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978-0-521-52042-3 - Joining Society: Social Interaction and Learning in Adolescence and Youth

Edited by Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont, Clotilde Pontecorvo, Lauren B. Resnick,

Tania Zittoun and Barbara Burge

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JOINING SOCIETY

Social Interaction and Learning in Adolescence and Youth

Joining Society addresses a timely and crucial topic, the socialization of today's youth, asking precise questions: To what are the young socialized? Which skills, modes of thinking, or forms of action are required from them, and what developmental value do they hold? All too often, socialization tends to be viewed within the confines of a particular geographical or cultural situation. The multi-national list of contributors brings an international perspective to the problems of socialization to work and to adult life while at the same time emphasizing the common issues that face youth around the world.

Some of the topics addressed are the rules and roles involved in socialization, attaining personal agency through collective activity, the use of new technologies, and the role of intergenerational relationships.

Over the past few decades, social scientists have begun to appreciate fully the importance of social interactions in the development of thinking and the acquisition of the necessary social and cultural skills for active and responsible involvement in society. This book sheds new light on the processes through which this is accomplished and through which society may hope to intervene in positive ways with today's youth.

Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont is Professor of Psychology and Director of the Institute of Psychology at the University of Neuchâtel. She is editor of *Social Interaction and Cognitive Development in Children* and coeditor of *Jean Piaget and Neuchâtel* (with J. M. Barrelet).

Clotilde Pontecorvo is Professor of Educational Psychology at the University of Rome "La Sapienza." She is author of *Writing Development: An Interdisciplinary View* and coeditor of *Orality versus Literacy: Concepts, Methods, and Data* (with C. Blanche-Benveniste).

Lauren B. Resnick is Director of the Learning Research and Development Center at the University of Pittsburgh. She is the author of *Education and Learning to Think* and editor of *Knowing, Learning, and Instruction*. She has coedited several books, including *Linking School and Work: Roles for Standards and Assessment* (with J. Wirt).

Tania Zittoun is a Research Fellow at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, where she studies cultural resources in young adult transition periods.

Since 1987, Barbara Burge has been the Senior Assistant to Lauren B. Resnick, Director of the Learning Research and Development Center at the University of Pittsburgh. During 10 of those years she was also the Editorial Associate for *Cognition and Instruction*.

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THE JACOBS FOUNDATION SERIES ON ADOLESCENCE

Series Editor: Professor Sir Michael Rutter
Institute of Psychiatry, London

The Jacobs Foundation Series on Adolescence addresses the question of what can be done to promote healthy development around the world. It views this important question from different disciplines in the social sciences. Economists and sociologists may consider how we can promote human capital over time, specifically an individual's ability to become educated and to develop earning power; demographers and sociologists may analyze development patterns over generations; psychiatrists and psychologists may tackle the problem of how much change is possible in psychological health during the life course and over generations.

Drawing from these different domains of inquiry into human development, the Jacobs Foundation Series on Adolescence examines the potential for change across generations and during the life course in three areas: (1) human capital, (2) partnership behavior, and (3) psychological health and the rearing of children. The purpose of the series is to further the goals of the Jacobs Foundation – to contribute to the welfare and social productivity of the current and future generations of young people.

Other Books in the Series

Youth in Cities: A Cross-National Perspective, edited by Marta Tienda and William Julius Wilson

The following titles were published in collaboration with the Jacobs Foundation, before the series was established:

Youth Unemployment and Society, edited by Anne Petersen and Jeylan Mortimer (1994)

Self-Efficacy in Changing Societies, edited by Al Bandura (1995)

Psychosocial Disturbances in Young People, edited by Michael Rutter (1995)

Preparing Adolescents for the Twenty-First Century, edited by Ruby Takanishi and David Hamburg (1997)

Understanding and Preventing Teacher Burnout, edited by Roland Vandenberghe and Michael Huberman (1999)

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Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont

University of Neuchâtel

Clotilde Pontecorvo

University of Rome

“La Sapienza”

Lauren B. Resnick

University of Pittsburgh

Tania Zittoun

University of Cambridge

Barbara Burge

University of Pittsburgh



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Contributors

Barbara Burge, Learning Research and Development Center, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, United States

Felice Carugati, Department of Education, University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy

Alain Coulon, Department of Education, Université Paris 8 at Saint-Denis, Saint-Denis Cedex 02, France

Annie Fouquet, Direction de l'Animation, de la Recherche, des Études et des Statistiques (DARES), Paris, France

Shirley Brice Heath, Department of English, Stanford University, Stanford, California, United States

Manfred Hofer, Department of Psychology, University of Mannheim, Mannheim, Germany

