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# Occasioned knowledge exploration in family interaction



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**ABSTRACT.** This article examines the ensemble of conversational practices a particular family makes use of to cultivate active and joyful engagement in imaginative inquiry about the world, during mundane, largely unstructured activity. Parents provide opportunities for children to query new words, idioms, and concepts, and invite them to do so, though they do not impose explanations on children. Explanations are 'recipient-designed' in terms of age appropriateness, and may involve dramatic animations through use of the current scene as a local metric. Unpacking meanings of words and concepts can involve the playful exploration of possible rather than literal meanings as well. Participants choose to hear (and restructure) words in particular ways so that they can be seized as opportunities for launching play on sound structure. Involvement in the talk of the moment entails practices such as collaborative production of utterances, format tying, and sound play.

**KEY WORDS:** *family, informal learning, language socialization, poetics, word play*

Recent studies of how families allocate time have found that increasingly middle-class parents are going to extraordinary lengths to foster their children's talents through maintaining a hectic schedule of organized leisure activities (Lareau, 2003). A study of children's time use (Hofferth and Sandberg, 2001), based on 24-hour time diaries collected from parents and their 3 to 12-year-old children in 1981 and 1997, showed that structured activities such as sports and art activities are rapidly replacing unstructured activities such as free play and outdoor activities. Within the sample of 32 middle-class families in the CELF study there exists a large range of variation with respect to how leisure activities are structured. In the Patterson family, where both parents, as well as members of their extended kin network, have to work around the clock in shifts to make ends meet, most of children's play takes place inside the house among siblings, or with friends in the neighborhood on the lawn and sidewalk. Parents do not have time

to take their children to softball practice, although they would like to do so. At the other end of the continuum, in the Reis Family, children are chauffeured from one activity to another (e.g. from tennis to hockey, or from karate to softball) all within a single afternoon, multiple days of the week. This is made possible because of a constellation of factors: Mom's work schedule is flexible, her workplace is the same school that the children attend (and her work ends when children are out of school), her husband has some flexibility in his own work schedule, and Mom has dependable back-up child care (provided by her mother-in-law). During travel to and from these events children are most frequently engaged in doing their homework.

In the Tracy family the lives of Weston (age 5) and Aurora (age 8) are not organized according to tightly scheduled age-specific leisure activities. Instead, in the midst of family-centered activities such as playing instrumental music together, walking barefoot on the beach, or visiting the downtown library, the family engages in a continuous stream of deeply involving interactions. The first day of filming the activities of the Tracy family, I noticed that parents and children interspersed whatever activity they were undertaking with playful moments of exploration of possible ways the world could be understood. The extreme pleasure and joy with which members of this family conduct their daily lives has been quite remarkable for all viewers of their taped interaction. This report attempts to explicate the ensemble of conversational practices a particular family makes use of to cultivate active engagement in imaginative inquiry about the world.

### *Knowledge exploration as routine activity*

As part of his daily routine Tanner Tracy walks for a half hour with his children around the neighborhood, within five minutes after he returns home from work; this activity is made possible because Mom cooks dinner on week nights. The evening walk provides an opportunity for eliciting talk about children's feelings and opinions about their day.

During such walks, in the midst of car noises and against the cityscape environment, Dad and children enter into a play world, taking on the characters of different animals and elaborating dramas between these animals – chasing, scaring, and assisting one another – as they walk several blocks. On one occasion Weston, with a blinking flashlight, wants to be a firefly. Aurora, a fan of reptiles, chooses to be a cobra. Dad decides to become a zebra. The walks provide a way of leaving behind the everyday world and imagining future or possible ones, as participants begin to discuss the habits of the particular animals they choose to inhabit.

Dad opens the discussion by posing questions to each of the children: 'What is the most important thing to know about [a cobra/a firefly].' With his daughter Dad explicitly asks Aurora to elaborate what happens if one slaps a cobra (Example 1, line 7). Aurora provides her version of what cobras do (saying that they 'go back like that and get ready to strike'). Dad (line 10) immediately ratifies her explanation and elaborates directly upon it, animating a cobra 'rearing' up and preparing to

strike with his body as well as his speech (making the hissing sound of a cobra). He then adds further details to the scenario of an encounter with a cobra, stating that cobras will 'strike you so quickly and then they'll shoot dangerous venom in your body, and then paralyze you within minutes' (lines 11–13). Following the completion of this discussion of cobras, Dad moves to ask Weston about fireflies. When Weston responds in the mode of someone enacting a firefly, stating that one can use one's light (line 16), Dad affirms this, adding 'To light things up'. Data are transcribed according to a modified version of the system developed by Jefferson (Sacks et al., 1974: 731–3).

