The elementary forms of narrative coherence in young children's storytelling

Ageliki Nicolopoulou
Lehigh University

This article argues for rethinking and reorientation in the study of narrative coherence and its development in young children. The most influential model guiding current research in this area (a) tends to equate narrative coherence with causal linkages between events and (b) suggests that the primary (or exclusive) strategy used by children to achieve coherence is to embed causally-connected event sequences in the goal-directed actions of a single major protagonist. Despite its undoubted contributions, this approach is misleadingly narrow in several respects, and it has not been able to reconstruct the actual dynamics and trajectories of young children's narrative development. A first step toward overcoming these limitations is to undertake the foundational work of reconstructing and examining the range of actual modes and strategies of narrative coherence used by children, beginning with young children, which must include delineating the different narrative purposes and intentions these embody and the distinctive ways that they integrate events and event structures with the depiction and coordination of characters and relations between characters. I offer some theoretical and methodological proposals along these lines, illustrated with empirical examples.

Keywords: coherence, narrative development, genres, episodic structure, story grammar, gender differences, character representation

This article constitutes a modest proposal to consider some of the strategies that young children use to achieve coherence in the stories they tell. Coherence is one of the essential features of successful narratives of any type or level of sophistication, so this is clearly a topic of critical importance for the study of narrative development. So far, however, developmental research on narrative coherence is still

in a very preliminary and underdeveloped state. I will first explain briefly why I think this is this is case, and then I will offer some theoretical and methodological suggestions about how we might go beyond the limitations of current approaches, illustrated with a few concrete examples from my own research.

After outlining what seem to me some limitations and blind spots of currently predominant approaches, I will argue that we still need to undertake the foundational work of reconstructing the *strategies of narrative coherence* (in the plural) actually used by children, beginning with young children; that doing this must include reconstructing the range of *narrative purposes and intentions* that the children themselves are trying to achieve; and that elucidating children's modes and strategies of narrative coherence must pay attention not only to their handling of *events and event structures* but also to their ways of portraying *characters and the relations between characters.*

One of the central themes of this article is that there is no simple or unitary answer to the question of what constitutes narrative coherence and how it develops. Accordingly, it will not attempt to address this subject in comprehensive detail, which would make the discussion unwieldy. Instead, I will focus primarily on fictional stories, as opposed to narratives of personal experience, and on the narrative activity and development of young children in particular. Treatments of coherence in personal narratives, both of children and of adults (e.g., Baerger & McAdams, 1999; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2006; McCabe & Bliss, 2003), raise enough special issues to warrant a separate examination. However, I believe that the analysis offered here can serve as a useful first step toward a more comprehensive consideration of narrative coherence and its development.

Current research: A critical overview

Current research on the development of coherence in children's narratives falls into two largely separate branches. While terminology in this area is far from consistent, most researchers now distinguish between these fields as the study of narrative *cohesion* and of narrative *coherence* (following Karmiloff-Smith, 1985; see also Hickmann, 1995, 2004; Shapiro & Hudson, 1991). In these terms, cohesion refers to the ways that linguistic devices are used to connect different sentences within a narrative. Coherence is a broader (but less fully specified) concept, which refers essentially to the interconnection and integration of the content of a narrative. In practice, assessing narrative coherence is usually understood to entail the analysis of plot structure.

For purposes of the present discussion, I will accept this distinction and pass over the subject of linguistic cohesion. The second of these two branches, the study

of coherence, is considerably thinner and less developed than the first, both analytically and empirically. Part of the explanation is that although the substantive importance of narrative coherence is fairly obvious, it is not so easy to pin down the phenomenon in a precise and measurable way.

What do we mean by narrative coherence? To quote a nice orienting formulation by Shapiro and Hudson (1991, p. 960), in order to achieve coherence children must "temporally and causally organize a narrative into a sequence that is meaningful to themselves and their listeners. That is, all the parts of the story must be structured so that the entire sequence of events is interrelated in a meaningful way." In other words, both the parts of the story and the story as a whole should hang together in a convincing and satisfying way. Broadly speaking, that captures fairly well what we are looking for when we try to assess and analyze coherence. But specifying it conceptually and operationalizing it effectively have proved to be more tricky.

Story grammar analysis and the "well-formed story"

These difficulties are brought out when we consider some of the most serious and influential current attempts to address these issues. Over the last two decades, some of the most careful, systematic, conceptually self-conscious, and broadly influential investigations of narrative coherence in developmental research have come from the work of Nancy Stein and her associates (Stein, 1988; Stein & Albro, 1997; Stein & Glenn, 1979; Stein & Glenn, 1982; Stein & Policastro, 1984), in partnership with Tom Trabasso (Stein & Trabasso, 1982; Trabasso & Nickels, 1992; Trabasso, Secco, & van den Broek, 1984; Trabasso, Stein, Rodkin, Munger, & Baughn, 1992). With various modifications, their approach has influenced a wider body of research in and around the field of story grammar analysis, and it serves as a standard point of reference. Precisely because this is an intellectually substantial and widely influential body of work that has made genuine contributions to narrative research, a critical examination of its approach to narrative coherence is an appropriate and instructive starting-point.

Stein herself did not actually begin to speak explicitly about narrative coherence until the 1990s (most notably in Stein & Albro, 1997; Trabasso, Stein, et al., 1992), but Trabasso's explicit treatment of the subject goes back to the mid-1980s (especially Trabasso, Secco, & van den Broek, 1984; Trabasso & Nickels, 1992), and they were working within the same broad framework. Stein's treatment of coherence emerged as a by-product of her long-term quest to specify and explore the paradigmatic schema for what has come to be termed a "well-formed story" (e.g., Stein & Albro, 1997, p. 38; Stein & Glenn, 1982, p. 258). For Stein, the fundamental paradigm or building block for a "good" or "prototypical" story is an episode that

centers on the portrayal of goal-directed activity by a central protagonist. The structure of a well-formed episode includes such elements as an initiating event, a goal-directed effort by the major protagonist, an outcome, and possibly an internal response and/or reaction (e.g., Stein & Glenn, 1982, pp. 257–259; Stein & Policastro, 1984, pp. 118–119). Stein has repeatedly emphasized (e.g., Stein & Albro, 1997, p. 8; Stein & Policastro, 1984, pp. 119–122) that the central structuring role of a goal-directed protagonist is a key feature that distinguishes the "Stein and Glenn grammar" (Stein & Glenn, 1982, p. 256) from some earlier story-grammar models — particularly those of Mandler and Johnson (1977) and Prince (1973) — whose definitions of a story did not insist on the necessary presence of such a main protagonist. The "ideal form of a good story" (Stein, 1988, p. 290) will also include obstacles or other problems complicating the attainment of the protagonist's goals, which are either overcome or otherwise responded to, as well as a formal ending. Most research along these lines has focused on story comprehension and recall, but more recently it has also included story production.