Karsten Hundeide, Psykologisk Institutt, Universitetet I Oslo, Oslo, Norway

Klaus J. Jacobs, Chairman of the Board, Johann Jacobs Foundation, Zurich, Switzerland

Claude Albert Kaiser, Service de la Recherche en Éducation (SRED), Geneva, Switzerland

Saul Meghnagi, Director, Istituto Superiore per la Formazione, Rome, Italy

David Middleton, Department of Human Sciences, Loughborough University, Leicestershire, United Kingdom

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Contributors

Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont, Institute de Psychologie, Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines, Université de Neuchâtel, Neuchâtel, Switzerland

Jacques Perriault, Section de Recherche sur les Industries Electroniques du Savoir (SERIES), Université Paris X-Nanterre, Nanterre Cedex, France

Clotilde Pontecorvo, Università degli studi di Roma “La Sapienza,” Dipartimento di Psicologia dei Processi di Sviluppo e Socializzazione, Rome, Italy

Dragan Popadić, Department of Psychology, University of Belgrade, Beograd, Yugoslavia

Lauren B. Resnick, Learning Research and Development Center, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, United States

John B. Rijsman, Department of Psychology, Tilburg University, Tilburg, the Netherlands

Laurence Roulleau-Berger, Chargée de Recherche CNRS, Groupe de Recherche sur la Socialisation, Université Lumière Lyon 2-bât K, Bron/Cedex, France

Paul Ryan, Faculty of Economics and Politics, King’s College, Cambridge, United Kingdom

Roger Säljö, Department of Education, Göteborg University, Göteborg, Sweden

Ursula M. Staudinger, Psychology Department, Dresden University, Dresden, Germany

Stuart Tannock, Social and Cultural Studies, University of California–Berkeley, Berkeley, California, United States

Jonathan Tudge, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, North Carolina, United States

Tania Zittoun, Institute de Psychologie, Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines, Université de Neuchâtel, Neuchâtel, Switzerland

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Foreword

The mission of the Johann Jacobs Foundation is international. Currently, its grant-making policy operates through communication networks to influence decision makers and educators, to facilitate interdisciplinary research, and to promote research for incentive and mutual aid.

Each year the foundation sponsors a major conference related to one of these priorities as defined by the board. The “Joining Society: Social Interaction and Learning in Adolescence and Youth” conference, held at Marbach Castle, Germany, in 1997, provides the basis for this volume. That topic is directly connected with the Johann Jacobs Foundation’s growing interest in the adolescent phase of human development in the social context of a rapidly changing world. The Foundation promotes research in this area and contributes to the development of action programs with a three-pronged goal: to improve opportunities for adolescents, to promote the development of respect for the environment, and to identify future widespread problems that may result from the unreasonable exploitation of environmental resources. This effort also involves correcting or preventing the marginalization of youth, particularly in inner cities, and proposing ways in which disadvantaged teens can become competitive users of new information technologies.

For the organization of this conference, the Johann Jacobs Foundation invited Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont, a psychology professor at the University of Neuchâtel, to set up a small international team. She was chosen because of her special interests in the social psychology of education and her extensive research on the importance of horizontal (peer) interactions in cognitive development. Professor Perret-Clermont’s group included Clotilde Pontecorvo, a professor at the University of Rome “La Sapienza”; Lauren B. Resnick, a professor at the University of Pittsburgh; and Tania Zittoun, a

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Klaus J. Jacobs

doctoral student at the University of Neuchâtel. The conference provided a highly productive “thinking space,” with participants from 15 countries representing a careful mix of disciplines, theoretical perspectives, and research traditions. This volume builds on and extends the main presentations and debates of this conference.

Our societies are facing formidable new problems; fortunately, new knowledge, resources, and approaches with which to solve them are also increasing. Although this book focuses on serious concerns about the well-being and prospects of contemporary youth, it also reports illuminating research findings and offers promising ideas and strategies for addressing these concerns. Today, postindustrial countries find themselves struggling with a common set of problems, the solutions to which may vary from society to society. Strategies that work in one place may not succeed in another where the culture, politics, and economy differ. Yet decision makers and practitioners can profit enormously from examining relevant research and the successes and problems experienced by others.

We hope that researchers will feel encouraged to pursue their important scientific work in this area.