### Example 1

1. Dad: Okay. What is the most important thing to know
2. about a cobra.
3. Aurora: We::ll, they::
4. Dad: Don't slap it?
5. heh heh hah hah hah!
6. Aurora: [ No:: eh heh heh!
7. Dad: [ If you slap a cobra what happens.
8. Aurora: It will probably go back like that
9. And get ready to strike.
10. Dad: Right. They'll rear up- SSS- ((*animates cobra*))
11. And then they'll strike you so quickly?
12. And they'll shoot dangerous venom in your body,
13. And then paralyze you within minutes.
14. Dad: Now Weston. What's the most important thing
15. about a firefly.
16. Wes: 'Cause you uh- could (use your light.)
17. Dad: Right! To light things up.

Children and Dad not only work together in the building of collaborative descriptions of the habits of animals, but they also negotiate details of their features. The structuring of talk to this point resembles Mehan's (1979) classic Question/Answer/Evaluation sequences. In Example 2 below, however, the participation framework (Goodwin and Goodwin, 2004) changes immediately after Dad's interchange with Weston. Rather than delivering a lecture about fireflies, Dad instead becomes uncertain and states that he doesn't know how the firefly's 'lighter' works (line 18). He leaves open the possibility of one of his children resolving what for him is an unsolved mystery. In response to her dad's query, Aurora connects the idea of a firefly's 'lighter' with the workings of a flashlight and proposes, 'They have some sort of charge' (line 19). Dad (lines 20–21) repeats what Aurora says, and then elaborates upon this, using 'or' in a form of collaboratively produced utterance (Lerner, 2004; Sacks, 1995), in which uncertainty is displayed through the use of his appended request for confirmation: 'Or maybe electrical charge?' He then introduces another possible explanation for how the firefly produces light with 'Some kind of chemical process'. Aurora, overlapping Dad in line 22, provides her own idea: the 'lighter' of a firefly could be passed down from one generation to the next (lines 22–23).

**Example 2** (continuation of Example 1)

17. Dad: Right! To light things up.  
 18. I don't know exactly how their l- their- their lighter works.  
 19. Aurora: Yeah. They have some sort of charge.  
 20. Dad: Some sort of charge, or maybe electrical charge?  
 21. [ Some kind of chemical process.  
 22. Aurora: [ Maybe charges from **their** mother and their monner-  
 23. mother before that and their mother before that.  
 24. Dad: Right. Right.

After agreeing with Aurora's description of how fireflies got their lights, Father begins commentary about the animal he is enacting, the zebra (Example 3, lines 24–32). He ponders how it is that despite having stripes that 'are very easy to see' (that is, having little camouflage), zebras have nonetheless escaped being eaten. He then mentions the animal that zebras would most have to fear, stating '**But** the lions haven't got 'em all yet.' (line 32). At this point Aurora joins in the discussion, adding her own perspective on animal behavior (line 33).

**Example 3** (continuation of Example 2)

24. Dad: Right. Right. Why do zebras have stripes?  
 25. Only **God** knows the answer to that.=right?  
 26. Aurora: Uh **huh**.  
 27. Dad: Because, they're very easy to **see**,  
 28. And that's usually not- something that animals want.  
 29. Because it's part of their- uh-  
 30. You'd think that all the zebras would have been eaten  
 31. since they're so easy to see.  
 32. **But** the lions haven't got em all yet.  
 33. Aurora: The lionesses- uh- hunt the most.  
 34. The lion is actually (.) sleeping at home  
 35. While the **lioness** is doing all the work.  
 36. Dad: Right. That happens in a **lot** of societies  
 37. Where the women do most of the work.

While Dad introduced the notion of a particular animal, the lion, as a generic predator in his talk about animal habits, Aurora corrects her dad, making a finer distinction. She argues it would not be a lion hunting zebras, but rather a lioness, because the female does the hunting while the male stays at home sleeping. Father immediately agrees with Aurora's correction and uses it as a point of departure for a more general comment about the nature of gender roles in human society (lines 36–37).

The nightly walk thus functions much like family dinners (Ochs et al., 1992) can in American society, socializing perspective-taking and critical thinking, providing a forum for what Ochs and Taylor (1992) have called 'science at dinner'. Studying child–parent interaction in a children's museum, Crowley and Jacobs (2002) discuss the building of 'islands of expertise' during museum visits, moments when children become deeply engaged in learning about a particular domain of

knowledge, as a result of 'opportunistic noticings' concerning museum objects. 'Islands of expertise' emerge across a range of family activities and become 'platforms for families to practice learning habits and to develop, often for the first time, conversations about abstract and general ideas, concepts, or mechanisms' (Crowley and Jacobs, 2002: 334).

