

Narratives and explanations during mealtime conversations in Norway and the U.S.

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ABSTRACT

Mealtimes reveal culturally specific ways of talking, and constitute opportunities for socialization of children into those ways. In 22 Norwegian families and 22 American families, matched for age and gender of preschool-aged child and for participant constellation, mealtimes were examined for the occurrence and type of narrative and explanatory talk. All indices suggested that the Norwegian families produced more narrative talk – in particular, talk about minor deviations from social scripts – whereas the American families produced more explanatory talk, particularly talk focused on explanations for physical events or for individual behaviors. When Norwegian families gave explanations, they were likely to be focused on social norms and deviations from them, like their narratives. The results are interpreted in relation to the Norwegian cultural values of mitigated collectivism, egalitarianism, homogeneity, and implicit social rules, in contrast to American values of individualism, diversity, and explicit formulation and transmission of civic values. (Socialization, culture, narrative, explanation, family, mealtimes, Norway, USA.)*

In this article we consider children's acquisition of ways of speaking during family mealtime conversations in Norway and the US. The study of language socialization rests on two assumptions about ordinary talk: first, that it is a culturally organized feature of social life in every society, and second, that it is a major mechanism of socialization. In several recent studies, meals have been found to expose children to a wide range of culturally molded speech genres –

e.g. narratives and explanations – and to local cultural rules regulating discourse, e.g. participants' rights to speak, choice of appropriate topics, and turn-taking rules (see Blum-Kulka & Snow 1992, Ochs et al. 1992, Beals & Snow 1994, Junefelt & Tulviste 1997). Meals seem to create culturally specific discourse environments in which children can both listen to adult talk and participate in collaboratively produced discourse. The study presented here offers evidence that there are subtle differences in the experiences that Norwegian and US children have during mealtime talk, particularly in the frequency and types of narratives and explanations that they help construct. We explore how narratives and explanations serve as distinct cultural resources for Norwegian and American children learning to use language.

Speech genres are socioculturally determined (Bakhtin 1986). Explanations and narratives have been identified as items in “cultural tool kits” (Wertsch 1995), and as basic devices for development and socialization (Bruner 1996). Though distinct genres, the narratives and explanations in which young children participate share some discourse features – e.g. being produced during conversational exchange between interlocutors, in extended segments of text, and often over several turns. Narratives and explanations both give the child opportunities to participate in extended discourse (Beals & Snow 1994), but they differ in their rules of organization and in their relative focus on psychological phenomena.

The goal of this study is to consider mealtime conversations as a context for making visible the socialization of culturally specific choices between narrative and explanation, and of culturally specific contents for both narrative and explanation. Our analysis is informed by Bakhtin's notion (1986) that children appropriate the discourse forms to which they are exposed, and by Bourdieu's (1991) notion that those discourse forms in turn reflect the *HABITUS* of a social group. Bakhtin argued that the words and genres that people use belong partially to others but are appropriated and adapted to the user's own purposes. This notion provides a functionalist complement to the more structuralist notion of *habitus*.

Bourdieu introduced the notion of *habitus* as central to an account of socialization. As the word implies, *habitus* is assumed to take shape as an implicit aspect of habitual life experiences and to be acquired in early childhood. It constitutes an unexamined background set of assumptions about the world, as well as a set of dispositions that incline agents to act and react in certain ways. The dispositions generate practices that are “regular” without being consciously coordinated, Bourdieu argues. Our purpose is to explore some characteristics of the linguistic *habitus* that children acquire in two different cultures by examining similarities and differences in the conversational genres that children overhear, are invited to participate in, and gradually appropriate. We present data about the concrete contexts in which Norwegian and American children are inducted into the *habitus* of their cultures.

EVIDENCE FOR A COLLECTIVIST/INDIVIDUALIST CONTRAST

Cross-cultural research often uses the strategy of comparing groups from highly contrasting settings (e.g. Japan vs. the US) in seeking cultural specificity. We have chosen to compare two relatively similar groups, both comprising urban dwellers in modern, industrialized cultures with universal education, social welfare systems, and institutions dominated by Judeo-Christian thinking. Furthermore, we have selected Norwegian and American samples that are similar on key variables, given the constraint that they come from two still essentially distinct cultures. These two societies afford a contrast between collectivism and individualism (or at least different forms of individualism; see below), and related to that, a contrast of social and cultural homogeneity with heterogeneity, rather than contrasts on dimensions like urbanity and industrialization. Child-rearing patterns are believed to differ in collectivist and individualist cultures in developmentally meaningful ways. Bellah et al. 1985 use the term "individualism" to index the belief that the individual has a primary reality, whereas society is a second-order, derived or artificial construct. They argue that "individualism lies at the very core of American culture" (Bellah et al. 1985:142), although they also identify a distinct ambivalence about individualism in America. By contrast, studies of the Scandinavian countries in the postwar welfare-state period point to the emergence of paradoxical links between individualism and new forms of collectivism.

The American value of individualism has been noted in a number of studies that compare American mothers' ways of using language with those of mothers from other cultures. For example, Dunn & Brown 1991, comparing mothers and children in the US and England, found that the American mothers more often explained what was acceptable or unacceptable behavior in terms of the children's individual actions; in England, however, mothers were more likely to invoke the norms of a wider social world. Junefelt & Tulviste 1997 studied mothers' regulatory language to young children in the US, Sweden, and Estonia (countries supposed to differ in degree of individualism), and found that American mothers offered their children many more individual choices during mealtime than Estonian and Swedish mothers did. Halle & Shatz 1994 have argued that differing values placed on the individual's role in the larger society may explain cultural differences in mothers' social regulatory language to young children.