Klaus J. Jacobs, Chairman
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Preface

Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont

The story of this volume unfolds like a fairy tale. Once upon a time, a fairy sent a letter to a professor at one of Europe's smallest universities. The recipient was a Swiss social psychologist who was preparing to celebrate the centenary of a compatriot, Jean Piaget, a major developmental psychologist. His prominence was fading in his own country both because of an increasing emphasis on technological and economic problems and because of a diminished concern for the education of youth. This was occurring despite the overwhelming presence of inquisitive young people in the social science departments, who sought help in making meaning of their seemingly ever-changing world; in reflecting on intergenerational relationships, social bonds, and individual autonomy; in trying to understand their cultural diversity and historical heritage; and in worrying about the future.

Upon opening the letter, the professor thought she was dreaming. It was an invitation to "secure the help of two or three colleagues in convening at Marbach Castle a group of 40 scientists of your choice, young promising researchers and confirmed senior scientists from all over the world, to work on an issue that is of primary importance for young people's future." I was the professor, the "fairy" was Klaus J. Jacobs, and the magic wand was the Johann Jacobs Foundation, well known for supporting important innovative projects and encouraging worldwide communication among scientists. A series of annual conferences on youth, sponsored previously by the Johann Jacobs Foundation, had resulted in important publications (e.g., Bandura, 1995; Petersen & Mortimer, 1994; Rutter, 1995).

I turned to Clotilde Pontecorvo, an Italian specialist on the role of talk and conversation in the growth of thinking in the home and in schools, with extensive experience among teachers, educators, and politicians; to

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Lauren Resnick, an American cognitive psychologist who, after having studied socially shared cognition and the school-to-work transition, has become deeply involved in the educational assessment of young people; and to Tania Zittoun, a Swiss graduate student whose recent personal experience of youth and professional training in social psychology and the psychology of emotions have made her a keen observer of her contemporaries' creative involvement in music, art, and other forms of social life. She provided a constant reminder of both the importance of transgenerational transmissions and the autonomous role of the young in making sense of contradictions in the "established worlds" into which young people are supposed to integrate.

Thus, on November 6–8, 1997, researchers representing diverse disciplinary perspectives from many European countries, including Russia and Yugoslavia, as well as from North America, South Africa, and the Middle and Far East, convened at the Johann Jacobs Foundation's Communication Center at Marbach Castle in Germany. The success of the conference prompted us to prepare a book dealing with the most important issues. Because our authors represent a range of theoretical perspectives expressed in nine different native languages, it became necessary to add Barbara Burge, an expert in international editing, to our team of editors.

This volume builds on the work and discussions of that conference. The initial question presented to conference participants was: How do social interactions provide opportunities for young people to learn life skills? It aimed at identifying the resources available to youth for fruitful peer interactions and other forms of interactive learning. Our scrutiny of the various facets of this issue led us to restate the question in a broader perspective: In this current period of profound societal transformations, under which conditions and with what kind of vertical or horizontal support do young people develop skills and acquire knowledge? When (and why) are these meaningful to them? The conference debates enlarged the understanding of learning by placing this basic activity at the intersection of expert transmission, self-crafted competence, and social participative activity. It raised new issues, called for theoretical reframings, and established the basis for the genuine multidisciplinary perspective presented in our volume.

We are indebted to the Johann Jacobs Foundation and its board for their exceptionally helpful support and an exceedingly gracious environment for our work. Their open invitation and exhilarating discussions in the early planning stages of the conference foreshadowed their constructive collegiality throughout. I also want to acknowledge the invaluable support of Pierre Ducrey, archaeologist and former Vice Chancellor of the University of Lausanne, for his helpful advice, encouragement, and thought-provoking

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questions and the decisive impulse provided by Laszlo Nagy, former President of the Johann Jacobs Foundation, who drew on his substantial personal experience and on the Foundation's long history of involvement in projects with youth, notably the Boy Scout and Girl Scout federations. With the diligent help of Judith Kressig, Theo Brenner, the current President of the Foundation, has been a valuable partner in setting the effort in motion and shepherding it, step by step, to publication.

We thank all those conference participants who did not contribute chapters to this book for their stimulating contributions to the debates. In writing their chapters, the authors included herein have drawn extensively upon this collective venture.

Very special thanks are due to the members of the board of the Johann Jacobs Foundation. We greatly appreciate that most of them actively participated in the initial planning meeting and were a vital part of the entire conference. We sincerely thank them for their genuine interest and cogent comments: Paul B. Baltes, Pierre B. Ducrey, David A. Hamburg, Christian Jacobs, Heinrich Ursprung, and especially the Chairman, Klaus J. Jacobs, whose personal commitment to a profound and empirically based reflection on these important matters is an important testimony. From the first draft of the conference design to the very last moments of the 3 days of work in Marbach, Klaus J. Jacobs honored us with his presence and enriched our discussions by sharing his worldwide experiences and in-depth reflections.

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