Moments of what I will call 'occasioned knowledge exploration' occur when children and parents extemporaneously connect new knowledge to existing knowledge in collaborative endeavors, such as the talk about firefly 'lighters' and lions' and lionesses' hunting habits during an evening walk. They thus differ from didactic 'lessons' in which parents lecture children about science (for example, by discussing how rockets are launched by referring to encyclopedia entries) without a child's inviting them to do so.

In the Tracy family any number of opportunities for occasioned knowledge exploration occur during everyday activities. Moreover, these explorations are frequently infused with enactments, laughter and wordplay, creating emotionally involving experiences that entail the 'the work of the imagination' (Harris, 2000), offering consideration of alternatives to reality.

### *Practices for inviting exploration*

During their evening walks, as was seen with the first set of examples (Examples 1–3), Dad often introduced the topics that were subsequently collaboratively developed by the children with him. At other points during the evening walk, however, rather than introducing a topic himself, children make noticings about objects in their environment that are expanded upon. As we are walking, Weston makes a comment about lights that are blinking on a parked car he sees, and this is transformed into a lesson about hazard lights.

#### **Example 4**

1. Wes: Look at the light! All those lights, ((to ethnographer))
2. **Look** they **leave** their lights on. ((to Dad))
3. **Two** of them. ((pointing with flashlight))
4. Dad: **Oh. That** is the signal for
5. 'I'm just stopping here for a minute.
6. Don't bother me policeman.'

Dad provides an explanation for Weston's observation (line 2) that a car has left its lights on. Here Dad (lines 4–6) animates the lights, speaking as he gives the definition of what lights, described as a 'signal', are 'saying': 'I'm just stopping here for a minute. Don't bother me policeman'. The explanation is brief, and recipient-designed for his 5-year-old son. Not infrequently when Dad explains to his son the meaning of a word or object, he animates that object talking.

When his 8-year old daughter poses a question to him ('Do you put that on sometimes?') (Example 4, line 7) 7 seconds later, he is provided a warrant for further exploration of the meaning of the lights. The term 'hazard lights' is introduced and explained to the children (lines 8–17) in some detail.

**Example 5**

- ((walking down the street during an evening neighborhood walk))
7. Aurora: Do you put that on sometimes?  
 8. Dad: Uh:m, Yes I have **done** it before.  
 9. When I had to hurry in somewhere  
 10. And I couldn't find a parking space.  
 11. It's a good- it's a good signal to have.  
 12. They call it **hazard** light.  
 13. **Hazard**. That means that **you** are a hazard  
 14. Because- you're not **parking** the right place.  
 15. And that you may have **encountered** a hazard  
 16. Because, you also put those on if you break **down**.  
 17. They're **hazard** lights.  
 18. ((getting ready to cross the street))  
 19. Watch out for dog (pup).

Dad explains the context and circumstances under which a hazard light would be used. Jefferson (1985) has discussed how the 'unpackaging' of a 'gloss' or formulation depends on the interactive work of co-participants. In explaining the meaning of the blinking lights, Dad waits until children display interest in the developing topic (when Aurora asks the question 'Do you put that on sometimes?') before providing a more elaborated discussion. Notice that children neither interrupt nor attempt to shut down the extended explanation in its course.

Jefferson (1985) describes how a speaker might be willing, indeed eager, to elaborate upon a story she wants to tell, but does not want to produce it immediately. Similar processes occur in the midst of assessments in stories. Charles Goodwin (2003), in his work on assessable names, discusses how a speaker might be seeking assessment of an object (an antique car); however, rather than explicitly marking that object as assessable through use of an assessment adjective, the speaker instead poses a recognition test for his recipients, by using enhanced stress over the noun.

In the midst of reading bedtime stories, Dad introduces new words that could be explored, and invites children to ask him about them. In the following Aurora asks Dad about the word 'Mizz'. Dad is reading a bedtime story (*Bill and Pete*) about crocodiles in Egypt to Aurora (in the top bunk) and Weston, who is seated on Dad's lap.

**Example 6**

1. Dad: Next day **Mi:zz** Ibis taught the class how to write  
 2. all the letters. ((kisses Weston))  
 3. They're gonna be doing a **lot** of writing  
 4. in **your** class Dude.  
 5. Aurora: **Mizz** [ Ibis.  
 6. Dad: [ The letters.  
 7. Dad: **Mi:zz**: (.) Ibis. ((looks up at Aurora))  
 8. Aurora: Why **Mi:zz**..  
 9. (2.2) ((Dad swallows, looks down))  
 10. Dad: It's a **lo:ng** story.