Studies of children in the first and second years of life have confirmed this tendency. US and Japanese mothers focused on different aspects of the interaction while playing with their babies: American mothers called attention to object names, while Japanese mothers used toys more often to engage their infants in social routines (Fernald & Morikawa 1993). Bornstein et al. 1992, comparing maternal responsiveness to infants in the US, France, and Japan, found that American mothers focused on stimulation and enrichment of the environment, and emphasized object responsiveness by incorporating the environment outside the

dyad into their interactions; Japanese mothers, however, tended to respond more dyadically to their infant's social looking. Both French and Japanese mothers emphasized dyad-focused responsiveness, and French mothers in particular defined their task as providing security and support. A more recent study of culturally determined maternal responsiveness (Bernicot et al. 1994) focused on somewhat older French-speaking preschool children interacting with their mothers in Canada (expected to be more American-like in their way of interacting) and in France, and documented significant pragmatic diversity within each group. The contribution of culture in their findings differed according to the pragmatic measure considered.

Studies relating the individual- vs. group-orientation to the production of explanations in different cultures are not available, but some studies of narrative development reflect this dichotomy. Miller et al. 1992 found that a focus on self apart from others emerged in personal narratives told by European-American but not Chinese-American children around age five. American adolescent middle-class girls adhered to norms of autonomous telling and making original contributions, while working-class girls more often engaged in joint discussion, took brief turns, and echoed each others' points (Hemphill 1989). Blum-Kulka 1993 found that mealtime narratives in native Israeli families were more likely to be collectively told than in families who were living in the US or had immigrated to Israel; in the American families, the narrator worked harder to protect his or her own turn, and mothers often protected the autonomous telling rights of younger children.

A central question in cross-cultural psychology has been how satisfactorily cultures can be distinguished on the basis of a group vs. individual orientation (Billings 1987), particularly since this dichotomy may overlook values that serve both individual and collective interests (Schwartz 1994). The study we present here was motivated by anthropological and sociological accounts suggesting that daily practices reveal individualism and collectivism differently in Scandinavia and the US (Löfgren 1993). The rules for being a good citizen in traditionally more homogeneous cultures are implicit and taken for granted, in contrast to the explicit, foregrounded messages and values in heterogeneous cultures like the US. We examined mealtime conversations as a site for culturally specific patterns of socialization in Norwegian and American families from similar backgrounds, living under similar circumstances.

METHOD

Subjects

Twenty-two Norwegian children (13 girls and 9 boys) and 22 American children (10 girls and 12 boys), with their families, participated in the study. The families were recruited through the target child's preschool and were invited to take part in a comparative study of young children's participation in conversations. The

children had to be between 2.9 and 4.0 years of age and had to speak respectively Norwegian or English at home. None of the families came from identified subcultures within either society; all the mothers were born in respectively Norway or the US; and the target children were monolingual. The average age of the Norwegian sample was 3.3 years (range 2.9 to 3.11). The average age of the American sample was 3.6 years (range 3.0 to 4.0).

The Norwegian children were recruited from six different public preschools giving full-day care, located in a low- and middle-income suburb of Oslo. The first 22 families who agreed to participate were included. All the children lived within walking distance of their schools, which all share a national curriculum and are similar in space, materials, and teachers' education. A majority (75 percent) of the Norwegian families invited agreed to participate in the study.

The American children lived in and around Cambridge, Massachusetts, and attended any of several different preschools. Most of the children did not live within walking distance of the schools, which varied greatly in material standard, teachers' educational level, and curricula. A minority of the American families invited agreed to participate. Since the Norwegian and American families responded somewhat differently to the invitation to participate, and since this element of self-selection might have generated samples that differ on key variables, a pairwise matching procedure was adopted to ensure comparability between the two groups.

Sampling and matching are challenging problems in comparative research. Several variables no doubt covary with ways of producing narratives and explanations, both between and within cultures; these may include social class (Heath 1983, Van Kleeck et al. 1996), situation of telling (Donaldson 1996), family size, family constellation, and gender. Owing to national differences in mean and variance of parents' educational level, as well as in family economics, the two groups of children were matched with regard to their mothers' relative educational level within their own country. While 29 percent of adults in Oslo have education above high-school level, including also briefer post-high school education (Statistics Norway 1995), 70 percent of the adult population in the Cambridge area have completed a BA (Honor 1995). The mothers' education, and if possible occupation, were given first priority as a basis for the pairwise matching. Because of the national differences in educational tradition, some American mothers were matched with somewhat less educated Norwegian mothers. With two exceptions, all the American mothers have completed high school. Three American mothers have an M.A., and two have a B.A., while most of the mothers have some post-high-school education. In the Norwegian sample one mother has an M.A., three mothers have a B.A., and fewer have completed high school than in the American sample. Both the Norwegian and the American families included a range of occupational and educational backgrounds – but with more diversity in the American than in the Norwegian sample, reflecting differences between the two countries in demo-

graphic homogeneity. Since the American families were selected in an attempt to match the Oslo sample, the resultant sample is probably less heterogeneous than one would collect by randomly sampling families in the Cambridge area.

The second priority in matching was the number and characteristics of the participants in the mealtime conversations taped: whether one as opposed to two or more adults participated, and whether siblings participated. Four pairs were matched along just one of these dimensions, and the rest on both.

Data collection

The Norwegian families were contacted by a Norwegian researcher, the American families by either an American or a Norwegian researcher. Researchers were always socially positioned vis-à-vis the persons they studied. There is, however, no reason to believe that what went on during the taped mealtime was significantly influenced by the nationality of the researcher contacting the family. The American families contacted by a Norwegian researcher were also aware that data would be analyzed in cooperation with an American researcher. We explained to the parents that we wished to observe the children's conversations within an everyday routine, and that we wanted to disrupt ordinary family conversation as little as possible. Each family was provided with a tape recorder, and was asked to tape during an ordinary meal for at least ten minutes.

The tapes revealed considerable within-group variation in regard to amount of talk, as well as surprising between-group similarities in both mean and variance. The American tapes include 8,118 utterances, with a mean of 369 utterances per tape. The Norwegian data-set includes 7,914 utterances, with 360 utterances per tape as the mean. In both samples, two families returned mealtime tapes with fewer than 100 utterances. The longest American mealtime tape has 888 utterances; the longest Norwegian, 952 utterances.

