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ABSTRACT

A study used a case-contrast approach to explore children's multiple story-telling motivation. Kindergarten children were invited to dictate stories during free play once a week. The stories were written down in a book-like pamphlet and later, read to the class during story time. Many children chose this activity but one child, Rachel, told many more stories than the others. Various possible motivations were explored by comparing the case of Rachel with those of her peers. Factors examined included verbal skill, the opportunity to express themes of concern, creating pictures of wish-fulfillment, family constellation, interaction with a valued adult, signs of value and status from adults and peers, discomfort with other activities, the fun of creating humor, progress in cognitive development, and pleasure in exploring the medium. One factor evidenced by Rachel that distinguished her from other steady, but less frequent, storytellers was her zest for exploring various storytelling genres. (Author/KEH)

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MOTIVATIONS OF YOUNG AUTHORS:

WHY DID RACHEL TELL SO MANY STORIES?

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ABSTRACT

Psychologists have suggested various motivations for children's story-telling. Theoretical frameworks tend to emphasize single factors, but in life situations, multiple motivation is more typical. This paper explores the motivation of young authors through a case-contrast approach. Kindergarten children were invited to dictate stories during free play once a week. The stories were written down in a book-like pamphlet and later, read to the class during story time. Many children chose this activity but one child, Rachel told many more stories than the others. Various possible motivations are explored by comparing the case of Rachel with that of her peers. Some of the factors considered are: prodigious verbal skill, the opportunity to express themes of concern, creating pictures of wish-fulfillment, family constellation, interaction with a valued adult, signs of value and status from adults and peers, discomfort with other activities, the fun of creating humor, progress in cognitive development, and pleasure in exploring the medium. There is evidence that several of these factors entered into the story-telling of both Rachel and other story-tellers. The zest for exploring various story-telling genres is one factor that distinguished her from other steady, but less frequent story-tellers.

Rachel was five years old when she dictated this story.

> Once upon a time there was ...a little girl... Her name was Sally...But there was only one thing wrong. She was mean...There were only two things wrong. The mean little girl didn't have any mean mother and father. But she'd rather live with a mean witch. Then she packed all her things...Then she saw the black house and she looked in the window and saw a witch boiling a little girl. She went inside the house...The witch said, "Well, well, well, What do we have here? And she said, "I might boil you." "Oh, no, no. I'm a mean little girl." "So you are. I might be your mean mother." "Oh, good. I was just waiting for a mean mother." The little girl slept and slept and slept and then it was morning. She stepped on a piece of glass and she got killed. Then the mean mother said, "What is happening to my daughter Sally? The End

This is one of many stories Rachel dictated. She had the opportunity to do so once a week, when story-telling was offered as one of several free play activities in her kindergarten class (See Doyle, 1989). Most of her classmates also chose to dictate stories once in a while. The median output was five stories and the range without Rachel was telling from zero to ten. Over the course of eight months, Rachel dictated 17 stories, sometimes telling two in one morning. That raises two questions: Why does any child choose to tell a story when all sorts of other attractive activities are

available? And my chief question for today, why did Rachel tell so many stories?

Two basic assumptions guided my explorations. First, I knew that psychologists from Freud to Skinner had speculated on the motivations that lie behind creative work. I decided to look at many possibilities seriously, not in the interests of being eclectic, but because I believe, with Lewin, that complex acts cannot be explained by a single motive or even a single kind of motive; rather, most acts take shape in a field of interacting forces arising from both the person and the environment. Lewin also suggests that the same activity carried out by different individuals may be motivated by a different pattern of forces, an assumption that guided a method I developed to analyzing my observations.

The method is the case contrast approach. I will explore Rachel's story-telling motivation by looking at her case in the context of the cases of other children who also chose to tell stories, but not nearly as many. All the children shared the same classroom, and most came from middle-class households.

