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# Book Reviews

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***The Significance of Schooling: Life-Journeys in an African Society.*** Robert Serpell, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. 361 pages, \$59.95.

In writing *The Significance of Schooling* Serpell takes up an idealistic yet pragmatic social goal that emerged from his 1976 book, *Culture's Influence on Behavior*. To contribute to the "adaptation of those borrowed Western institutions, the factory and the school, to conform better with the aspirations and skills of other cultural groups." In this book, Serpell selects the school as the borrowed Western institution and his adopted nation of Zambia as the terrain on which to fulfill this objective. He hopes that his research can lead to local accountability and usefulness of schooling in agricultural village settings. Another goal is to help those students who do not pass into the extremely selective national secondary system attain a sense of worth about the education they have successfully completed. Finally, he hopes to show that teachers who are from a traditional background themselves can serve as mediators between the community and the school.

Serpell approaches these pragmatic social goals through a series of substantive, theoretical, and methodological means. Substantively, he tells of the extractive definition of school success that requires rural village children to leave their communities in order to complete their secondary education in an urban center and of the steep, competitive educational pyramid that leaves most seventh graders feeling like school failures. In two of the most interesting chapters, Serpell presents two contrasting ethnotheories of development, the indigenous Chewa perspective on child development and intelligence (Chapter 2) and "the formal educational model of cognitive growth" (Chapter 3), at war in the Kondwelani community that is the focus of Serpell's longitudinal study.

Methodologically, each chapter uses a different combination of disciplinary approaches to try to answer the book's central question: What is the significance of schooling in a developing country in which school represents an institution of colonial origin, rather than an indigenous development? Chapter 1 uses sociological, political, and historical methods to introduce the reader to schooling in Zambia. Chapter 2 employs standardized interviews with a group of village elders and young Chewa adults to find out the evaluative criteria that would be used to select children to carry out particular tasks relevant in (but not routine to) the Chewa environment. The Chewa perspective on child development and socialization is further elaborated with an ethnographic description of indigenous games of strategy.

Chapter 3 uses historical and philosophical sources to explicate "the formal educational model of cognitive growth." Interestingly, the whole history of European education is deemed necessary to explain the legacy of formal schooling in Zambia. But Serpell also summarizes empirical studies that

have investigated the U. S. and European conceptions of the goals of human development. Chapter 4 uses questionnaire methodology to delineate the perspective of primary school teachers in Zambia as "bicultural mediators" between their culture of origin, the Chewa perspective of Chapter 2, and the culture of the school, the perspective of Chapter 3. The title of the chapter, "Bicultural Mediation," turns out to be more an ideal of the author than a social-psychological reality: the teachers have assimilated to the formal educational model hook, line, and sinker, and do not consider themselves even accountable to the local community. Chapter 5, "Life-journeys and the significance of schooling," uses a combination of retrospective interviews and tests stimulated by indigenous practices to try to draw connections between Chewa concepts of child development, the developmental ethnotheory of formal education, and the significance of schooling. Unfortunately, the connections are few and far between, bespeaking the fragmentation of culture stemming from the colonial period, which is still not overcome. In addition, this chapter reveals certain problems inherent in combining quantitative and qualitative analysis: e.g., how to have a sample size large enough for statistics such as path analysis, while retaining in-depth knowledge of each individual case. Chapter 6, "Dialogue and accountability: The school as a community resource," compares two methods, group discussion and popular theater, as ways of providing feedback and eliciting dialogue with the study community concerning the research findings. The success of the latter method against the failure of the former breaks new ground in the adaptation of psychological methodology to cultural differences in the very norms and presuppositions concerning social communication. The final chapter, 7, uses educational and social statistics to present a birdseye view of educational planning for Zambia, aiming to show the inadequacy of abstract and generalizing macro approaches in the light of the case study micro analysis presented in the previous chapters. The combination of methods also contributes to a clear image of the different levels of causative factors - development, cognition, family, economy, community values, national educational policy, colonial history - that interplay in the life-journey of each individual growing up in a single community.

On the level of theory, Serpell develops the idea of psychological reality as multiple perspectives and interpretation as the interpenetration of two perspectives (themes that have mostly been relegated to the Appendix). Given the importance of perspective and of the interpretive process in the author's conceptualization of the nature of research, he will not be surprised to learn that his interpretations of data reflect his own personal perspective. Indeed, in his preface, he says as much, at the same time providing the reader with one of two important autobiographical facts that seem to drive many of his interpretations: "Both of my parents were scholars and teachers. The efforts they made to ensure that my education would be supportive of my personal development and understanding of the world have doubtless shaped my perspective on the topic more deeply than I can explain" (p.xiv). The other important autobiographical fact that Serpell provides is that he is "an immigrant to Africa whose primary socialization was in the West" (p. xii), someone who established a family in Zambia that experienced "the subtleties of communication across the interfaces among cultures, languages and generations" (p.xiv).

The first autobiographical fact gives him an endearing and enduring belief in the value of formal education. If he finds schooling dysfunctional in the Zambian villages he studies, it must be because schooling is not being actualized in the optimal way; there has got to be a way to make it work, and this is Serpell's quest throughout the fourteen-year community case study and longitudinal research that became this book. The second fact gives him a belief in the positive value of the fusion of different cultural perspectives. Applied to Zambian education, he believes that Zambian school teachers could represent this ideal of the fusion of different cultural perspectives in a single individual.

While Serpell's perspective has generated an extremely interesting project and book, I believe that it also impedes him from giving proper weight and theoretical interpretation to some facts that do not fit his perspective. In the rest of this review, I shall delineate these facts and then provide a different theoretical perspective that can account for and give coherence to them. Here are the discrepant facts:

1) Unschooling parents of school children in a rural area do not want their children to apply their formal education to areas of traditional skills such as agriculture. Indeed, they want schooling to remain apart from the traditional way of life.

