with particularly empty promises will perhaps never be captured better than in Beckett's (1938) *Murphy*, a near relative to Murphy's (1975, 1987) *Murphy*. In Beckett's *Murphy*, Neary is finding life without Miss Counihan unbearable, and Wiley explains our world to him (1938, pp. 58-59):

"From all of which I am to infer," said Neary, "correct me if I am wrong, that the possession - Deus det! - of angel Counihan will create an aching void to the same amount."

"Humanity is a well with two buckets," said Wiley, "one going down to be filled, the other coming up to be emptied."

"What I make on the swings of Miss Counihan," said Neary, "if I understand you, I lose on the roundabouts of the non-Miss Counihan."

"Very prettily put," said Wiley.

"There is no non-Miss Counihan," said Neary.

"There will be," said Wiley.

"Help there to be," cried Neary, clasping his hands, "in this Coney Eastern Island that is Neary, some Chinese abstractions other than Miss Counihan."

"Now you are talking," said Wiley. "When you ask for heal-all you are not talking. But when you ask for a single symptom to be superseded, then I am bound to admit that you are talking."

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