11. (2.2) ((Aurora smiles))  
 12. There's **Miss**?  
 13. (1. 6)  
 14. Aurora: And there's **Mizz**.  
 15. Dad: And there's Mizz,  
 16. And there's **Mrs**.  
 17. Dad: **Miss?** (.) i::s generally-  
 18. Aurora: A miss.=  
 19. Dad: A young lady.  
 20. **Mizz**, is generally an **un**married **adult** lady.  
 21. **Mrs.**, is a **married** adult lady.  
 22. Aurora: Mm::.  
 23. Dad: Okay honey?  
 24. Aurora: Mm.  
 25. Dad: ((story continues))

How is this sequence organized? In assessment sequences a speaker can 'signpost' an upcoming assessment though an intonational enhanced intensifier (Goodwin and Goodwin, 1987). In the case of the present sequence enhanced stress making a word salient can act as a prompt or invitation for children to ask for elaboration of a new word. As Dad is reading a story, he accentuates the word '**Mi:zz:**' (line 1) suggesting its availability as a topic in its own right, and then makes a comment to Weston. In her next move Aurora does a repetition of the words '**Mizz Ibis**' (line 5), selecting it out to be commented upon and topicalizing it. Dad's subsequent return repetition (line 7) is produced to further highlight the word through elongation of sounds in the word and a micropause: '**Mi:zz:** (.) Ibis.' In addition he looks up towards Aurora. Note that unpacking the meaning of the word 'Mizz' is accomplished only after Aurora makes an explicit request for an explanation of the meaning of the word.

Similar processes are used for making available the unpacking of idioms. In the next example, as we arrive at the marina a car backs out of a tightly packed parking place. Dad does not hesitate to occupy the parking place, though another car arrived at the same time. Dad creates an imaginary dialogue with the car that is competing for space (line 1); then, commenting on the interaction between himself and the other car, he uses the idiom 'being a shark'.

### Example 7

- ((Arriving at the marina looking to his left out the window  
 Dad enacts talking to another car competing for space))
1. Dad: **Oh** yeah yeah yeah.=whatever.  
 (1.2)  
 2. Dad: You gotta be a **shark** in **this** town  
 3. if you want **parking**.  
 (1.6) ((turns off ignition))  
 4. Dad: Okay. Here we **are**.  
 5. Wes: What's **shark**.  
 6. Dad: A shark? You gotta be **aggressive**.  
 (1.0)  
 7. Dad: That person wanted to take my **parking** spot.



8. But we were there first. =So I **told** him  
 9. we were there first. (1.2)  
 10. And they didn't seem to **like** that information very much.

In this example after Dad makes his comment 'You gotta be a **shark** in **this** town if you want **parking**' he announces arrival at the beach (line 4). As in Example 6, Dad puts stress on the word 'shark' (a word perhaps touched off by arrival at the beach location) in his talk. By making the word salient he invites the children to ask about it. The selection of an idiom acts as a gambit; in order for the new expression to be explicated, a recipient must ask questions displaying interest in it. Only *after* Weston questions Dad about the meaning of being a 'shark'. ('What's shark'. line 5) does Dad begin to explain the meaning of this idiom.

The gloss or explanation takes the form of a situated narrative. In explicating 'being a shark' Dad provides a formulation of the expression with reference to a *local metric* (Goodwin, 2003: 323). He formulates the events that just happened, and what the child saw, as appropriate ways of acting. Dad gives a situated account of 'being a shark' by depicting a type of person who acts in a particular way in these circumstances. He describes how a typical driver 'in this town' should act and then describes how he acted. Being shark-like is described as a reasonable and appropriate course of action in the current circumstances.

### *Word play in the midst of exploring the meaning of a word*

Unpacking meanings of words can involve the playful exploration of possible rather than literal meanings as well. Children actively attend to the poetics of language (Fasulo et al., 2002; Keenan, 1974; Keenan and Klein, 1975; Schieffelin, 1983) and often replicate form in terms of the phonological shape of a prior utterance in their next moves. Bilingual situations in which children participate provide perspicuous opportunities for poetic language games (Hinnenkamp, 2003), as words can be interpreted as belonging equally to two codes, or 'bivalently' (Woolard, 1998: 27–33).<sup>1</sup> In the Tracy family (where Mom is a bilingual speaker of Spanish and English) family members choose to hear (and restructure) words in particular ways so that they can be seized as opportunities for launching play on the sound structure of words.

Word play occurs in the next example as children provide their English understanding of Spanish words that Dad introduces during a bedtime story. As Dad mentions that the tale he will read is based on a story by the author Octavio Paz, he accentuates the word 'Paz', hesitates, and gazes up at Aurora in her bunk bed before continuing. This elicits word play as the children present their renderings of the meanings of the Spanish words 'Paz' and 'Octavio'.