A Labovian alternative. It is worth noting that some research which has addressed the subject of narrative coherence, either implicitly or explicitly, has tried to link it to a rather different structural model of what might be called a well-formed story — namely, the six-part model developed by Labov and Waletsky (1967; somewhat refined in Labov, 1972) to capture the underlying structure of first-person oral narratives of personal experience. The most comprehensive and illuminating overview of the Labovian model and its long-term influence on narrative research is Bamberg (1997); this collection included Labov and Waletsky's seminal 1967 article, some updated further reflections by Labov, and widely ranging contributions by some 50 other scholars. As it happens, none of the pieces in that collection explicitly addressed the subject of narrative coherence, but during the past decade and a half some other work has mentioned the possible relevance of this Labovian model for analyzing and assessing narrative coherence (e.g., Hickmann, 2004, pp. 282–283; McCabe & Bliss, 2003).

However, applications of this canonical Labovian model to the analysis of narrative coherence have usually involved the study of personal narratives, which puts them outside the main focus of this article. A more general point made by Labov and Waletsky — their insight that stories must somehow interweave two complementary narrative functions, which they termed "referential" and "evaluative" — has been applied more widely and, I would say, more fruitfully than their specific structural model. But such applications have no necessary bearing on narrative coherence. Some treatments of coherence have tried to mix elements from Stein's model and the Labovian model in an ad hoc or eclectic way (Shapiro & Hudson, 1991, is one example), even though the underlying logics of the two models are

actually somewhat different. But overall, when developmental narrative research has drawn on one of these structural models in connection with explicit and systematic efforts to study narrative coherence, it has been much more likely to draw on the story-grammar model represented by the work of Stein, Trabasso, and their associates.

The Stein-Trabasso approach to narrative coherence. So where does coherence come into the Stein-Trabasso model? In some careless moments, research influenced by this approach has more or less treated their criteria for story "well-formedness" as simply equivalent to a measure of coherence. For example, Shapiro and Hudson (1991) moved immediately from the very broad and general orienting statement quoted above to the following operationalization: "Thus, story coherence is determined by the degree to which the overall structure of a narrative satisfies the requirements of story well-formedness…" (p. 960). Stein and Albro (1997, p. 17) at one point seemed to imply the same equation with this remark: "Moreover, linear causal chain sequences are judged [by experimental subjects] to be more coherent if they include goal-directed action than if they do not (Stein, 1988; Stein & Albro, 1994; Stein & Policastro, 1984)." Stein and Albro (1994) is an unpublished manuscript, and I am unfamiliar with its content. But neither of the two published works cited in that quotation — Stein (1988) and Stein and Policastro (1984) — actually contained any independent empirical measures of coherence or of perceived coherence. Instead, in both studies subjects were asked to judge whether sample narratives should be counted as stories, and to indicate the degree to which they were "good" stories. Therefore, this puzzling claim by Stein and Albro (1997) about the findings of these previous studies would appear to make sense only if they were implicitly equating the global perception of a story as "good" or "well-formed" with a specific perception of its degree of coherence.

But such an equation would be far from self-evident. The degree to which a story is perceived as "good" by either children or adults involves a number of criteria, and there is actually no conclusive evidence that a perception of the story's coherence is the decisive criterion. As Stein herself recognizes, a "good" or well-told story is likely to be one that successfully combines coherence with other characteristics, such as complexity or dramatism (not to mention being interesting), so that not all features that make a story "good" necessarily contribute to its coherence. Furthermore, the suggestion that a story's coherence is determined, partly or wholly, by its conformity with the Stein/Trabasso episodic model is a (contestable) substantive claim, not a truism that can simply be taken for granted.

More precisely, at the core of this approach to narrative coherence are *two* interconnected claims that run through the work of Stein, Trabasso, and their associates. First, with respect to what *constitutes* coherence, they have argued that a

key criterion of story coherence — sometimes this is treated as *the* key criterion — is the extent to which the events in the story are causally, and not just temporally, linked (e.g., Stein & Albro, 1997, p. 6). This causal-linkage criterion definitely captures one aspect or element of coherence, though it can be misleading if it is treated as an overall definition of coherence. (To pick just one illustrative example, the overview of elements or dimensions of global story coherence offered by Habermas & Bluck, 2000, includes "referential, spatial, temporal, causal, and thematic coherence," as well as the extent to which a story conforms to relevant cultural models. But that's just a start.)

Second, while this is not always put quite as clearly or explicitly as it might be, they have argued that the predominant (or exclusive) *strategy* by which young children *achieve* coherence in their narratives is by linking the sequence of events in the story to the goal-directed activity of a single major protagonist. To quote one characteristic formulation (from Trabasso, Stein, et al., 1992, p. 137), children "achieved global coherence in their narrations by including more than one episode related to the goal plan of the main protagonist." Likewise (Trabasso & Nickels, 1992, p. 252), "A coherent narration is thus one in which a series of clauses is organized by the character's goal and goal plan of action. The main character's actions are interpreted as renewed attempts with goal failures and reinstatements that eventually lead to goal success …"

Stein and Albro (1997) can be taken as exemplary in these respects. The authors indicated at one point in their introduction (p. 6) that they would "focus on the strategies [in the plural] children use to tell a coherent story," but in the next sentence they made it clear that, in their view, all aspects of this question led back to the ways that the events of the story are linked to the "goals, plans, and actions of the protagonist." And with respect to *young* children's narratives, "the protagonist" was indeed understood to mean a single central protagonist. The empirical analysis reported in Stein and Albro (1997) was based on stories elicited from children at three grade levels — kindergarten, third grade, and fifth grade — using three brief open-ended story stems with one character apiece. For kindergartners, the youngest cohort (mean age 5–6 when tested), 52% of the stories were assessed as "goal-based" and thus coherent (p. 21). In the stories of older children, Stein and Albro suggested, narrative coherence could sometimes be achieved by introducing and coordinating several goal-oriented protagonists. However, 80% of "goal-based" stories by kindergartners included only one protagonist, and in most of the remaining 20%, the protagonists' actions were either disconnected or only loosely coordinated (pp. 34–36). To sum up this picture of young children's narrative strategies (p. 40): "Kindergarten children rarely introduced more than one character in their goal-directed narratives, and even when they did, the two characters did not interact very much with each other."

In short, the predominant (or exclusive) strategy by which young children achieve coherence in their narratives is by embedding a causally-connected sequence of events in the goal-directed activity of a single major protagonist. Explicitly or in practice, this orienting premise has informed all the relevant work by Stein, Trabasso, and their associates.