Transcription and data reduction

Audiotaped parent/child interaction was transcribed into computer files using the transcription conventions of the *Child Language Data Exchange System* (MacWhinney 1991, MacWhinney & Snow 1985, 1990). Transcripts were verified for content and were checked for adherence to transcription conventions, using the automatic checking facilities of the CHILDES system. Utterance boundaries were based primarily on intonation contour, and secondarily on pause duration. No attempt was made to distinguish the number of unintelligible words in a string. In accordance with the CHILDES rules, information about all participants in the mealtime was included, as well as any context notes needed to understand the interaction.

Meals are characterized by many immediate instrumental goals: serving food, ensuring that children eat, and engaging in ritual politeness routines. Many of these activities are accompanied by verbal directives (*Could you pass the milk?*), compliments (*This tastes nice*), and various politeness routines (*What do you say*

when you leave the table?). These here-and-now anchored themes, which are the most frequent kind of talk during mealtimes in both cultures, have not been analyzed here. The percentage of utterances devoted to this instrumental, immediate talk was approximately equal across the Norwegian and American groups. Coding and analysis focused entirely on narratives and explanations occurring in the mealtime conversations.

Narratives

Narratives are defined as conversational segments combining at least two event elements along an explicit or implicit timeline. Included are events in the past as well as the future. Narratives were subcategorized in terms of the topic referred to, from a perspective of its distance from the present in psychological space and in time, as follows:

(a) *Space*: Narratives were coded as referring to events that occurred at home, at preschool, or even farther away from daily events (“distant outside world”).

(b) *Time*: Narratives were coded as referring to past vs. future, and in both cases, for relatively immediate vs. more distant time. “Immediate” was defined as the day of observation, and the day before or after.

Conversational sequences in which the participants referred to events in the past or future – without, however, combining two or more event elements – were coded as SEMI-NARRATIVES. Although such segments do not qualify as full-fledged narratives, coding them seemed important because they clearly refer to a past or future event, and they may occur in particular as a form of reminiscence (Engel 1985). This category of semi-narratives also included conversations about non-present persons’ activity (e.g., *Where is daddy?* or *What is daddy doing?*), which were quite infrequent.

Narratives were also coded for conversational moves and interactive status. The coding system distinguished the following categories:

Giving narrative: a move that provided narrative information.

Spontaneous: without a prior request.

Response: in response to a prior request.

Requesting narrative: a move that requested narrative information.

Conversational moves within narratives that were not categorized included clarification requests and confirmations.

Explanations

We adopt here the definition for explanations offered by Beals 1993, i.e. an “interactional exchange in which there is an indication by one party that there is something he or she does not understand or an assumption on the part of the speaker that she knows something that the addressee needs to know; this request or assumption is followed by the speaker explicitly expressing the logical relationship between objects, intentions, events and/or concepts” (Beals 1993:497).

The categories for identifying explanations were defined by the six “questions of concern” also drawn from Beals (presented in Table 5, below).

In addition to categorizing explanations in terms of the questions that gave rise to them, we coded them from an interactive perspective, using a simplified version of Beals’ system:

(a) Giving explanation: The speaker gives an explanation (*Because I want to go out.*)

Spontaneous: The speaker gives an explanation spontaneously, without a request from another speaker.

Response: The speaker responds to a request or proposal, giving an explanation that has been requested by another interlocutor, or confirms or denies an explanation proposed by another interlocutor.

(b) Requesting explanation: The speaker directly asks for an explanation (*Why are you putting your coat on?*)

(c) Proposing explanation: The speaker proposes an explanation, seeking a confirmation from the addressee, usually in the form of a yes/no question. These occurrences are coded differently than requests for explanations. They give a possible explanation, presumably contributing more to the explanation (*Are you hungry because you skipped the lunch?*)

Conversational moves within explanations that were not categorized included clarification requests, giving information and confirmations following an explanation.

Explanations were defined primarily by the kind of question that was answered in the explanation. In addition, the topic of the explanation was coded to indicate what aspect of the world was rendered linguistically through the explanation (expanding on Dunn & Brown 1993). In developing content categories, the primary distinction made was that of following social rules and practices vs. more explicit foregrounding of personal points of view:

(a) Physical reality: the topic of the explanation is the physical world.

(b) Behavior/action: focus on individual action.

(c) Internal states: focus on individual wishes, feelings etc.

(d) Person/competence: describing the child’s personal characteristics, often in terms of competence. The category “person/competence” is closely associated with social practices and might be considered a subcategory of social practices. To describe the child as *a good football player* or as *big* is to a large extent a social project.

(e) Social practices: regulating social life. In both cultures, the parents work on making daily routines and social conventions known to the children. Explanations within this category can focus either implicitly or explicitly on social practices – e.g., social routines and conventions are explained explicitly to the child – or a strongly regulated social life is implicitly taken for granted, and what is explained is a slight deviation from the ordinary. Social conventions are im-

PLICITLY taken for granted in negotiation of table interaction. Any explanation coded as “social practices” had to be focused on activity as socially regulated, and not on individual behavior *per se* (see Table 7, below).

In applying this coding system, “social practices,” “internal states,” and “person/competence” took precedence over the other codes in cases of possible multiple coding, because these are of particular interest for the analysis. When both social practices and internal states were involved in the explanation, the category that was more foregrounded was coded.

While these two coding systems were applied independently, some relationships between them emerged. Explanations having to do with social practices were found in response to any type of initiating question. The “behavior/action” topic, however, often occurred in response to questions about reasons for action; “internal state”, normally in response to questions about feelings; and “physical reality”, often to questions about “Why something happened” or “What something means/something is like” (Tables 5 and 6, below).

Statistical analysis

Reliability. The reliability of the content categories was checked with a second scorer who was blind to the purpose of the project. In 89.4 percent of the cases, the observers agreed on the content scoring of explanations.

Data treatment. Because of the variance in the length of the returned tapes, most calculations are based on relative frequencies. T-tests for independent samples were used for group comparisons, and for correlated samples in comparing speakers with themselves in different forms of talk.