#### **Example 8**

1. Dad: **Okay.** My Life with the Wave.  
 2. By Katherine Cowan.  
 3. Aurora: **Cool. Look** at it.  
 4. Dad: It's based on a story by Octavio **Paz**.  
 ((looks up to top bunk at Aurora))

5. Wes: Paws?
6. Aurora: Octavio **Paz**,
7. Dad: Not like **kitten** paws. ((*tickles Wes*))
8. Aurora: **Octave** paws.
9. Like octaves on a piano.
10. Wes: **Pause**.
11. Aurora: And paws like a kitten.
12. Wes: No.= [ Pau:se like-
13. Dad: [ Oc- Octavio is-
14. Wes: Pause like **stop**.
15. Dad: No. None of those.
16. Let me explain it to you.
17. Dad: Oc- Octavio- **i::s** Spanish for the- original
18. Latin word meaning Octavius.
19. Octavius Caesar, was a famous- um (.) king.
20. And- and they named October after him.
21. So **his** name is Oc- Octavio,
22. And Paz, P-A-Z?
23. That means **peace**, in Spanish.
24. Pa::z. Kay? My Life with the Wave.

While reading a story by Octavio Paz, Dad makes salient the word ‘Paz’ by stressing the word and gazing up at Aurora in the top bunk bed before continuing the story (line 4). This activity occasions a question by Wes, who asks ‘Paws?’ (line 5). When Dad, anticipating the possible interpretation of Wes, clarifies that the word does not mean ‘**kitten** paws’. (line 7), Aurora plays on both the words ‘Paz’ and ‘Octavio’ in her explanation ‘**Octave** paws. Like octaves on a piano’ (lines 8–9) and ‘And paws like a kitten’. (line 11). Wes then gives his own reading that ‘pause’ means ‘stop’ (lines 12, 14). The storytelling activity thus provides a space for a playful exploration of the bivalent meanings of the word ‘Paz’ and ‘Octavio’ as children provide alternative possible interpretations of the words before Dad provides his own definitions (lines 17–23).

### *An extended sequence of playful knowledge exploration*

Opportunities for occasioned exploration might also occur during family activities such as eating a meal together. Mealtime allows a more extended time period for the joint production of knowledge exploration (Ochs and Taylor, 1992; Ochs et al., 1992); however, to be sustained, it requires the engrossment in the talk of the moment through displays of understanding and questioning. I now wish to examine how in the midst of a storytelling sequence at dinner adults and children weave together playful interaction with a lesson about mummies.

Example 9 takes place on Sunday evening as Dad is relating to Mom a serious injury that happened to a Dodger player, Kaz Ishii, on the field.

#### **Example 9.1**

- ((*Mom sits down to dinner that Dad prepared*))
1. Dad: So did you hear what happened to Kaz Ishii today?  
(2.0)

2. Mom: °What?  
(1.4)
3. Dad: You know the- poster- Dodger?
4. that [ Aurora bought? ((*points to poster*))
5. Mom: [ Oh:::
6. Dad: (°is fading) Kaz Ishii?
7. Mom: Yes?
8. Dad: Got a line drive back in his face.
9. And- it hit him in the forehead so hard
10. when he was pitching?
11. That it went right- straight back to the catcher.  
(0.6)
12. On a line.
13. Dad: And they brought [ a-
14. Mom: [ My Go::d.
15. Dad: They had to- bring the ambulance onto the field
16. To take him off the pitcher's mound.

Though the children are silent during the body of the story, when Dad starts a word search, Wes (line 19) and Aurora (line 22) collaborate in building the talk on the floor.

### Example 9.2

17. Dad: °And- and-
18. I thought we might wanna-  
(2.0)
19. Wes: Pray. ((*smiling*))
20. Dad: °Yeah!
21. Mom: °What?
22. Aurora: To **Ishii!**

While the story was initially posed to Mom, both Weston and Aurora display their keen attention to and interpretation of the ongoing progress of the story, as well as the affective tenor of it, through their ability to add new segments to Dad's emerging talk in grammatically appropriate ways. When Dad pauses in his utterance (line 18) 'I thought we might wanna-' Weston (in line 19) completes the word search Dad initiated by providing the word 'pray'. In essence he collaborates (Sacks, 1995: 57–60) in the production of the unfolding utterance Dad initiates. Aurora then seamlessly provides a new added segment to the ever-unfolding talk in progress with 'to **Ishii**'. By selecting the preposition 'to' instead of 'for' in her utterance 'to **Ishii**', Aurora transforms the protagonist Dad has talked about from someone on whose behalf one needs to pray to someone to whom someone should pray; in essence, Ishii is transformed from a baseball player into a god. With this move Aurora changes the storytelling from the depiction of a past event into the exploration of a hypothetical one.