Limitations of the Stein-Trabasso story-grammar approach to narrative coherence

This body of research has made significant contributions to our understanding of narrative development, and nothing in the present article is intended to suggest otherwise. Unfortunately, its approach to the problem of narrative coherence is too narrow and one-sided, in ways that have made it quite misleading when it is treated, as it often has been, as providing a comprehensive model of coherence. Work in this area has thus been marked by a set of interconnected limitations:

(1) First, this particular paradigm of the "prototypical" or "well-formed" story is simply too restrictive and one-sided, so that it misses a good deal of what is interesting and complex about children's stories. As I will explain in the next section, during the past decade and a half I have analyzed several thousand spontaneous stories composed by preschool children, including 5-year-olds, from different parts of the US. (For one account of this long-term project, see Nicolopoulou, 2002, pp. 124–129.) In my experience, only a negligible proportion of the children's stories fit this central model of a "well-formed" episodic structure. I am not suggesting that the children's stories did not include representations of goal-based and even problem-solving activity. They did — among other things. And they often displayed a good deal of coherence and complexity, but not necessarily in the ways that this model suggests.

This model certainly captures *some* aspects of children's narrative activities and development, and no one would deny that portraying causal linkages between events is *one* element in the process of constructing coherent narratives. But, in fact, there is no convincing evidence that organizing a story around the goal-directed activity of a single major protagonist is the exclusive, or even predominant, strategy by which children, including young children, seek to achieve narrative coherence. A good deal of evidence suggests otherwise. For example, when young children generate stories in contexts that do not isolate them artificially in experimental settings and/or restrict their narrative options, they seem to begin by introducing a number of characters, not just one or two. (Table 1 provides representative figures from one of the preschools I have studied, as explained in the next section.) And except in the case of "I" stories, which are fairly rare when children are composing fictional or semi-fictional narratives, it takes a while

before one of their characters begins to be used as the central protagonist. Even in the stories of older children, this particular model of the "well-formed story" seems to be of dubious or marginal relevance to many of the characteristic narrative genres that the children actually use.

Table 1. Mean Number of Characters in Girls' and Boys' Stories by Age and Semester

		Fall			Spring		
		# stories	*M*	SD	# stories	*M*	SD
Girls	3-year-olds	52	3.34	(.48)	37	4.18	(.72)
	4-year-olds	65	4.54	(1.00)	48	4.95	(1.28)
	5-year-olds	21	4.83	(.95)	42	5.07	(1.78)
Boys	3-year-olds	63	2.99	(.80)	70	5.08	(1.80)
	4-year-olds	42	3.46	(.78)	47	4.44	(1.11)
	5-year-olds	52	5.38	(1.83)	67	4.76	(1.13)

(2) Second, the narrow and misleading character of this "prototypical" narrative model points to a larger conceptual problem with the approach that informs this research. That is, its conceptual starting-point is a model of what *adults* think is a good story, and the children's own stories, particularly those of young children, tend to be analyzed in one-sidedly negative way: in terms of how they do *not* yet conform to this model. What is missing from this approach is any systematic effort to analyze the children's distinctive narrative modes in their own terms, to bring out their inner logic, and to consider how children build on them in the course of further narrative development. (For some elaboration of these points, see Nicolopoulou, 1996b, 1997a.)

Oddly enough, Stein herself has recognized on a number of occasions that young children are often *capable* of telling stories that would fit her model of a "good" story, but choose not to do so. We might hypothesize, though Stein does not, that at least part of the reason that these children deviate from the Stein-Trabasso model is that they have different narrative preferences and priorities. For example, Stein and Glenn (1982, pp. 279–280) noted that "Second-grade children actually believe these nonepisodically structured sequences to be stories." Stein (1988, p. 295) acknowledged even more explicitly that the analysis was based on an adult model of what constitutes a well-formed story, not on the models informing the children's own narrative efforts:

> Although young elementary school children are quite capable of generating episodically based stories with obstacles included in them, these children do not make distinctions between goal-based stories and other types of narratives that include animate characters. …. Adults, however, make clear distinctions between those narratives that are causally structured versus those that are not.

But these have remained no more than passing remarks, and have not led to any attempts to analyze the children's narrative modes on their own terms, or to reconstruct and elucidate the narrative purposes that the children themselves are trying to achieve.

(3) These conceptual limitations have been reinforced by methodological ones. Even when this research has focused on the production of stories rather than their comprehension and recall, it has mostly been based on narratives elicited by experimental procedures that constrain the child's narrative options or otherwise direct them in ways that have the effect of channeling the results toward narratives that fit the postulated model while discouraging or shutting out alternatives. For example, children are presented with pre-selected topics and characters for their stories; or they are given story stems to complete that present a single major protagonist for the story; or the stories are elicited with the use of picture books that generally present children with a scenario in which the goal-directed activity of a single central character is the major connecting element. Even the minimalist and formally open-ended story stems used by Stein to elicit children's narratives in several of her experimental studies (e.g., Stein, 1988; Stein & Albro, 1997) involve, in effect, having an adult experimenter suggest to an isolated child that the story ought to be about, or at least center on, a single character. These procedures facilitate and simplify the child's task. But, on the other hand, they also have the effect that results which appear to support the orienting model may be largely artifacts of the research design.

Consider, for example, one influential study of this sort by Trabasso and Nickels (1992). It argued that narrative coherence consists fundamentally in linking events by presenting them as the outcomes of goal-directed action and that coherence is achieved to the extent that children are able to grasp and represent a hierarchically ordered series of goals. This usefully captures one possible aspect of narrative coherence; but, as a general conclusion, it is essentially a by-product of the research design. The picture book used to elicit the stories being studied, *Frog, where are you?* (Mayer, 1969), presents children with a scenario in which the goal-directed activity of a central protagonist (a boy's search for his lost frog) is the major connecting element. And, at the same time, the use of this picture-book format rules out *alternative* narrative frameworks around which the children might organize their stories.

Similarly, Stein and Glenn (1982) remarked at one point: "Despite the fact that children's concepts of a story are more broadly based" — a significant concession, incidentally — "most generated stories were episodically bound" (pp. 280). But was that really surprising, given that the experiments were designed in a way that could be expected to channel the stories in that direction (and to exclude alternative genres)?

(4) These conceptual and methodological orientations have usually been combined with, and have encouraged, a further limitation in the perspective informing this research. It has focused almost exclusively on the criteria of causal linkages and temporal continuity between *events*. While this approach addresses a crucial dimension of narrative coherence, it does not exhaust the requirements of coherent narrative. Establishing coherence involves not only connecting a series of actions and events, but also choosing, constructing, introducing, and maintaining a set of *characters* who are connected and coordinated in continuous and meaningful ways. (The relative neglect of character representation in developmental research on narrative, a tendency not restricted to work on narrative coherence, is discussed in Nicolopoulou, 2008.) This dimension is especially critical to the ways that children define and maintain the boundaries of a story. And, of course, it is obscured by elicitation procedures which provide the child with a ready-made cast of characters.