RESULTS

What are the frequency and length of narratives and explanations during Norwegian and American mealtimes? Overall frequency of narratives was quite similar in the two groups, but the American families produced many more explanatory segments; see Table 1. Norwegian families produced more narrative talk, and American families more explanatory talk. The length of narratives and explanations was comparable across the two groups. The mean relative frequency of narrative utterances was significantly higher for the Norwegian than for the American sample ($t = 2.956, p < .01$); but the American sample produced almost twice as many explanatory utterances as the Norwegian sample ($t = 4.77, p < .001$).

The pattern found in group means is replicated when we look at pairs of families matched on education and constellation. Just five American children were higher on narrative measures than their Norwegian matches, while just two Norwegians were higher on explanations than their American matches. Only one pair, the two girls Trude and Rebecca, showed the reverse pattern; Trude scored slightly higher on explanations, and Rebecca on narratives. Trude, the “atypical”

TABLE 1. *Frequency, length, and percentage of narrative and explanatory talk in Norwegian and American families.*

	Norwegian	American
Narrative segments	91	65
Explanatory segments	155	301
Number of narrative utterances	2537	1377
Number of explanatory utterances	971	1836
Relative frequency, narrative utterances**	30.87(sd=17.56)	16.02 (sd=14.78)
Relative frequency, explanatory utterances***	11.73 (sd=6.80)	21.95 (sd=7.41)
Number of utterances coded both narrative and explanatory	309	348
Percent of utterances coded both narrative and explanatory	3.90	4.29

**difference between column means significant at $p < .01$

***difference between column means significant at $p < .001$

Norwegian, engaged in the following lengthy explanatory sequence with her mother, about the financial consequences of unemployment; this sequence, though explanatory, is characteristically Norwegian in its focus on social practices.

Excerpt 1

- | | | |
|--------------|--|--|
| (1) Trude: | <i>Det e'kke det e snakker om da vet du.</i> | That is not what I am talking about. |
| (2) Mother: | <i>Hva er det du snakker om?</i> | What are you talking about? |
| (3) Trude: | <i>Snakker om # når dem ikke går på jobb.</i> | Talking about when they do not go to work. |
| (4) Trude: | <i>Når dem ikke begynner på jobb eller noe.</i> | When they do not start on any job or anything. |
| (5) Mother: | <i>Hva skjer da?</i> | What happens then? |
| (6) Trude: | <i>Da # da har # da har dem ikke noe mat heller.</i> | Then, then they, then they have no food either. |
| (7) Mother: | <i>Trur du det?</i> | Do you think so? |
| (8) Trude: | <i>N # også dør de menskene.</i> | Yes, and then those people die. |
| (9) Mother: | <i>Gjør dem? [humrer]</i> | Do they? [chuckles] |
| (10) Trude: | <i>Mm.</i> | Yes. |
| (11) Mother: | <i>Huff da!</i> | Oh! |
| (12) Trude: | <i>Jo-o.</i> | Yes. |
| (13) Mother: | <i>Man får mat selv om man ikke går på jobb.</i> | You get food even though you don't go to work. |
| (14) Trude: | <i>Hva gjør dem da?</i> | What do they do then? |
| (15) Mother: | <i>Man kan godt nei man kan få penger selv om man ikke jobber.</i> | You can very well, you can get money even though you don't work. |
| (16) Mother: | <i>Det kommer litt an på det # det er litt komplisert.</i> | It all depends # it is a bit complicated. |
| (17) Trude: | <i>Går i butikk.</i> | Goes to the shop. |
| (18) Mother: | <i>Hja hva skal dem betale for da? [humrer]</i> | Yeah, but what should they pay with then? [chuckles] |
| (19) Mother: | <i>Med?</i> | Pay with? |

- (20) Mother: *Men det er riktig som du sier at når de som ikke har jobb så har man jo gjerne ikke no lønn.* But it is right as you say, when they do not go to work, then they would not have an income either.
- (21) Trude: *Nei.* No.
- (22) Mother: *Fins andre måter å få penger på åssa.* There are other ways of getting money as well.
- (23) Trude: *xxx.*
- (24) Mother: *Sånn vi har krav sånn som vi har krav på xxx spørs om du forstår det da men.* Has to do with our rights xxx wonder if you understand this though.
- (25) Mother: *De som ikke har jobb de kan få noe som heter arbeidsledighetstrygd.* Those who do not work they can get something called public assistance.

Rebecca participated in more narratives than her match Trude. One of her narratives tells about a trip to Canada when somebody became sick (2:4), mentioning where this happened (2:4, 23–25), who participated (2:6–12), and when it happened (2:26–28). Though clearly narrative, this sequence reveals a typically American focus on understanding how things happen:

Excerpt 2

- (1) Mother: Who was there the last time you were there [in Canada]?
- (2) Rebecca: Me?
- (3) Mother: Nn, you've been there!
- (4) Father: Oh, it was a, probably last fall I remember that xxx threw up xxx stuff and they xxx Quebec.
- (5) Mother: Yea [whispering].
- (6) Mother: Was anybody else there when we were there?
- (7) Father: Nn ...
- (8) Rebecca: Grandpa! [shouts]
- (9) Father: Grandpa was there.
- (10) Mother: Grandpa there.
- (11) Mother: And Caroline was there.
- (12) Father: Nn.
- (13) Father: I don't think anybody else was there.
- (14) Rebecca: Da da.
- (15) Mother: What?
- (16) Rebecca: And Rebecca.
- (17) Mother: And Rebecca was there.
- (18) Father: xxx.
- (19) Mother: Yes we always bring him with us.
- (20) Father: Fred and Elizabeth might have been there.
- (21) Rebecca: Ye.
- (22) Father: Yea.
- (23) Rebecca: I, I xxx very far away.
- (24) Mother: Was it, did we go xxx.
- (25) Father: Very far away yeah.
- (26) Mother: Did we go for Thanksgiving?
- (27) Father: Might have been Thanksgiving.
- (28) Mother: Don't remember [softly].

