
BOOK REVIEW

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Book Review

Daiute's Dynamics

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BOOK REVIEW

Daiute's Dynamics

Human Development and Political Violence, by Colette Daiute, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 304 pp., \$90.00 (hardback).

Reviewed by 5
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Cultural-historical psychology is fundamentally concerned with human development and its mediation toward teleologically driven social futures by means of cultural tools. Researchers have studied the ways in which people learn cultural practices in formal and informal settings, at work and at play, in schools and in after-school programs, and many places elsewhere. Colette Daiute's *Human Development and Political Violence* consolidates and extends research she has been conducting in multiple national settings on how young people develop concepts of life in society following their immersion in the breakup of the former Yugoslavia and the genocide, conflict, and violence that characterized this massive societal upheaval. Daiute's remarkably original work should be of great interest to anyone interested in the role of cultural mediation in human development, and more specifically in the manner in which human consciousness navigates rapid social change, especially that driven by violent and deadly means. 10 15

As I read Daiute's study, I was reminded by the conditions that surrounded Lev Vygotsky's own career, which coincided with the revolution that left many orphans and traumatized children to be educated and integrated into the new Soviet society. This task was left to teachers such as Vygotsky, who used Marxist principles to construct new settings that, rather than assuming stigma and deficit, sought to create new developmental paths for affected youth (Vygotsky, 1993). Similarly, Daiute defies much conventional wisdom about young people from violent and troubled environments. She explicitly challenges the notion that such young people are necessarily handicapped and damaged by their experiences. Rather, she views the participants in her research as having far greater agency than is typically assumed of them. Avoiding deterministic interpretations that postulate that damaged lives necessarily follow from the survival of threatening environments, Daiute and her developmental premises view violence as among a host of mediational means that in turn can be reflected on and reconstructed with additional cultural tools—especially the use of narratives—to imagine more hopeful and resilient social futures. 20 25 30

Q1

Toward that end, Daiute asserts yet another radical assumption: that young people have much to say about their own lives and prospects for positive adulthoods. Most research on youth from violent backgrounds looks outside young people's perspectives of themselves to draw pathologizing conclusions about how conflict has shaped their lives. Daiute's research method—which she explains in splendid detail—provides opportunities for young people to voice their own understandings of their experience as a way to document their reconstructions of how the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia shaped their perspectives. Although she doesn't employ the term *perezhivanie*, I see it as relevant to her study. *Perezhivanie* has recently emerged as a construct of interest from Vygotsky's work, and so I introduce it with some caution, given the lack of agreement in current scholarship on precisely what it means. For the purposes of this review, I treat it as synonymous with meta-experience, that is, the manner in which one experiences his or her experiences (Smagorinsky & Daigle, in press). Given that Vygotsky (1935/1994) and others linked *perezhivanie* to trauma, it seems particularly appropriate to Daiute's study of youth development in violent settings.

To study how young people construct their experience of their experiences following their immersion in the breakup of Yugoslavia into a new set of independent and contentious Balkan nations, Daiute developed an intervention: a Dynamic Story-Telling by Youth (DSTY) workshop, for volunteers whose childhoods or adolescence had taken place in Yugoslavia and the nations that formed in the wake of its breakup. These workshops involved young people in relating and reconstructing their experiences through a variety of writing and speaking activities built around different kinds of narrative and persuasive writing. The purpose of these activities was both to provide a cultural tool through which the participants could think about and symbolically express their feelings about their lives amidst extreme violence and to provide Daiute a data-collection instrument through which she could make sense of how they constructed their experiences.

The intervention thus served the deeply humanistic function of working on behalf of the participants as a therapeutic means of mediating their understanding of the past and projection of a future, and the pragmatic role of enabling Daiute to analyze their expressions to enable a broader audience to listen to and learn from the young people as they made sense of their lives. Daiute is adamant about the importance of studying youth experience from the perspective of the young people themselves, closing her author's preface with a note of gratitude to her participants in which she offers, as she says,

my thanks and respect not only for your plights but also for the dignity with which you have weathered them. My sincere hope is that if you read this book, you think that I listened to you, took you seriously, and got it right. (p. xxii)

As she argues, by "shifting the focus from youth subject to subjectivity" (p. 9), she gained access to developmental data that are absent from most considerations of how youth experience war.

Daiute's cultural-historical approach leads her to assume that violence is a system, rather viewing it only in terms of individual experience. She thus must be careful in viewing the system as a central mediator of meta-experience while also avoiding deterministic interpretations based on factors in the system, a problem she balances with clarity and insight. The DSTY workshops were conducted in Serbia, Bosnia/Herzegovina, Croatia, and a New York state community that housed refugees. The volunteers both took and created surveys of their beliefs, engaged in "inquiry" discussions of problems and possibilities for society, talked about current local events involving youth activism, wrote actual and hypothetical narratives about conflicts in daily life from diverse

perspectives, and wrote “advisory” texts such as letters to public officials expressing their beliefs and making recommendations.

Daiute’s analysis of their texts reveals three major scripts: “tensions abound (in public life), moving beyond difficulties, and reflecting on societal divisions” (p. 92). It is no surprise that the young people included attention to the tensions that characterized their lives during their childhood and adolescent years. What Daiute’s analysis reveals, however, is surprising in the context of most research that assumes that victimization necessarily follows from trauma: that her participants sought to gain control over the tensions of their lives by using their narratives “to manage those tensions and to make sense of them” (p. 94). The workshops enabled what Daiute calls “a thawing of frozen narratives” (p. 118) by enabling her participants to construct new cultural scripts that projected hopeful social futures for themselves and society more broadly.

Daiute’s analysis is rich and provocative and not amenable to easy reduction within my page allotment, but if I could manage a bumper-sticker summary of her argument, I would say that she offers a situated account of youth development as revealed through their emplotment, within a supportive setting, of lived experience into scripts and genres through the medium of the cultural tool of the narrative. In this hopeful book about presumably hopeless circumstances, she provides an evidence-driven argument about how the principles of a cultural-historical developmental psychology can be applied to a real-world problem of profound significance, in terms of both design and interpretation. The design deliberately employs the creating of a setting that emphasizes the mediation of speech to produce new insights, allows for the use of appropriate cultural tools for data collection, assumes the developmental and mediational role of the workshop in assisting youth in their construction of representational texts that enable new experiences of prior experiences, and introduces means of mediation through which the participants gain new vehicles for creating agency to contribute to the construction of a future more promising than their pasts would project.

The central goal of *Human Development and Political Violence* is to provide a unique portrait of young people’s processing of experience growing up amidst civil war and construction of visions of a future that might mitigate against such strife and inequity. But it illuminates much else to those interested in human development, the role of cultural tools such as narrative in mediating and representing experience, and the meticulous design and execution of complex research into the human experience. It is both intellectually impressive and socially inspiring, and should be read for the range of possibilities it provides to readers who are passionate about these issues.

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