In short, the most prominent and influential approach in current developmental research on narrative coherence is not really adequate to capture important dimensions of children's narrative activity and development. And one sign of its limitations is the revealing fact that, for all of its undoubted contributions, it has not really been able to reconstruct the actual dynamics and trajectories of children's narrative development. Instead, it has mostly yielded a set of static comparisons which examine how closely the stories of children at different ages resemble its paradigmatic model of a "well-formed story." By itself, this approach cannot capture or elucidate the developmental patterns of actual children and the logic underlying these patterns. Nor, despite some claims to the contrary, do we have an adequate working conception of narrative coherence or of the strategies by which it is achieved.

Moving beyond current limitations: some challenges, proposals, and illustrative examples

How can we move beyond this situation? Part of the message of this article is that the problem of narrative coherence cannot be solved at one stroke, so I will not try to do that here. Instead, I propose that we are still at a stage where a good deal of foundational work remains to be done. As I suggested earlier, this must include (a) reconstructing and examining the actual *strategies of narrative coherence* used by actual children, beginning with young children, and (b) linking these to the range of *narrative purposes and intentions* that the children themselves are trying to achieve. As a necessary part of this effort, (c) we need to pay attention to the ways that children's narrative strategies manage to integrate their handling of *events and event structures* with their treatment of *characters and the relations*

between characters. In short, we need to reconstruct the elementary forms of narrative coherence in children's storytelling.

I will now offer a few concrete examples to illustrate how we might go about doing that.

Young children's self-generated narratives in everyday social context

These examples are drawn from a long-term project that examines the development of children's narrative activity and its role in development more generally (Nicolopoulou, 1996a, 1996b, 1997a, 1997b, 2002; Nicolopoulou & Richner, 2007; Nicolopoulou, Scales, & Weintraub, 1994; Richner & Nicolopoulou, 2001). This project centers on the analysis of spontaneous stories by preschool children generated and recorded as part of a storytelling and story-acting practice pioneered by the teacher/researcher Vivian Paley (e.g., 1986, 1990) that is integrated as a regular — but voluntary — component of the curriculum in the preschool classes I have studied in California, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania.

More specifically, the discussion that follows is based on the analysis of 606 stories freely composed by 3- to 5-year-old English-speaking children in Massachusetts participating in a version of the Paley storytelling and story-acting practice that was a daily activity in their preschool classrooms. The same body of stories was also used as the basis for two previous studies (Nicolopoulou & Richner, 2007; Richner & Nicolopoulou, 2001) on which I will draw in my discussion. (For various technical reasons, the precise number of stories analyzed in each study varied very slightly. For a more detailed account of the data collection procedures, see Nicolopoulou & Richner, 2007, p. 419–420.) Thirty children were selected from those attending four half-day mixed-age nursery classes in a preschool/elementary school in western Massachusetts observed over a period of several years (two classes from 1992–1993 and two from 1994–1995) to obtain a sample equally divided between boys and girls and between 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds. The preschoolers in this school came primarily from middle-to upper-middle-class families whose parents were mostly professionals or academics. All but two children in this sample were White European-American and all spoke only English. (The children in the oldest cohort began the school year slightly before turning 5, with a mean age of 4 years and 9 months, and finished the school year with a mean age of 5–5. By comparison, the kindergarten cohort in Stein & Albro, 1997, had a mean age of 5–6 when they were tested in September and October.)

At a certain period during the day, any child who wished could dictate a story to a designated teacher, who recorded the story as the child told it. (The stories they composed were overwhelmingly fictional or imaginary stories, rather than "factual" accounts of personal experience of the sort one hears in "show and tell"

or "sharing time.") At the end of the day, each of these stories was read aloud in sequence to the entire class by the same teacher at "group time", while the child/author and other children, whom he or she chose, acted out the story.

Several features of this practice are especially relevant to the methodological issues discussed earlier. The children's storytelling was voluntary, self-initiated, and relatively spontaneous: the stories were neither solicited directly by adults nor channeled by props, story-stems, or suggested topics. Thus, children were able to choose their own characters, subjects, and plots. Furthermore, in contrast to the artificial and socially isolated situations that predominate in much research on young children's narratives, the children's storytelling and story-acting were embedded in the shared public setting of the classroom miniculture and the children's everyday group life, a context that also provided the children with extensive opportunities for narrative sharing, experimentation, and cross-fertilization. There are good reasons to believe that these conditions lead children to produce narratives that are richer, more ambitious, and more illuminating than when they compose them in isolation from their everyday social contexts and in response to formats and agendas shaped directly by adult interviewers (e.g., Nicolopoulou, 1996a, 2002; Nicolopoulou & Richner, 2007; Spinillo & Pinto, 1994; Sutton-Smith, 1986; Wellhousen, 1993).

Narrative genres and strategies of coherence

One strikingly consistent pattern demonstrated by my analyses of young children's spontaneous storytelling over the past decade and a half, in these preschool classes and others, is that although the children's stories were shared with the entire class every day, they divided systematically along gender lines (Nicolopoulou, 1997b; Nicolopoulou et al., 1994; Richner & Nicolopoulou, 2001). Their stories were dominated by two highly distinctive gender-related *narrative styles*, differing in both form and content, that embodied different underlying images of order and disorder, different images of social relationships and the social world, and different conceptions of the person. The girls' stories, for example, characteristically portrayed characters embedded in networks of stable and harmonious relationships, whose activities were located in stable and specified physical settings. One common genre within the girls' preferred narrative style revolved around the family group and the cyclical patterns of its everyday activities, centered on the home. In contrast, the boys' stories were characteristically marked by conflict, movement, and disruption, by the relative absence of stable and harmonious relationships, and often by associative chains of extravagant imagery. Whereas the girls' stories tended to begin by establishing characters in "given" networks of relationships and then found ways to set them in motion, boys' stories were more likely to portray

relatively disconnected characters and then to bring them into contact, usually through fighting or other opposition.

In constructing their narratives, the children drew themes, characters, images, plots, and other elements from each others' stories; they also incorporated elements into their narratives from a wide range of other sources including fairy tales, children's books, TV (and popular culture more generally), and their own experience. However, they did not simply imitate other children's stories, nor did they just passively absorb messages from adults and the larger culture. It was clear that, even at this early age, they were able to appropriate these elements *selectively*, and to *use* and rework them for their own purposes. For example, whereas the girls tended to supplement their depictions of family life by drawing on fairy-tale characters such as kings and queens or princes and princesses, boys were especially fond of powerful and destructive characters along the lines of large animals, cartoon action heroes, and so on. Even when apparently similar elements were used in the stories, they were transformed in significance through *symbolic reworking* as they were introduced into the contrasting frameworks of these gender-related narrative styles (Nicolopoulou et al., 1994, pp. 113–116). In short, these preschool children actively constructed, used, and creatively elaborated two quite distinctive narrative styles through their ongoing activity within the context of a shared classroom miniculture.