In the Norwegian data, 309 utterances were categorized as both narrative and explanatory, while this was the case for 348 American utterances. The percentage of utterances coded twice is thus very similar in the two samples, but their functions were quite different. In the Norwegian data, utterances coded twice were typically explanatory utterances within more elaborated narratives. Explaining

something was more often part of telling a narrative than in the American data – where a narrative might be a part of an explanatory conversation, or a short narrative might be an example in a more elaborated explanation, or a narrative might turn into an explanation, with some utterances in the middle scored as both narrative and explanatory. An example of the typical Norwegian pattern, a narrative with some embedded explanation, comes from Else's family. Her mother worked as a teacher in a different preschool group from Else's, and they talked about the two groups seeing each other while on their respective field trips. Utterances 3:16–20 were coded as both narrative and explanatory:

Excerpt 3

- | | | |
|--------------|--|---|
| (1) Else: | <i>Vi så på gakkgakkene i dag vi.</i> | We watched the ducks today. |
| (2) Mother: | <i>Gjorde det?</i> | Did we? |
| (3) Else: | <i>Og så hadde vi ikke med no mat til dem.</i> | And then we did not bring any food for them. |
| (4) Mother: | <i>Hadde dere ikke hadde dere glemt det a?</i> | Did you not, had you forgotten? |
| (5) Mother: | <i>Ja, var det mange gakkgakker der nede?</i> | Yes, did you see many ducks there? |
| (6) Else: | <i>Nn.</i> | Yes. |
| (7) Mother: | <i>Så mange?</i> | That many? |
| (8) Mother: | <i>Oj, ti stykker?</i> | Wow, ten ducks? |
| (9) Mother: | <i>Det var mye.</i> | That was a lot. |
| (10) Mother: | <i>Else så du atte t-banen hvor mamma var i idag kjørte forbi?</i> | Else did you see that the metro that mum was on today passed you? |
| (11) Else: | <i>Ja.</i> | Yes. |
| (12) Mother: | <i>Ja vinka dere til oss?</i> | Yes, did you wave to us? |
| (13) Else: | <i>Nn.</i> | Yes. |
| (14) Mother: | <i>Nn så deg jeg [humrer].</i> | I saw you too. [chuckles] |
| (15) Else: | <i>Var det høyt oppe vi kunne ikke se dere?</i> | Was it high up, we could not see you? |
| (16) Mother: | <i>Ja vi kjørte over den store brua vet du som du gikk under.</i> | Yes we passed, the huge bridge that you were walking under. |
| (17) Mother: | <i>Nn.</i> | Yes. |
| (18) Else: | <i>Hvorfor det?</i> | Why? |
| (19) Mother: | <i>T-banen går over den brua # oppå den brua.</i> | The metro goes on top of that bridge. |
| (20) Mother: | <i>Dere måtte gå under der for å komme ned til den andedammen.</i> | You had to go under the bridge to get to the ducks' pond. |
| (21) Mother: | <i>Husker det du?</i> | Do you remember that? |
| (22) Else: | <i>Mere krydder.</i> | More spices. |
| (23) Mother: | <i>Du, vet du hva mamma skulle da?</i> | Do you know what mum was going to do then? |
| (24) Else: | <i>N?</i> | What? |
| (25) Mother: | <i>Til byen å gå på kino med de andre barna.</i> | Go downtown to watch a movie with the other kids. |
| (26) Mother: | <i>Skal se på Bambi.</i> | We're going to see Bambi. |

The participants

Cultures no doubt vary extensively in opportunities provided for children to participate in various kinds of conversation, but in the two groups studied here the relative frequency of children's participation in mealtime talk was very similar;

NARRATIVES & EXPLANATIONS IN MEALTIME CONVERSATIONS

TABLE 2. *Index of participation in mealtime talk for Norwegian and American children.*

Participation index for children	Norwegian	American
All mealtime talk	38.16	38.99
Narrative talk	41.10	35.65
Explanatory talk	31.88***	34.70**

**different from all mealtime talk, $p < .01$

***different from all mealtime talk, $p < .005$

see Table 2. Child participation in explanations was significantly lower than their participation in the mealtime as a whole (explanations included) in both groups, but the American children participated more. The converse pattern is apparent for adults, who participated more in explanations than in the mealtime talk in general in both cultures.

Table 3 shows who initiated the narrative and explanatory talk, whether it occurred spontaneously or in response to a request. Norwegian families gave spontaneous narratives, responded with narratives, and requested narratives almost twice as often as American families; the target children showed the same pattern. Although they produced many more narrative utterances, the Norwegian group looked very like the American in distribution of narrative utterances. The largest category was giving narrative spontaneously, while giving narrative response was the least frequent over all in either sample. Giving narrative response was a child-dominated activity, with slightly more than 50 percent of all narrative responses offered by target children in both samples. By contrast, target children requested narrative very infrequently in either group (8 percent of all narrative requests in both samples). Although there was minimal variation between the two groups in overall relative frequency of spontaneous and responsive provision of narratives or in child participation, there were some differences between the two groups. More Norwegian children heard a conversational partner give narrative spontaneously (20 Norwegian as opposed to 14 American) or request narrative (19 Norwegian as opposed to 15 American), and more Norwegian children spontaneously offered and requested narrative. While four Norwegian children requested narrative more than three times, just one American child did so.

American families offered spontaneous explanations, responded with an explanation, and requested or proposed an explanation twice as often as Norwegian families did; and target children replicated their group pattern. American target children provided spontaneous and responsive explanations and requested explanations two to three times as often as Norwegian children (see Table 3). Thus spontaneous explanations were the most frequent type in both samples overall; but the target children, Norwegian as well as American, most often contributed to explanatory talk by requesting explanations. The finding that both Norwegian

TABLE 3. *Spontaneous and responsive provision of narratives and explanations.*

	Norwegian			American		
	I	II	III	I	II	III
Narrative utterances, coded for conversational move	1224 (362)	48.25	29.75	659 (200)	47.86	30.35
Explanatory utterances, coded for conversational move	355 (64)	36.56	18.03	760 (184)	41.39	24.21
Giving narrative: spontaneous	623 (205)	50.90 (56.63)	32.91	371 (122)	56.30 (61.00)	32.88
Giving narrative: response	221 (126)	18.06 (34.81)	57.01	116 (63)	17.60 (31.50)	54.31
Requesting narrative	380 (32)	31.05 (8.84)	8.42	172 (15)	26.10 (7.50)	8.72
Giving explanation: spontaneous	167 (17)	47.04 (26.56)	10.18	378 (66)	49.74 (35.87)	17.46
Giving explanation: response	109 (15)	30.70 (23.44)	13.76	210 (52)	27.63 (28.26)	24.76
Requesting or proposing explanation	79 (32)	22.25 (50.00)	40.51	171 (66)	22.50 (35.87)	38.60

I: Total number (parents, siblings, target children).