While Dad indicates he wants to pursue his own storyline, in his repair ('Not **to** Ishii'. Example 9.3, line 23), everyone else at the table now participates in laughter in response to Aurora's utterance. Format tying (Goodwin, 1990: 177–85) is frequently employed to build playful exchanges. In children's talk, in particular

during bouts of ritual insult, children build a new utterance by tying closely to prior talk, maintaining the grammatical structure of a prior sentence while making minimal semantic shifts. Mom enters into the activity of playing with format tying with her utterance 'Pray to *Isis*'. She replaces 'Ishii' with '*Isis*' (an Egyptian goddess). Dad persists in his version of 'Pray *to* Ishii' and asks for silence and 'no burping' while other family members are laughing.

### Example 9.3

22. Aurora: To *Ishii*!  
 23. Dad: Not *to* [Ishii.  
 24. Mom: [eh heh heh!  
 25. Aurora: [eh heh heh!  
 26. Wes: [eh heh heh!  
 27. Dad: eh heh!  
 28. Mom: Pray to *Isis*.  
 29. Dad: [°Hm:::!:  
 30. Mom: [ eh *huh*-huh-huh-huh! hm!  
 31. Dad: Pray *for* Ishii.  
 32. Mom: [ eh heh heh heh heh heh!  
 33. Dad: [ A moment of silence?  
 34. Aurora: *No*. Pray *to* Ishii.  
 35. Dad: Close your eyes. I said *silence*.  
 36. Aurora: ((*closes her eyes and smiles*))  
 37. Dad: That means no talking. =right?  
 38. Mom: eh huh-huh [huh-huh-huh  
 39. Aurora: [eh heh heh heh heh!  
 40. Wes: eh heh!  
 41. Dad: No burping either.

Family members display different forms of alignment with respect to the developing prayer talk. As Dad begins his prayer, Aurora continues to eat, and is corrected by Mom with her admonishment, 'We're not supposed to eat when we're praying'. (line 46). Dad removes the fork from Aurora's mouth (line 49). Aurora participates in the underlying playful ethos of the talk on the floor and defends her action with 'Look! I'm hungr(hh)ry'. Only when Dad explains that they'll get through the prayer faster if everyone stops talking does she act more reverently towards the prayer, nodding, and closing her eyes.

### Example 9.4

- ((*Aurora is eating*))  
 42. Dad: Close your eyes for a moment?  
 (1.2)  
 43. A::nd say::, uh:::m,  
 44. Uh:::m, dear God, let everyone  
 45. Dad: [ who got-  
 46. Mom: [ We're not supposed to *eat* when we're praying.  
 47. Eh heh heh heh heh!  
 48. Aurora [ heh heh-[heh!  
 49. Dad: [ ((*removes food from Aurora's fork onto plate*))

50. Aurora: [ Look! I'm **hungr**(hhh)y.  
 51. Dad: [ It'll be- it'll be **faster** if you stop interrupting me.  
 52. Aurora: ((*nods and closes eyes*))  
 (2.0)  
 53. Dear God. Thank you for this food.  
 54. A:nd this- wonderful bounty that you brought to us.  
 55. A: nd uh, protect everyone who was injured today.  
 56. Ahmen.

At the close of the prayer, Weston (line 59) has his own critique of the developing talk. He finds fault with Dad's pronunciation of the word 'Ahmen', and corrects him: 'Amen. Ah- **Not Ahmen**'. Weston begins sing-chanting versions of Amen, with 'Amen, **Ahmen**'. This word is uttered in an environment similar to that of the words in Example 8. Amen is presented as a word that is topicalized; it is produced with an exaggerated singsong intonation contour with no talk overlapping it. In such a location, the sung 'Amen' invites participants to select it as a point of departure for subsequent elaboration through word play. Mom enters into the game of sound play by producing the word 'Tutankhamen'. This word generates the next topic, which is talk about King Tut.

#### Example 9.5

57. Wes: °What was it?  
 58. Mom: **A**(hhh)men.  
 59. Wes: **Amen. Ah- Not Ahmen.**  
 60. Dad: You can say Ahmen (0.8) if you **want**.  
 61. Wes: **Amen. Ahmen.** [ Amen ((*singsong*))  
 62. Mom: [ Tutank**h**amen.