I want to emphasize that this analysis has approached gender differences in narrative development, not as a straightforward product of biologically determined "essentialism," but rather as emerging, socially constructed patterns bound up with the formation of gendered subcultures and the sociocultural dynamics of the children's peer-group life. And this line of research has implications that go beyond the specific subject of gender. It can help us better understand how to delineate and elucidate some of the diverse pathways and strategies pursued by young children in the course of narrative development — which, in turn, can help us build up a more precise and illuminating picture of young children's developing narrative competence and their efforts increase their mastery of narrative form.

Narrative genres as generative frameworks

Each of these gendered narrative styles was manifested in a range of specific genres. The discussion that follows will focus on two of the most characteristic genres I have identified in young children's storytelling, which I have termed the *family genre* and the *heroic-agonistic genre* (Nicolopoulou, 1997b; Richner & Nicolopoulou, 2001).

As I have already mentioned, one of the most striking features of the spontaneous stories produced by the 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old *girls*, was that their stories began — not just typically, but overwhelmingly — with characters embedded

in *groups*, and specifically in stable and "given" networks of social relations, that continued through the rest of the story. The most commonly portrayed group of this sort — though not the only one — was the *family*, in forms ranging from "ordinary" and quasi-realistic versions to fairy-tale versions with kings, queens, princes, and princesses. Since this narrative genre centers on the portrayal of the family group, it seems appropriate to call it the *family genre*. In contrast, the stories of preschool *boys* typically began with disconnected individual characters who were defined, not by being embedded in stable social relationships, but by their actions. Thus the boys' genres, unlike the girls', posed an immediate formal problem of how to relate these isolated figures to each other. The "solution" most favored by the boys was to bring them into contact through interactions of conflict, and specifically violent conflict. The characters most often used by boys tended to be either big and powerful animals, real or mythical (e.g., wild horses, growling bears, T-Rex, Brontosaurus, Pterodactyl, Godzilla, fiery dragons, huge monsters), or else superheroes, villains, and other cartoon action characters drawn from popular culture (e.g., Batman, Superman, Spiderman, Ninja Turtles, Shredder, Krang, Venom, Captain Hook, Captain America). Some small but lethal or "scary" characters (e.g., scorpions, rattlesnakes, bats, skeletons) also appeared, but usually a central theme was demonstrating who was the most powerful character (i.e., the winner). In short, one of the most common genres in the boys' stories was organized around the portrayal of active conflict and aggressive violence, usually accompanied by movement, disruption, and destruction. This genre can usefully be termed *heroic-agonistic*.

Table 2 shows the relative frequencies (technically, the mean proportions) of these genres in the stories told by the sample of 15 girls and 15 boys being discussed here. It is apparent that their stories polarized sharply between these two genres, with the overwhelming majority of the girls' stories fitting unambiguously in the family genre and the overwhelming majority of the boys' in the heroic-agonistic genre.

It is worth noting that although gendered polarization of narrative styles has been broadly consistent in all the preschool populations I have studied, the underlying orientations informing these narrative styles can also be manifested in a wider range of specific genres than the two indicated here. That was true, for example, in stories generated by a preschool class in Berkeley analyzed in Nicolopoulou et al. (1994). The stories told by the boys in the Berkeley preschool strongly displayed the preferred strain toward disorder, and they frequently portrayed disorder through the depiction of violence, conflict, and destruction. But they also used other narrative strategies to achieve the desired symbolic effects: for example, by focusing on rule-breaking rather than violence *per se*, or by building a story around escalating chains of extravagant, grotesque, and disruptive images.

Table 2. Mean Proportions (with Standard Deviations) and Numbers of Narrative Genres in Girls' and Boys' Stories

Genres	Girls			Boys		
	3s	4s	5s	3s	4s	5s
Proto-Stories	.14 (.14)	.03 (.06)	–	.05 (.08)	.09 (.15)	–
# stories	14	4	–	7	5	–
Family Genre	.68 (.32)	.79 (.24)	.76 (.20)	–	–	.01 (.03)
# stories	53	89	44	–	–	2
Heroic-Agonistic Genre	.02 (.03)	–	.04 (.09)	.84 (.11)	.76 (.27)	.87 (.16)
# stories	2	–	2	107	73	97
Mixed Genres	.06 (.09)	.01 (.02)	–	.02 (.03)	.02 (.04)	.02 (.04)
# stories	8	1	2	3	1	3
Other Genres	.11 (.15)	.17 (.22)	.20 (.19)	.10 (.10)	.14 (.14)	.11 (.11)
# stories	11	19	12	16	10	13

Straightforward depictions of destruction and/or chaos, without opposition or conflict between characters, were also not uncommon. In the present sample, however, the boys' stories almost always included explicit conflict. Correspondingly, while the prototypical girl's story in the Berkeley sample centered on the depiction of a family group, the girls also used other genres to convey themes of centered stability rooted in stable relationships. The stories composed by these Massachusetts preschoolers focused more exclusively on the two genres that were only predominant in the Berkeley corpus of stories — the family genre and the heroic-agonistic genre. (Some of the differences may be attributable, at least in part, to the dynamics of the different classroom cultures involved.) At the same time, each of these key genres was developed and elaborated more fully than was the case for the Berkeley stories.

How does the analysis of these genres bear on the issues of narrative coherence discussed earlier? At the core of each of these narrative genres is a distinctive *generative framework* characterized by paradigmatic images of *social relationships* and of the *self* or *person* as well as distinctive narrative *purposes* and *concerns*. The distinctive orientations that shape and define these genres provide different narrative resources and opportunities and also tend to pose different — in some ways complementary — *formal problems* for the children who try to employ them. Another consequence is that these genres are marked by distinctive *modes of coherence*, along with distinctive strategies for achieving them, and these strategies necessarily seek to integrate the depiction and coordination of *events* with the depiction and coordination of *characters and relations between characters*. At the same time, each of these constitutive narrative models must be understood as a *generative* framework that offers distinctive possibilities for elaborating the genre

in various directions and developing its narrative complexity, thus generating distinctive developmental pathways or trajectories for different narrative genres.

To help flesh out these points and some of their concrete implications, let me now offer a brief illustrative comparison between the two narrative genres I have highlighted. In each case, the examination will begin by sketching the generative framework at the core of each genre and will suggest how the inner logic of this core framework is manifested in distinctive modes and strategies of narrative coherence and their development. (For further explanation and elaboration, see Nicolopoulou, 1997b, and Richner & Nicolopoulou, 2001, on which the following discussion draws.)