Numbers in parentheses: target children.

II: Percent of coded utterances.

Numbers in parentheses: target children.

III: Child participation index.

and American children were more active than their parents in requesting explanations is confirmed across the families; in slightly more than half of the families, in both cultures, children requested explanations more often than their parents (in Table 3 siblings are included in the total number). Norwegian children requested explanations less often than their American peers, but somewhat more often than their adult conversational partners.

Giving spontaneous explanations, in contrast, was a heavily adult-dominated activity in both American and Norwegian families. In 20 of the 21 American families that offered spontaneous explanations during mealtimes, the adults gave more spontaneous explanations than the children (the one exception was a family that talked very little). Of the 20 Norwegian families in which at least one utterance was scored as spontaneous explanation, the adults gave more spontaneous explanations than the children in every case. Explanations given as responses to requests or proposals were also adult-regulated. In 16 of the 19 Norwegian families who produced any responses to requests or proposals, adults had a higher frequency of these utterances. In the other three families, the children had one or two more utterances of these kinds than the adults. In the American sample, giving explanations in response to requests/proposals was done more often by adults. Of the 20 families with any such types of explanation, an adult offered them more often than the children in 13. Giving spontaneous explanations was thus an adult-dominated activity in both cultures, while responding with explanations showed more inter-family variation within each country.

American children participated somewhat more than their Norwegian peers in producing spontaneous explanations (see Table 3 – 17.46 percent as opposed to 10.18 percent) and in responding with an explanation (24.76 percent as opposed to 13.76 percent). The American children were more often offered explanations; by the age of three, these children already had a history of language socialization that made them more active participants in explanations than the Norwegian children were. This is exemplified by Jerry's enthusiastic, unprompted provision of explanations (for liking pancakes, and for eating them promptly) in the following sequence:

Excerpt 4

- (1) Jerry: Do you like pancake mummy?
- (2) Mother: Actually no I don't really like pancakes at all.
- (3) Jerry: I like pancakes.
- (4) Mother: I know you do, yeah pancake-man.
- (5) Jerry: They make me strong.
- (6) Jerry: Pancakes makes, makes strong.
- (7) Jerry: I'm gonna eat this gets cool.

In summary, however, there were no huge between-group differences in what narratives or explanations looked like. Norwegian families narrated more, and American families explained more – mainly because the adults and children in each culture more often provided their own preferred genre both spontaneously and responsively, as well as requesting it more often.

TABLE 4. *References to time and space in narratives of Norwegian (NO) and American (AM) families.*

		Preschool		Home		Not home	
		NO	AM	NO	AM	NO	AM
Past	close	26 (12)	8 (6)	9 (1)	8 (4)	16 (5)	12 (6)
	more distant	2 (1)	0	8	4 (4)	8 (2)	4
Future	close	9 (9)	4 (2)	15 (8)	3 (6)	8 (2)	12 (10)
	more distant	2	1	7	2 (2)	5 (2)	7

() types of semi-narratives.
 N (NO) = 85 narratives.
 N (AM) = 57 narratives.

Types of narratives

We noted occurrence in the narratives of reference to any combination of time and space categories; thus, although some narratives contributed more than one type to the total count, most were coded only once. The Norwegian narratives generally were somewhat more elaborated; thus, more often than the American narratives, they contributed to the total count more than once. Narratives that could not be reliably coded for time and space were excluded from the analysis (6 Norwegian and 8 American). The most frequent event types referred to by the Norwegian families were recent past events occurring at preschool, and recent past events occurring in the distant outside world. For the American families, they were recent past events occurring in the distant outside world, as well as immediate future events occurring at home and in the outside world; see Table 4.

It is clear from Table 4 that, in both cultures studied, relatively immediate past and future events dominate narration – a pattern different from that reported by Blum-Kulka 1993 for Israeli families. Even the events categorized here as distant past happened within the previous few weeks. The events categorized as occurring in the distant outside world are mostly narratives about family outings, e.g. going on family trips or visiting grandparents. There is reason to believe that mainstream American children include fewer nuclear and extended-family topics in their narratives than do Hispanic children living in the US (Silva & McCabe 1996) or Israeli children; however, for most Americans as well as the Norwegians, outside-world narratives had to do with family experiences outside the home.

There were considerably more narratives and semi-narratives about preschool in the Norwegian sample. Eighteen of the 22 Norwegian families told a narrative about a recent past or immediate future preschool event, whereas only seven American families produced narratives about preschool events in the close past

or future. The standard Norwegian narrative about a preschool experience is about slight changes in what ordinarily happens during the day, like the following, in which the typical school event “circle time” had included both a typical “lesson” about brushing teeth (Karius and Baktus are cartoon figures used in widely distributed dental hygiene promotions in Norway), and a special event, a classmate’s birthday. Preschool narratives are highly scaffolded by the scripted nature of children’s (and mothers’) knowledge of the normal preschool day, which enhances their capacity to report minor deviations from it (see Ninio & Snow 1996).