Mom's utterance 'Tutankhamen' provides a gambit. It introduces a new topic, triggered by the child's talk, that can lead to further inquiry. Dad asks Weston if he knows who King Tut is. When Weston responds that he doesn't with 'No(hh)o' this provides the warrant Dad needs to begin to describe 'the famous mummy'. As Dad begins his depiction, Weston and Aurora display their engrossment in the story through the questions they pose, and permit Dad to develop his narrative about King Tut (lines 73–80):

#### Example 9.6

63. Wes: **Amen. Ahmen.**  
 64. Dad: He doesn't know who that **is**.  
 65. You know who King Tut is Weston?  
 (2.0)  
 66. Wes: eh- heh [ °No(hhh)o. ((*shaking head*))  
 67. Dad: [ The famous mummy?  
 68. Wes: ((*shakes head*))  
 69. Dad: He's a famous mummy.  
 70. Wes: → Is he real?  
 71. Dad: Not alive.  
 72. Mom: May I have a fork? ((*to Aurora*))

73. Dad: But- he's a mummy. He was all-  
 74. He was a king? In Egypt?  
 75. Wes: -> And he died?  
 76. Dad: About- twenty five hundred years ago?  
 77. Wes: -> [Know his dad?  
 78. Dad: [Maybe **two** thousand years ago.  
 79. Aurora: -> Is his dad alive?  
 80. Dad: He was mummified, inside a tomb, in Egypt.

After Mom reveals that she saw King Tut in a museum, questions that children ask permit Mom to develop her own hypothetical story about her encounter with King Tut:

### Example 9.7

- Mom: I saw [ King Tut.  
 Dad: [ Hmph!  
 Dad: Mama saw [ King Tut.  
 Mom: [ In a museum.

This new segment of the story leads to another set of questions that now enable Mom to develop her own fanciful story about King Tut winking at her:

### Example 9.8

1. Wes: Was it- moving?  
 2. Mom: He winked at me.  
     (3.0)  
 3. Heh heh heh heh heh!  
 4. Aurora: King Tut wink- winked at you?  
 5. Mom: Yea::h.  
 6. Wes: Really?  
     (0.8)  
 7. Mom: No:..  
 8. Aurora MM:::::!!!!  
 9. Dad: Uh huh hnh hnh!  
 10. Mom: Eh huh huh huh!  
 11. eh heh heh! (1.8) eh heh heh heh!

Subsequent questions from Weston (lines 11 and 18 in Example 9.8) permit further development of the story. Aurora offers her own possible version (lines 12 and 19) of the story, while both Dad and Mom develop their depiction of how King Tut was positioned in the tomb (lines 14–17) and why (lines 20, 22–23).

### Example 9.9

11. Wes: What did he do.  
 12. Aurora: Like he would go- ((winks))  
 13. Mmmmmm!  
 14. Dad: They just lay there.  
 15. Mom: He just laid there.  
 16. Dad: Like this ((crosses hands in front of him))  
 17. Mom: eh heh heh! (1.8) eh heh heh heh!

18. Wes: Why did they die like this ((*crosses hands*))  
 19. Aurora: To make [ room-  
 20. Dad: [ Ancient- ancient Egyptian religious beliefs.  
           (1.6)  
 21. Aurora: Beliefs.  
 22. Mom: That's the pose. ((*crosses arms*))  
 23. He was vogueing.

In the next section of the story Weston asks whether King Tut's head is movable. In response Dad describes how the skull could easily be knocked off his head (lines 2–3); Mom and Dad also describe what the outcome of breaking the law by doing so would mean. To this story segment, Weston adds his own version of what could occur before going off to jail with 'And then, before you go to jail you can- see the body parts' (lines 18–19).

### Example 9.10

1. Wes: Can you move his head?  
 2. Dad: You could knock his head right off  
 3. if you smacked it.  
       ... ((*some transcript deleted*))  
 12. You could punch right through his whole skull.  
 13. Gung!! ((*demonstrating a punch*))  
 14. But- it's against the law because he's-  
 15. he's a museum piece.  
 16. Mom: They'd probably take you to jail.  
 17. Dad: Yeah. And they'd be very angry.  
 18. Wes: And then- before you go to jail  
 19. You can- see the body parts.  
 20. Dad: There's none left. He's empty.  
 21. Or he's caked inside with salt peter  
 22. And other- ((*gestures in word search*))  
 23. Mummification.

As the story develops further, word play in the form of punning is introduced once more. When Weston asks what would happen if the bandage were taken off of the mummy, Dad responds 'He'd fall apart. Not just emotionally' (lines 43–48). Aurora chimes in with 'You'd break his heart' (line 51).

### Example 9.11

42. Wes: What if you take the- the bandage off.  
 43. Dad: He'd fall apart.  
 44. Aurora: eh heh heh heh heh! heh heh heh heh  
 45. Mom: °He was just teasing.  
 46. Dad: And I'm not kidding. He'd really fall apart.  
 47. Aurora: Like [ you ( ).  
 48. Dad: [ Not just emotionally.  
 49. Mom: Eh hmh-hmh! hmh-hmh-hmh-hmh!  
 50. Wes: Mm- W- We'll see a-  
 51. Aurora: You'd break his heart.