The girls' stories: The family genre

As noted earlier, stories in this prototypical girls' genre began with the major characters embedded in a stable and "given" network of family relationships. Typically, an interrelated *set* of characters was introduced at the beginning and then retained throughout the story. The girls (unlike the boys) also tended to specify the physical *setting* of the story, usually beginning with a home or castle (or "kingdom"), which were roughly equivalent. This home-setting served as the locus from which action emanated and, often, where the story ended. (Home-out and home-out-home movement were common in the girls' stories but quite rare in the boys' stories.) Thus, "home" was not only a specific physical place, but also the center of safety, security, and order, rooted in the family unit.

In short, at the heart of this genre was a paradigmatic *framework* of stable relationships; and the stability being depicted was physically *centered*, anchored "topographically" in the home. When the girls were given the opportunity to structure their stories according to their own preferences, what they put at the center of the story was rarely a single individual protagonist. Instead, the girls' stories usually centered on a collective family *group*, within which a *cluster* of relatively central characters were linked by, defined by, and embedded in a framework of stable and harmonious social relationships.

Furthermore, the girls *used* these frameworks of relationships to help achieve narrative stability and coherence in their stories. They helped to hold the story together. At the same time, this was a flexible and *generative* framework, which could be used to generate and manage increasingly complex forms of action and movement within a coherent matrix. This was true, in part, because the family framework has several kinds of possible temporal sequences built into it. For example, it allowed the storyteller to depict the regular, repeated patterns of everyday domestic life, which the girls (unlike the boys) liked to recount in a framework of rhythmic and cyclical action. This temporal rhythm could be readily combined

with cyclical movement in social and physical space. Thus, the family, after all its members have been carefully enumerated, might go places and do things — and then come back *home*:

> Once there was a little girl and she lived with her Mom and Dad and her big sister. Then they went for a walk and they went to the little girl's grandma and the big sister's grandma. They stayed overnight at grandma's house. Then they went home in the morning and they had breakfast at their own house. And then they went for another little walk and they came home again. (Elaine, 5)[1]

If new characters appeared, they were most typically integrated into the story either by *inclusion* within, or *exclusion* from, this core group. For example, even animals could be brought into the family by making them *pets*.

> Once upon a time there was a princess, a prince, a queen and a maid. Then they went for a walk and met a unicorn and brought her back. Then they went walking more and they met a tiger and a bear. Then they went back home and they took the bear but not the tiger home. And then they went to sleep and woke up the next morning. They had breakfast. They went to the mall and the unicorn and the bear guarded the house. The princess bought something and she bought a new gown. They went back home. The End. (Valerie & Elaine, 5–1 & 5)

The family framework also allowed for another mode of temporal movement, continuity across generations.

> Once upon a time there was a beautiful little princess. Then a prince came. The princess girl grew up and they married and they had two babies, a boy and a girl. Another prince came and married the other girl. They had a puppy and a little cat. (Nina, 4–1)

Consider some interesting features of the story just quoted. I think there is no question that the story is coherent — that is, it hangs together in a comprehensible and meaningful way. But the coherence is clearly *not* achieved by connecting the chain of events in the story to the goal-directed action of a single major protagonist. Nor are the different events related in a merely temporal way; that is, there is a deeper logic to the sequence of events portrayed. But in light of the theoretical issues discussed earlier, it is worth emphasizing that the connections between events are not simply or precisely "causal" either, in the sense of each event causing the next. There are certainly causal linkages between some of the events, but by themselves these cause-and-effect linkages are not sufficient to account for the global coherence of the story. Rather, the events are connected by being embedded in an overall framework of family relationships, and of the canonical temporal

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1. Pseudonyms have been assigned to the children whose stories are quoted.

rhythms and transformations of family life, that give each of the events an appropriate place. In short, the main reason that this is not merely a random sequence of events is that it refers back to *paradigmatic* sequences of events that are embedded in a certain specific framework of *social relationships*. And it is this core framework that provides the underlying foundation from which the coherence of the story is generated.

Development and elaboration. Once this core generative framework was established, it also offered specific possibilities for narrative elaboration and development, by which increasing complexity could be achieved while maintaining the coherence of the story. For example, over time the girls found ways to generate increasingly complex patterns of movement and action (without disrupting the basic framework of order) and to individualize the characters (without breaking the basic social connections). Furthermore, once the central framework of order, rooted in the unit of home and family, was securely established, plots could be based on systematic contrasts between this unit and the world "outside" the home, which might be a source of danger or disruption — whether the family went out or the danger came in.

> Once upon a time there was a kingdom, and there was a unicorn and a pony, and there was a king and a queen and a princess and a prince. And they went out for a walk in the woods and they met an elephant. And so they keeped on walking through the forest till they came to a dead end and there was a house, and they opened the door and they said, "This is not our house!" And someone jumped out from behind the stove and said, "Surprise!" and it was a witch. And so they ran all the way back to their castle and locked their doors so nobody could get in. The End. (Margo, 5–1)

At the same time, while the model of personhood associated with each narrative genre remained fundamentally consistent with increasing age, it was also developed considerably in depth and complexity. In the family genre favored by the girls, the socially embedded and interdependent person, while still acting in the context of a cohesive group marked by networks of stable, harmonious, and predominantly "given" relationships, was no longer simply subsumed in group relations, but became an increasingly *individuated and self-consciously responsible* group member. In the following story, for example, this individuation of certain characters was combined with a thematic focus on the breach and restoration of order.

> Once upon a time there was a little girl and she had a brother, a mom, and a dad. One day they went walking and they met a bear. The bear was a baby bear. The sister said, "Isn't he cute" and they brought him home. A crib was in the sister's

room and the baby bear slept in it. And when they woke up the very next day, the brother came into the sister's room and she was gone. The bear was gone too, and they got kidnapped. And the brother found a kingdom and he saw the bear and the sister been locked up in a cave. The brother said, "You can't do this" and the bad guy got a timer and put the sister in it. And in 5 minutes time, sand was going to bury the sister. But in 5 minutes she got buried, but the brother had a knife in his pocket and he banged the knife on the timer and it broke. And the sister came out and she said, "Where is mom and dad?" And the brother took the sister's hand and brought her home. When the sister was grown up, she met a boy in the street named Pete. And she got married. Her cousins were the flower girls and they lived happily ever after. (Anna, 5–1)

The boys' stories: The heroic-agonistic genre

The boys' stories within the heroic-agonistic genre (which, for convenience, I will at times simply call the boys' stories) displayed a different developmental trajectory, driven by different narrative purposes, preoccupations, and formal problems. Whereas the core generative framework of the family genre provided a solid basis for story coherence, while also allowing for greater elaboration and increasing complexity, the basic frameworks underlying the boys' preferred genres, and the heroic-agonistic genre in particular, presented them with rather different narrative problems and possibilities.