Excerpt 5

- | | |
|--|--|
| (1) Mother: <i>Du Hanne, det hadde # den samlingsstunden dere hadde i dag i barnehaven. .?</i> | Hanne, the circle time you had in preschool today. .? |
| (2) Hanne: <i>Samlingsstunden.</i> | Circle time. |
| (3) Mother: <i>Hva var det dere gjorde da?</i> | What did you do then? |
| (4) Hanne: <i>xxx.</i> | |
| (5) Mother: <i>Hæ?</i> | What? |
| (6) Mother: <i>Tannbørste hn?</i> | Toothbrush – is that right? |
| (7) Hanne: <i>Vi ha det Karius og Baktus.</i> | We had that Karius and Baktus. |
| (8) Mother: <i>Ja i /boka ja var det noen som leste da?</i> | Yes, in the book, did somebody read to you? |
| (9) Hanne: <i>Nei.</i> | No. |
| (10) Mother: <i>Bare så dere på video?</i> | Did you just watch a video? |
| (11) Hanne: <i>Nei.</i> | No. |
| (12) Mother: <i>Bare fortalte?</i> | You were just telling? |
| (13) Hanne: <i>Ja.</i> | Yes. |
| (14) Mother: <i>Om Karius og Baktus?</i> | About Karius and Baktus? |
| (15) Mother: <i>Også hadde dere tannbørste da?</i> | And then you had a toothbrush there? |
| (16) Mother: <i>Hvor var det dere hadde samlingen var det oppi annen etasje?</i> | Where did you have the circle time, on the second floor? |
| (17) Hanne: <i>Nei.</i> | No. |
| (18) Mother: <i>Nede hos dere?</i> | Downstairs? |
| (19) Hanne: <i>Ja.</i> | Yes. |
| (20) Mother: <i>Eller inne hos de andre?</i> | Or with the other ones? |
| (21) Mother: <i>Inne hos de voksne?</i> | In the adult room? |
| (22) Hanne: <i>Nei, bare xxx i barnehagen nede helt nede.</i> | No, just xxx in school downstairs, all the way downstairs. |
| (23) Mother: <i>Også var alle nede hos dere da?</i> | And everybody was downstairs with you? |
| (24) Hanne: <i>Jaha.</i> | Yes. |
| (25) Father: <i>Alle?</i> | Everybody? |
| (26) Hanne: <i>Ja.</i> | Yes. |
| (27) Father: <i>Hn.</i> | Oh. |
| (28) Mother: <i>Men, feira alle barna bursdagen til Marius?</i> | But, did all of you celebrate Marius’ birthday? |
| (29) Hanne: <i>Ja.</i> | Yes. |
| (30) Mother: <i>Fikk alle is?</i> | Did everybody get ice cream? |
| (31) Hanne: <i>N.</i> | Yes. |

Future family narratives about the outside world are slightly more frequent in the American sample, while all other kinds of narratives are more frequent in the Norwegian families.

Types of explanations

Like Beals 1993, we found that American families produced most explanatory utterances in the categories “Why I am doing something” and “Why I am telling you to do something”; see Table 5. The Norwegian families produced relatively more explanatory utterances in the categories “Why I am doing something” and “Why something happened,” and somewhat fewer in the “Why I am telling you to do something” category. The Norwegian families also did less explaining than the Americans in the category “Why I want or feel something.” In general, though, what is most striking in this analysis is the fairly high level of similarity across the two cultural groups in the types of explanations they give, especially in light of the much greater production of explanatory talk overall by the American families.

Content of explanations. The American families produced a significantly higher percentage of utterances than the Norwegian families in the categories “behavior” and “internal states,” and a much lower percentage in the category “social practices”; see Table 6.

The most striking finding here is the major discrepancy in the “social practices” explanations, which dominate the Norwegian explanatory talk. For example, in discussing the common issue of why the mealtime was being taped, Norwegian families most often talked about their relationship to the researcher, how they had met, and how the meal being recorded fit into their daily routines (all categorized as “social practices”), as in this conversation between Tone and her mother:

Excerpt 6

- | | | |
|-------------|--|--|
| (1) Tone: | <i>E det vår?</i> | Is this ours? |
| (2) Mother: | <i>Ja vi låner den.</i> | Yes, we're borrowing it. |
| (3) Tone: | <i>Nn.</i> | Nn. |
| (4) Tone: | <i>E det dama sin?</i> | Is it the lady's? |
| (5) Mother: | <i>Ja.</i> | Yes. |
| (6) Tone: | <i>Kal kal vi ta med det hjem?</i> | Can can we take it home with us? |
| (7) Mother: | <i>Vi har med den hjem og så skal dama få den tilbakeen annen dag.</i> | We have brought it home and then the lady is going to get it back another day. |

American families were more likely to focus on what they would do with the recorder (i.e. tape first and listen afterwards, a “behavior” explanation), as Barbara's mother does in this example:

Excerpt 7

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| (1) Mother: | Well I tell you what this is before I shut it off okay? |
| (2) Mother: | You're all done? |
| (3) Barbara: | Yes. |
| (4) Mother: | This is a tape recorder and everything that you said and did while you're eating your supper is on this tape recorder and I play it back for you and you can hear what you sounded like okay? |

American families also tended to focus more on the technical aspects of the tape recorder, as in this conversation:

TABLE 5. Frequency and relative frequencies (as proportion of explanatory and of total utterances) of types of questions to which Norwegian and American explanations respond.

	Norwegian			American		
	freq	freq/explan	freq/total*	freq	freq/explan	freq/total*
Why I tell you to do something	123	12.67	1.55	322	17.54	3.97
Why I want or feel something	63	6.49	0.80	232	12.64	2.86
Why I am doing something	293	30.18	3.70	445	24.24	5.48
Why something happened	189	19.46	2.39	276	15.03	3.40
What something means/ What something is like	177	18.23	2.24	325	17.70	4.00
Others	39	12.98	1.59	30	12.82	2.90
Total	971	100.01	12.27	1836	99.97	22.61

*Total in third column is somewhat higher than mean frequency of explanatory utterances due to some explanatory segments coded twice.

TABLE 6. *Categories of explanations given in Norwegian (NO) and American (AM) families.*

	NO: total utterances	NO: rel. frequency	AM: total utterances	AM: rel. frequency
Behavior*	131	13.40	461	25.11
Physical world	197	20.29	658	35.84
Internal states*	62	6.29	245	13.34
Person/competence	45	6.39	71	3.87
Social practices***	550	56.64	401	21.81

*Significant difference between groups in relative frequency, $p < .05$.