Why did Rachel tell so many stories? Psychoanalytic theory gives us two suggestions. One is that fantasy allows the fantasizer to create pictures of wish-fulfillment. I occasionally saw unambigious examples of this in Rachel's stories. She told one story about Christmas. When she came to the line "Santa came," the most beautiful, marvelling smile came to Rachel's face. She clearly had created a mental picture that gave her a great deal of

pleasure. Sally had made Rachel angry before she told the witch story, so perhaps wish-fulfillment was part of the pleasure of this story, too. But other children also created wish-fulfilling pictures in their stories - the diet of the characters in the kindergarten children's stories consisted entirely of ice cream and candy.

Psychoanalytic theory also suggests that stories enable authors to give expression to themes of concern in the service of mastery. We can find certainly find themes of concern in Rachel's stories. Her early stories often had to do with a brother who is mean, who sometimes likes his sister and then doesn't, or at first doesn't like her and then does. Then Rachel told several stories about a little girl who is mean or misbehaves; the story I read belongs to that group. And she ended up with a series of stories in which the characters are denied something and eventually get it. I am sure the opportunity to give expression to themes of concern had something to do with Rachel's story telling. Two things tell us that this alone will not give us the answer to why Rachel told stories. First, no one theme dominated her story-telling throughout the year. Rachel explored one theme for two or three stories and then went on to a different one. Second, other children also gave expression to themes of concern, and these children did not consistently choose story telling over other activities. For example, Ryan told this story the same week as I was teaching about Freud's account of the Oedipal conflict. It is

about a homeless rabbit who meets a badger and asks the badger if he can move in with him.

> ... the badger said, "No you can't. He growled and growled to say, "You can't move in with me."...So he hopped along and hopped along and hopped along until he saw another badger. And then the mother badger said, "Do you have a home?" and the rabbit said, "No, I don't. So the mother badger said, "Would you like to move in with me?" And the bunny said, "Sure." And then the Mrs. Badger said, "I am going to take you back to Mr. Badger because that's where I live and he's been so greedy to you and I am going to tell him he doeosn't have a home. And that's the very end. They lived happily ever after.

Ryan's total output for the year was two stories.

Adlerian theory might suggest that we look at Rachel's position within the family. Rachel was the youngest of three children, and one of her older siblings required a great deal of family attention. Thus Rachel, like many youngest children, spent a lot of her time observing the drama around her, dramas she did not participate in directly. (Writers typically are keen observers of others.) So her family position may have led her into the kind of ~~thinking~~ observation and ~~fantasy~~ reflection typical of writers. But being a youngest child was not unique to Rachel.

A social learning theorist might suggest that Rachel was rewarded for her story-telling. Many mothers made a big fuss over the children's stories; Rachel's mother simply accepted them

without ado. But there were other rewards in the story-telling activity. Dictation was a social situation; the story-taker enjoyed hearing the children's stories, and I think the children enjoyed the interaction. But this was true of many children. One child, who told six stories, was explaining to another child why she signed up for story-telling: "I like to tell stories and I like Mrs. Doyle." Another reward in the situation came from having the stories read aloud to the group. (This was done a week after the stories were dictated.) Most children were pleased to have their stories read aloud, though many showed signs of ambivalence as well. Rachel showed both pleasure and shyness when her stories were read aloud. It is true that Rachel's stories were seen as special by her peers. One of Rachel's early stories was very funny to the children. The leading character was a bad baby named Mrs. Doyle. It was the first story read aloud that was full of five-year-old humor, the children laughed at every line, and it influenced other children to attempt telling funny stories. The class came to expect Rachel's stories to be funny, and many of them were. But Rachel was not the only child to gain class status from her stories. Here is part of one of Sonny's stories:

> Once upon a time, knight found a tent. And he sat down in there. But there were bombs in there. Then they exploded, but the knight didn't die. But there were fires all around him. But his suit was so strong, he can't die.

Children praised Sonny for this story and it also started a class tradition, transforming the meaning of story-telling for many of the boys in the class. Story-telling was predominantly girl's activity in the early weeks. After Sonny's knight story, many boys chose it as well, chiefly as a medium for telling heroic stories. Sonny told eight stories - most clustered in a consecutive seven week period - and then he dropped story-telling completely. Rachel told stories throughout the year.