A key starting-point for this divergence was a sharply different picture of social relations and, correspondingly, of the self from that underlying the family genre. The boys' stories typically portrayed a world of essentially separate and independent individuals (i.e., *not* located in networks of stable and harmonious relationships), usually powerful and highly kinetic, described primarily by their actions. Most interactions between characters involved violent conflict and aggression. These conflicts might be chaotic, but increasingly they tended to be motivated more explicitly by characters' concerns to establish dominance, display greater power, and/or determine winners and losers (hence, characters were not only conflictual but competitive, i.e. agonistic). Given this picture of social relationships and the motivating preoccupations that accompanied it, the boys generally had a harder time establishing and maintaining coherence in their stories than did the girls.

At the most primitive level, roughly a third of the heroic-agonistic stories by 3-year-old boys (though very few stories by 4-year-olds and none by 5-year-olds) depicted strings of disconnected or barely connected characters who were not just separate but actually isolated, and who also lacked any real stability, solidity, or continuity as characters (see Richner & Nicolopoulou, 2001, pp. 416, 419). When these

characters were not simply introduced and then forgotten, they functioned as little more than vehicles for action and movement. The depiction of the character's aggression might be unfocused (e.g., "Peter Pan comes and fights. And then a knight comes and fights. Then Captain Hook came. Then the Sheriff came. Then that's the end.") or the conflict might be presented as a general free-for-all (e.g., "And the pterodactyl and some bad guys came, and there was a dragon. And they had a battle. And that's the end."; "It's about pirates. They fight. And that's the end.").

The next level, which accounted for slightly over a quarter of the 3-year-old boys' stories (compared with 3% of the 5-year-olds' stories), did depict conflicts between specified opponents. But at this stage either the story was confined to one simple conflict that was not further elaborated (A fights B, A kills B) or else, when the boys did try to generate longer stories with more characters, these stories fragmented into chains of disconnected or loosely connected conflicts between different pairs of specified opponents. Sometimes these chains of conflicts were complicated by characters changing shapes, dead characters coming alive again, and similar flights of fancy.

> A Batman came. He got the policeman dead. And Robin came. He can shoot the monsters. A wolf comes. A knight comes. The dragon killed the princess. The knight killed the dragon. The wolf bites the dragon. The end. (Jed, 3–8)

> Spiderman kicks the Joker. Then the Joker dies. Then there's Batman. Then Superman comes. Then they eat pizza. Then Superman kicks the Joker down. Then Batman dies. Then the Joker fights with the Penguin and the Penguin dies. And there's Shredder.   He gets guns. He shoots the Joker. The end. (Darius, 3–5)

The heroic-agonistic genre thus posed certain distinctive and characteristic narrative problems to which the boys employing this genre had to respond. They faced the challenge of stabilizing their characters and coordinating them in ways that could generate coherent plots, while maintaining the pervasively conflictual relations between those characters and an overall strain toward disorder. Even as the boys began to develop greater mastery of narrative skills and the ability to construct more sophisticated stories, the defining framework of the heroic-agonistic genre made achieving coherence a more difficult task than in the family genre, and indeed tended to pull the stories toward instability, discontinuity, and incoherence.

This story by a 4-year-old boy, which displays some of the exuberant dynamism and lively imagination often found in the boys' heroic-agonistic stories, also illustrates the kinds of centrifugal elements operating in these narratives.

> Once upon a time there was a snake and then he was hungry. And he ate a squirrel. He went up a tree to find more squirrels. And then a monster came, and then another monster came, and they fighted over the food. And a monster ate all the

squirrels except one because the snake ate it. Then the monster killed the snake. Then the monster ran away and found a cave and went inside it. Then he saw lots of bats hanging upside down. And then the scorpion came inside the cave and he stepped on the scorpion and the scorpion got squished. Then he didn't know it was an ant. And then a bunch of bad guys came. They had a big battle. Then they stopped fighting and they didn't do a fight any more. The End. (Zachary, 4–4)

There is a certain amount of continuity to the sequence of actions in this story, and portions of the story hang together to some degree. But the overwhelming emphasis on conflict, disruption, and the demonstration of power, combined with the sequential presentation of characters in shifting and unstable settings, tend to pull the coherence of the narrative apart. Even at moments when the story might seem to be moving toward a conclusion, it is always tempting to feed in new characters to keep the action going and to add striking images — particularly new characters who can fight with the winner-so-far, thus prolonging the fighting and/or further demonstrating the winner's power and superiority.

Development and elaboration: *boys' narrative strategies.* In addition to posing these challenges, the generative framework of the heroic-agonistic genre also offered some distinctive possibilities and resources for achieving greater narrative coherence and complexity. The developmental trajectory manifested in the boys' stories centered on the mutually supportive interconnection between two complementary processes. On the one hand, the characters became more stable and substantial, were delineated more fully, and were given greater depth. On the other hand, the boys managed to connect and coordinate the characters in more stable, continuous, and coherent patterns. One feature of narrative strategies by which these results were achieved was that the boys found ways to *stabilize* the conflicts between characters and to *use* these conflictual relations to help structure the plots of their stories more coherently.

At first, as noted above, the boys' stories portrayed conflict, aggression, and destruction in relatively unfocused and even chaotic ways. Then this pattern shifted to the depiction of conflicts between specified opponents — though sometimes this involved one-sided attacks by one character against another rather than explicitly two-sided contests. One strategy for using these conflicts to help give a story more continuity was for one or more of these characters to persist through several actions (thus achieving local continuity), or even for one character to be carried through the whole story, engaging in a series of conflicts with other characters and often (though not always) ending as the ultimate winner.

> Once there was Captain Planet and then Batman came and he had lasers. And then Superman came and Batman and Superman didn't have a battle and the Splinter came, the boss of the Ninja Turtles, and then a lion and a tiger came

and the lion and the tiger and Batman had a battle and Batman won the battle. And then Spiderman came and Batman had a big battle with Spiderman to see who's the strongest and Batman was the strongest because I love Batman. The End. (Ethan, 4–9)

Once upon a time there was Mummyman. And he squirted lava out of his nose at a criminal who died. Mummyman walked away and then a monster came and that one shot poison out of his fingers. Mummyman came back and shot poison out of his stomach and the monster died. The second monster came and Spiderman kicked the monster. Then another Spiderman came and squished the monster and then the monster got unsquished and squished, etc. Then they had a battle. And Mummyman squirted a web out of his ear and then caught a skeleton and the skeleton got pulled back into his ear. The skeleton came out of his other ear. It was nothing but chocolate and Mummyman ate the skeleton. The End. (Seth, 4–9)

By itself, however, establishing the continuity of one or more (relatively) central characters might yield little more than a loose sequence of otherwise unrelated conflicts.