The learning experience about mummies extends beyond the dinner conversation into post dinner interaction. When Weston then asks 'Did you see his body' and 'Was he- was he wrapped?' Dad decides to go beyond simply providing his own embodied depiction of King Tut (crossing his arms) by showing the children a picture of the mummy on the computer, after they finish their dinner. As he exits the table he states, 'Please excuse me while I um, while I download a picture of King Tut'.

### Example 9.12

57. Wes: Did you see his body?  
 58. Mom: I don't remember (.) that much about it.  
 59. Wes: Was he- was he wrapped?  
 60. Dad: I can get a picture of him- on line  
 61. After you finish your dinner.  
 62. Mom: Yeah:::  
 63. Dad: We can look at- pic- That's our uhm-  
 64. That would be fun.  
 65. Please excuse me while I um, while I download  
 66. a picture of- King Tut.

Format tying, sound play, and other forms of language play allow members of the Tracy family to explore the world of mummies. A sound touch-off from the word 'Ahmen' leads to Mom's introduction of a new topic: 'Tutankhamen'. Mom subsequently produces her own hypothetical narrative experience about encountering a mummy, which includes King Tut's winking at her. The children's questions display their engagement and permit Dad and Mom to elaborate on features of mummies, including how long ago they lived, where they lived, how they were discovered and by what group of scientists, how religious beliefs affect burial practices, what physical characteristics mummified bodies consist of, and how the law impacts interaction with objects considered 'museum pieces'.

## Conclusion

While researchers have described ways that children construct theories about the world (Wellman and Gelman, 1998) in a controlled setting, we know very little about the actual practices that parents employ to assist children in exploring new domains of knowledge in everyday environments. In this article I have described the practices which family members make use of for accomplishing a particular activity – exploring new domains of knowledge, including new vocabulary, idioms, and theories about the world – in the midst of mundane activity during walks around the neighborhood, car rides, at mealtime, and during bedtime stories. Forms of participant frameworks and positive affect in the examples we have examined invite extensive and joyful elaboration of meanings. Together parents and children of this family explore gender differences in hunting patterns among lions, how fireflies light up, why people use hazard lights, why mummies are buried with their arms crossed, etc. Parents wait for children to display interest in a topic before entering into extensive explanations. Learning new idioms and vocabulary is interspersed with word play and drama.



The parents of the Tracy family have succeeded in creating with their children aspects of what activity theorists have characterized as a 'culture of collaborative learning' (Nicolopoulou and Cole, 1993). Children take an active role in their own education, and adults act as facilitators and guides rather than authoritarian figures or ultimate sources of information. Discipline is provided by a system of shared and *voluntarily* accepted rules, and play is a crucial feature of interaction. Gutierrez et al. (1999), in their close examination of 'hybrid learning practices' in the classroom, also find that optimal environments for cognitive development involve play as well as seriousness. They argue that humor, local knowledge, personal experience, and narrative are all entailed in successful learning encounters.

Psychologists such as Larson and Richards (1994: 217) have argued that 'in order for individuals to thrive, they need caring, supportive, and enjoyable interactions with others'. Families require not only the avoidance of destructive emotional exchanges; in addition they require renewing ones during shared leisure and within egalitarian relationships. Larson and Richards view the activity of sustaining a family as a difficult creative accomplishment and state, 'if any aspect of family life needs to be institutionalized, it is not fixed roles, but rather processes of communication that allow this creativity to occur' (Larson and Richards, 1994: 222). Parents seize opportunities to tie talk to sound structure as well as meaning structure, gearing into the poetic dimension of language that delights children.

In this article I've only reported on the organization of one activity, occasioned exploration of meaning. Having viewed over 60 hours of tape of this family, however, I have found that the practices and forms of participation structure described here are not unrelated to how members of this particular family accomplish other activities (complaints, assessments, directives, disagreements). While negotiation does occur in the midst of task activities the children are asked to perform, there is never any doubt that parents are in charge in this family (see Goodwin, 2003). Bargaining and whining are uncommon. While Lareau (2003) and others have reported that direct imperatives are a feature of working-class rather than middle-class life, in the Tracy family the percentage of direct imperatives outweighs more mitigated forms (Press, 2003). Children willingly participate in daily chores and the economic life of the family in ways that display deference towards parents rather than a sense of entitlement (Goodwin, 2005). By investigating a range of diverse speech activities across a single family's interaction we can come to understand what might constitute a family culture or ethos.

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