Most activities are chosen in the context of other possible activities. Did children choose story-telling because other activities were unattractive or unavailable? I think this was true for Sonny, the author of the knight story. He chose story-telling regularly during a period in which he was a social isolate in the class; when he found ways to enter the social world of children, he no longer chose story-telling. Instead, he and other boys acted out dramas of superheroes. What about Rachel? Did she choose story-telling because she did not get pleasure out of doing the other things that were offered? Her kindergarten teacher says no. Rachel enjoyed all sorts of activities, creating imaginary dramas with other children, painting, games, and all sorts of other projects. In fact, she was the kind of child who could have been overlooked because she blended into most class activities easily, without calling attention to herself. For Rachel, story-telling was a positive choice, not an avoidance of other activities.

Was Rachel a child with exceptional verbal intelligence? This class used another method of teaching children to write: writing process. Here children actually write words with a pencil, usually on their drawings, with encouragement to spell words any way that seems right to the children. This was one of the few activities Rachel rarely chose, and the teacher reported that she was one of the least advanced of the children in terms of understanding the sounds of letters. Clearly, Rachel was not exceptional in all things verbal. Nor was she a story telling prodigy from the beginning. She did not choose story-telling the first two times it was available. During the third story-telling session, she listened to the stories of two other children and then told a story that consisted almost entirely of elements from the two stories she just heard.

Let's see how far we've come in understanding Rachel's story-telling. We can reject the idea that Rachel told stories because no other activities were attractive and we know that parental support was not exceptional. We know that she was not advanced in general verbal ability and that she was not a precocious story-teller at the beginning of the year. On the positive side, we know that stories allowed her to give expression to themes of concern and to create wish-fulfilling pictures. Her family constellation made her an observer of family dramas. She enjoyed interactions with the person who took dictation and her stories gave her status among her peers as a good story teller. These four factors must have entered into her love of telling

stories, but the case contrast approach ~~shows us~~ suggests that these factors did not distinguish her from other children.

Perhaps the answer lies in something intrinsic to story-telling. Rachel was able to make herself laugh with the humor she created, but so did other children, such as Sally, who laughed as she entitled her story about ducks, DUCKFACE.

What about cognitive development? Several psychologists (Applebee, Sutton-Smith, Stein) have suggested stages of development in the logic of story telling. Is there any evidence that Rachel told so many stories because of the pleasure inherent in continual cognitive growth. I rated Rachel stories using Stein's system: according to whether they had a temporal structure (almost all of Rachel's stories did); whether or not events cause one another (in many of Rachel's stories they did not), whether or not there is an obstacle to goal attainment, and whether it is the action of the leading character that removes the obstacle to goal attainment (this was true in four of Rachel's stories). If we divide the year in half, Rachel told one advanced story in the first half and three in the second half of the year, so there was trend toward advancement. And Rachel told more mature stories than anyone else in the class. But interestingly, the telling of a mature story was quite likely to be followed by more immature ones, according to Stein's criteria.

For example, here is a witch story told a week after that exciting one in which a witch boiled a little girl in oil.

MEAN WICKED WICKED WICKED WICKED WICKED WITCH: Once there was a brother and a sister and a father and a mother. The mother was a doctor and the mother was so pretty. Then the children grew up. But then they turned into a wicked witch. The End.

So there is no strong evidence that the impetus of cognitive development was the major factor in Rachel's story telling, nor was there any clear evidence of this in the stories of other children, though many children made some progress.