Over time, the boys began to connect and coordinate their characters in more stable and effective ways. This task was approached from two complementary directions. One strategy involved *stabilizing, extending, and elaborating conflicts* by having *paired opponents* engage in an interconnected series of repeated conflicts. Some boys' stories began to display rudimentary efforts along these lines fairly early. However, constructing a whole story, as opposed to portions of stories, around a sustained conflict between two roughly equal individual antagonists (i.e., two opposing heroes, or a hero and a villain) proved to be a late and, presumably, difficult achievement. Only a small number of stories fit this model in full-blown form, and those were generated almost exclusively by 5-year-olds. One exception was this relatively brief and focused story by a 4-year-old.

Once there was a cave. In that cave lived a tarantula. And then a dragon came. The dragon broke the cave. The tarantula came out and fighted the dragon. And then the dragon died because the tarantula won the battle. The tarantula got a new cave and that's all. (Michael, 4–4)

And here is a longer and more detailed example by a 5-year-old.

Once there was Robin Hood. Then there was a bad guy with a bazooka. They fighted. And just Robin Hood shot an arrow. And it hit the bad guy's bazooka. And then it bounced off the bazooka. And then the arrow hit the bad guy in his bottom. So then he went, "ouch." And jumped right up. And then when the bad guy landed, he landed on his back. Then the bad guy got back up on to his feet. Then Robin Hood shot another arrow. So then the arrow hit the bazooka again. Then it bounced off, hit the ground, and hit the bad guy's butt. And then he jumped up

and went, "ouch." So then the bad guy shot his bazooka at Robin Hood. So then Robin Hood ducked. So the rocket that the bazooka shot went over Robin Hood's head. So then the rocket that the bazooka shot hit the ground and the dirt that sprayed up hit the bad guy's face. The end. (Edgar, 5–8)

But such full-blown examples involving individual antagonists were rare, even in stories by 5-year-olds.

Working from the other direction, boys also began to connect some of their characters in *alliances, coalitions, or teams* — which fought with other characters. Sometimes, though rarely, this strategy might involve linking characters who began the story as separate individuals and became "friends" or partners. A more common option was to invoke undifferentiated categories, with little or no internal articulation, such as "good guys," "bad guys," "the knights," and so on. But most often the boys appropriated pre-existing teams or duos from the world of cartoon action heroes, such as Ninja Turtles, Power Rangers, or Batman and Robin. In some respects, these teams or duos might be seen as the closest analogues in the boys' stories to the family group at the heart of the girls' family genre. However, in the context of the heroic-agonistic genre, teamwork — whether temporary or stable — almost always served the larger purpose of conflict with other characters.

These two strategies could be combined by depicting sustained, continuous conflict between relatively stable opposing teams and structuring the story around this conflict. Over time, stories of this sort appeared with increasing frequency, and in the process each of the two sides, as well as the conflicts between them, were depicted with increasing detail, complexity, and specificity. It is worth noting that stories organized around prolonged conflict between opposing teams were considerably more frequent than stories organized around prolonged conflict between individual antagonists. (By contrast, conflict between opposing groups almost never appeared in the girls' stories. Is it entirely coincidental that in children's spontaneous play during middle childhood, boys are much more disposed than girls to organize games that involve competition between opposing teams [Maccoby, 1998, pp. 39–40]?) To put it another way, constructing and stabilizing connections between characters on either side of a conflict often appeared as a starting-point or concomitant for stabilizing the conflicts themselves. It is also worth noting that stories structured by conflict between opposing groups or teams were frequently the ones that included the most sophisticated forms of sustained goal-directed action by key characters, often acting in cooperation. Thus, elements of cooperation and of conflict could be combined in ways that contributed to the achievement of narrative coherence, while the world portrayed in these stories fundamentally remained one of conflict and disorder.

> Once upon a time there was Batman and Robin the Boy Wonder and they were riding in a Batmobile. And suddenly they crashed and the Batmobile exploded. And they suddenly jumped out so they wouldn't get exploded. Joker came and he set Bat traps and they were for Robin the Boy Wonder and Batman. Batman and Robin the Boy Wonder got stuck in Bat traps. It almost turned them into bad guys but they broke through it. And they had a battle and Batman and Robin the Boy Wonder fighted Joker. Joker had his flower on his clothes and it squirted ink at Robin the Boy Wonder and Robin the Boy Wonder got wounded. The wound got better. They had another battle and Batman and Robin the Boy Wonder won. Then Penguin came with Penguin's umbrella. And the gas shot at Robin the Boy Wonder and he fell down and got wounded. The wound got better. They had a battle and Robin the Boy Wonder and Batman won. The End. (Zachary, 4–9)

Through the use of these and other strategies, what began as chaotic conflict was structured into more coherent patterns of agonistic competition — though tendencies toward disorder, fragmentation, and incoherence often remained close to the surface. In the process, the model of personhood associated with this narrative genre was also developed in greater depth and complexity. Within the heroic-agonistic genre favored by the boys, the separate and agonistic person, originally portrayed as an extremely isolated and transitory locus of disconnected actions, became an increasingly *stable, autonomous, and self-conscious mental agent* capable of cooperation as well as conflict. (For elaboration, see Richner & Nicolopoulou, 2001.)

In short, the formal problems inherent in these gender-related narrative styles led the girls and the boys toward different characteristic strategies for achieving narrative coherence and for combining coherence with complexity.

Not a conclusion, but a starting-point

This article has sought primarily to diagnose a problem in current developmental research on narrative coherence, particularly with respect to the narrative activity and development of young children, and to suggest some of the kinds of rethinking that might help us begin to overcome this problem. Let me briefly recapitulate some of the main arguments.

A necessary first step, I have tried to demonstrate, is to recognize that some of the key conceptual and methodological tools on which much of the developmental research on this subject currently depends are themselves underdeveloped and even misleading. Consequently, the most prominent and influential approaches in current developmental research on narrative coherence are not fully adequate to capture important dimensions of children's narrative activity and development.

For all of their undoubted contributions, they have not really been able to reconstruct the actual dynamics and trajectories of the development of narrative coherence in young children.

To move beyond these limitations, we need to undertake the foundational work of reconstructing the actual strategies of narrative coherence used by children, beginning with young children, and connecting these systematically to the narrative purposes and intentions that the children themselves are trying to achieve. This will require an approach that can integrate the formal analysis of plot structures with the interpretive analysis of structures of meaning (as cogently and eloquently urged by Bruner, 1986, and others) and that attends not only to connections between events in children's stories but also to the ways that they represent and coordinate characters and their relationships. The result will not be a single model of narrative coherence for young children's stories, but instead a deeper understanding of the distinctive modes and strategies of coherence that inform children's narrative activity and development.

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