2) Villagers see formal education, with its exclusive focus on cognitive skills, as undermining the developmental trajectory valued by the Chewa culture.

3) Despite their agrarian Chewa roots, teachers in Kondwelani are not bicultural in the way they approach their profession; in their work and their approach to the community, they have and want the persona of school culture.

The theoretical perspective that can, I believe, account for these deviations from the author's expectations involves the dimension of individualism/collectivism (Triandis, 1989), a continuous dimension (with many syncretic combinations) whose endpoints represent two contrasting ethnotheories of development, socialization practices, and social institutions. Schooling is intrinsically individualistic (Greenfield, 1994), whereas African cultures are intrinsically collectivistic (Nsamenang, 1994; Oloko, 1994). Although people in all societies are both separate individuals and part of relationships, families, and groups (these facts generate cultural universals, or what Serpell calls primary culture), different societies and cultures give varying weights to these different aspects of the human situation (these varying weights generate cultural differences, or what Serpell calls secondary culture). Most relevant to the present discussion, collectivistic cultures, typically found in small-scale societies, give importance to intergenerational relations in the transmission of knowledge and they privilege relations among familiars (Suina, 1991; Kim & Choi, 1994). In contrast, individualistic cultures, typically found in large-scale societies, valorize knowledge that comes from outside the family and provide many opportunities to interact with complete strangers (Kim & Choi, 1994). In school, knowledge comes from strangers (teachers) and unknown people (the authors of books). In this way, schooling poses a basic threat to a collectivistically oriented society. As Serpell points out about African ethnotheories of child development, collectivistic cultures in general see technical and cognitive skills as means to serve social ends; individualistic cultures, in contrast, see technical and cognitive skills as an end in themselves. As Serpell recognizes, this is the very goal of schooling. One might even go one step further and say that individualistic cultures invert the relationship between social knowledge and technical skills, seeing social relationships as a means to develop technical and cognitive skills, as in the process of school education. The contrast and conflict between the intrinsic individualism of the school and the collectivism of the community make sense of the discrepancies listed above in the following way.

1) *Villagers who have not been to school do not want their children to apply their school education to areas of traditional skills such as agriculture. Indeed, they want schooling to remain apart from the traditional way of life.* This follows from the collectivistic philosophy of education: knowledge is passed from grandparent to parent to child. The intervention of the teacher or of books destroys this process of intergenerational transmission. By compartmentalizing school knowledge as something that applies only to areas outside village life, the practice of intergenerational transmission from

grandparent to parent to child can remain intact. Although school knowledge might be very practical and efficient for farming, its application would undermine the social values and relations that are considered even more important by many unschooled villagers. By keeping school and farming separate, the mechanism of knowledge transmission from ancestral generations is preserved. (Compartmentalization of "foreign" institutions like the school has proven to be an excellent strategy for preserving an indigenous culture engulfed by colonial institutions, as the Zinacantecos, a Mayan group I have studied, demonstrate.)

When knowledge comes from parents and elders, this provides a reason to respect their authority. Teachers in Kondwelani recognize that young people with a primary education are "more likely to question their parents' ways of doing things" (p. 129). Additional evidence that such social ties are indeed severed by literacy's recourse to books as a source of knowledge is made clear by Serpell, who notes, "A recurrent theme in the autobiographical and semi-autobiographical writings of African intellectuals about their childhood is an exhilarating sense of liberation through the acquisition of literacy" (p. 98). Serpell, however, reports this from the European point of view as an unadulterated good. What is valued in the European perspective can crack and destroy traditional Zambian culture. This is recognized by rural adults who speak of "giving away" children to the school.

2) Villagers see formal education, with its exclusive focus on cognitive skills, as undermining the developmental trajectory valued by the Chewa culture. As Serpell elegantly shows in Chapter 2, cognitive skills are considered dangerous by the Chewa if they develop in isolation from social wisdom. Yet, this is exactly the effect of school pedagogy (recognized by the teachers in Kondwelani, Chapter 4). What is important in the Chewa ethnotheory of development, as Serpell points out, is a cooperative attitude of respect and responsibility to others; these are processes of social sharing. What is important in the Western ethnotheory of development is cognition, conceived in Western philosophy as private and inalienably one's own (p. 79). The cooperation valued in the Chewa cosmology is called cheating in school, a negatively sanctioned form of cooperation.

3) Despite their agrarian Chewa roots, teachers in Kondwelani are not bicultural in the way they approach their profession; in their work and their approach to the community as educational personnel, they have and want the persona of school culture. I conclude that, at a basic level, the teachers have recognized the fundamental conflict between the two cultures. This disjunction was well expressed by the regional secretary of the national political party: "Here in the village we have our traditional wisdom, and it's the wisdom of life here in the village. In school there is another kind of wisdom, the wisdom of the nation" (p. 136). In such a case, to adapt their teaching to the local cultural norms of their own upbringing would be, from their perspective, to stop being a teacher.

*The Significance of Schooling* is a book that has much to offer. Most important to me as a researcher in cultural psychology, it recognizes (1) that research is a communication process between researchers and their subjects; (2) that psychology has traditionally used genres of communication that were more familiar in the European cultures of the researchers than in the nonWestern cultures of their subjects; and (3) that the validity of data is compromised when they are generated by a communication genre that is unfamiliar or negatively sanctioned in the culture of the subject community. The success of community theater as an "interview" method in Kondwelani, next to the failure of the more "traditional" focus group technique, shows the radical changes that cultural psychology must make if it is to portray the psychology of culturally diverse peoples in an authentic manner that they themselves can recognize and understand.

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