But looking at Rachel's stories as a sequence makes something else very clear, something which distinguishes Rachel's stories from those of all the other children. In the course of the eight months, Rachel's stories kept changing, both in content and in style. I wanted to choose a typical story with which to begin this paper and found I couldn't; there was no typical story. Every few weeks there was a new kind of story. It is possible to divide up her output into five major types, sometimes defined by theme and sometimes by style. THe five types are: animal/domestic/big brother stories, Mrs. Doyle stories, witch or bad girl stories, dialogue/monologue/song-containing stories, and getting what you want stories. No other child told so many different kinds of stories. Generally, Rachel told a particular type of story for three or four sessions. Several times, I saw a sequence that consisted of a loosely structured first story which is the first of a new type, followed by a better formed one of the same type, followed by a third one again less well-structured. It is as if

Rachel perfected a kind of story and then lost interest in this type of story and went on to a new exploration, beginning with something more poorly structured. In the Mrs. Doyle series, the last story was a transitional story, with elements of both the stories that preceeded it and the new kind of story that followed it. Let me read the whole series to you:

1. Mrs. Doyle went outside. She picked a root up. Her mother was very mad because it was part of a flower. Mrs. Doyle was seven and she went to the wrong house that looked like hers. And she took off her sweater and she had a house on her sweater.

2. (This is the best-formed one) There was some candy in the cabinet. And Mrs. Doyle was trying to get it. Mr. Doyle came. And the baby was named Mrs. Doyle. And then Mr. Doyle got mad. He spanked the grass; he did the wrong thing. And then the Mrs. Doyle, the baby, laughed. And then Mrs. Doyle came outside and hided from her father. Finally the father spanked the Mrs. Doyle.

3. (Now here's the transitional story.) Dear Zero, I love you very much Zero. Can you come to my birthday? No I can't because I don't know your name and you want me to come.

So why don't you tell me what your name is.

But I don't want to come. Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah.

My name is Mrs. Doyle. What's your name, zero.

I don't have a name. So Mrs. Doyle, you're fired. The police is going to get you and put you in jail.

Mrs. Doyle: But I love you.

But now Zero's Mom said, "It's breakfast time. And then Zero spilled his orange juice mixed with sprite, orange coke, diet coke. The end.

This story is very loosely structured. But it was also different from any other story I heard a child tell and from all the transcriptions of children's stories I've read. The story is told almost entirely in dialogue. Mrs. Doyle is still a leading character and one who gets punished, but the fun of creating dialogue dominated this story. And it is the first of three very free, very loosely structured dialogue stories.

Why Rachel did tell so many stories? Her stories gave her the opportunity to fulfill her wishes and master themes of concern in fantasy. As a youngest child in a family where others required attention, she found herself observer to family dramas. The social world rewarded her for her stories; she could make herself laugh with her own stories and she made some progress in creating better formed stories. These things cannot be the total answer because they were true of some of her class mates too. I think Rachel told many more stories than anyone else because she enjoyed trying out a variety of themes and genres in the medium of story-telling. Some children were very judgemental about their own stories. Rachel never was. In every story she did, there was always something new in it she enjoyed. While other children

invented their own particular ways of telling stories that they first enjoyed and then found less interesting, Rachel's continuing explorations in form and content in the medium of story-telling continued to be a source of pleasure throughout the year.

Stepping back from Rachel, what can we learn from this exploration? First, looking at motivation as a pattern of forces emerging from the interaction between the individual and the environment continues to be a useful one as Kurt Lewin first proposed.

Second, the case-contrast approach proved to be a very interesting method. I sort of stumbled into the case-contrast method, but the more I worked with it, the more impressed I became with it as a way of getting insight both into individuals and into general psychological processes. The classroom and the day-care center are ideal settings for the case-contrast approach, and I hope more people will use it.

Third, my experiences with Rachel made me broaden my vision of verbal giftedness can mean. It isn't only a large vocabulary (Rachel's wasn't particularly exceptional) or an advanced sense of story structure or just the ability to come up with unusual associations. Giftedness also involves the cognitive and emotional freedom to experiment with a variety of themes, styles, and genres.

Finally, my work with Rachel is consistent with what many artists and observers of artists have said: A very fundamental motive behind artistic work is love for a particular medium, so

that experimenting in it is the best and deepest kind of fun. During the year that I observed her, I think Rachel discovered her medium.

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