***Significant difference between groups in relative frequency, $p < .001$.

Excerpt 8

- (1) Mother: Well we were just checking out the little red light on it.
- (2) Father: Watch your juice.
- (3) Mother: Like when you talk it goes on.
- (4) Sam: Oh.
- (5) Mother: See?
- (6) Mother: So //
- (7) Mother: See?
- (8) Mother: Now if you say something watch.
- (9) Mother: It gets brighter as you talk.

Relations in time and space

Like narratives, explanations – at least those within the categories “social practices” and “person/competence” – can be viewed as a way of constructing the child in time, space, roles/relations, and conventions. For example, time is constructed in the explanations as something that was before, that is going to come, or that regulates the day, the week, and the year (seasons). A type analysis of the occurrence of various constructions during the relevant explanatory sequences was carried out; thus each segment could get coded once or several times.

There were no marked differences between the two cultural groups in the types of social constructions their explanations involved; see Table 7. The total number of “social practices” explanations produced was much higher in Norway, and they were produced by many of the Norwegian families. In the US, only a few families produced these explanations with any frequency. The American child Barbara accounted for almost all the American conversations about eating and table conventions, but such explanations were widely distributed in the Norwegian sample. Again, it is striking how similar these two groups of families are in the social worlds they construct in their explanations, though there are important within-group differences in both samples.

The similarities across the two groups are more interesting than the differences in the types of social reality constructed during “social practices” expla-

TABLE 7. *Construction of time and space during social practices explanations.*

	NO	AM
Constructing time:		
the rhythm of the week	4	7
the rhythm of the day	16	14
before/after the meal	3	0
holidays / seasons of the year	5	5
what happens usually	3	1
constructing time as limited	1	5
Constructing space:		
the house as a socially constructed area	3	3
preschool	3	4
specified local areas as socially constructed (shop, church)	3	2
constructing the neighborhood area	3	0
constructing places far away, related to relatives	4	1
constructing space as limited	2	0
Relations/roles:		
family roles (being big sister etc.)	3	1
constructing the child as being little or big / constructing adulthood	5	3
Social conventions:		
table conventions	8	8
speech conventions	2	2
gender conventions	4	0
regulation of the larger society	3	4
Conventions having to do with rules for social interaction, turntaking, naming, visiting, dressing	15	8

nations with young children. A wide variety of social constructions occur during mealtimes with young children in both cultures. However, the Norwegian families produced significantly more “social practices” explanations, and such explanations were more universal in the Norwegian than the American conversations.

Relating narratives and explanations

There were 309 Norwegian utterances scored as both narrative and explanatory, 254 of which were within the explanatory subcategory “social practices.” Thus almost half the explanatory utterances scored as “social practices” were also scored as parts of narratives. Norwegian narratives told more about the routines of everyday life, and matters explained within narratives often had to do with slight differences in social practices. A similar pattern was found in the American data, where 207 of the 348 utterances scored within both categories are “social practices” explanatory utterances – roughly half of all the American “social practices” explanatory utterances. American narratives include more explanatory utterances

within other thematic subcategories of explanatory talk, like “behavior,” “physical world,” or “internal state.”

Again, the families in the American sample were more heterogeneous than the Norwegian families. Although the sum scores were not very different in the two samples, only five American families had “social practices” as an important part of their double-scored utterances, while twelve Norwegian families did. The relative heterogeneity of American families is reflected in the presence of several who showed a more Norwegian pattern, e.g. in the following conversation between American Rebecca and her parents:

Excerpt 9

- (1) Rebecca: We cannot sleep at night-time.
- (2) Mother: We won't!
- (3) Father: Why?
- (4) Rebecca: Cause then we go out to dinner.
- (5) Parents: [Both laugh]
- (6) Mother: Well we're going.
- (7) Father: We can go out to dinner /before it's time to sleep.
- (8) Rebecca: Before we sleep?
- (9) Mother: Yes.
- (10) Father: Yes.
- (11) Mother: I guess.
- (12) Father: We're coming back from dinner and then we're gonna sleep.

This explanation dealing with social routines is part of a longer narrative about going out for a meal later that night. The American excerpt illustrates a typical Norwegian way of relating narratives and explanations, where explanations concerning regulation of social life take part within more elaborated narratives.

CONCLUSIONS

The major findings that have emerged from this comparison of Norwegian and American dinner-table conversations are the following:

(a) Norwegian conversations included more narrative talk, while American conversations included more explanation. This differential focus reveals itself in amount and percentage of talk devoted to narration and explanation, respectively, as well as more subtle differences in the spontaneous and responsive provision of narratives and explanations.

(b) Norwegian families tended to focus their explanations on social practices and minor deviations from familiar social practices, while American families focused more on reasons for behavior (including internal states) and the physical world.

(c) Norwegian narratives tended to focus much more on events that occurred at preschool, while American narratives were more likely to incorporate events that occurred in the more distant outside world.

We argue that these various differences all reflect a greater Norwegian focus on familiar social practices, which constitute the content both of the many narratives

and of the fewer explanations given in Norwegian families. Narratives in themselves are more likely to be focused on social dimensions of life; they tend to merge in Norwegian family conversations with explanations of how to operate socially, and of why minor deviations from common social practices have occurred. The themes that can be identified in the Norwegian family conversations are ones proposed by Klausen 1995 and Eriksen 1993 as characteristic of Norwegian culture: local belongingness and equality.

The Swedish ethnographer Löfgren (1993) has studied the ways in which new ideas of modernity are expressed in the everyday life of citizens in Sweden and the US. Sweden and Norway have much in common, within this framework of comparison with the US, and this justifies considering data about Sweden as relevant to Norway. Löfgren argues that the Scandinavian countries have developed welfare states based on new ties between the state and its citizens, and new forms of collective action and cultural sharing – a process he describes as decollectivization (freeing individuals from traditional collective loyalties) and recollectivization. Homogenization has been a powerful tool when trying to replace old values; a more marked national habitus of shared dispositions, understandings, routines and practices has emerged.

Löfgren contends that the idea of the welfare state has played a strong role in the homogenization process in Scandinavia. Scandinavianness and Americanness have come to be expressed in different cultural registers and through different symbolic languages. The symbolic capital called “American values” (democracy, freedom of choice, equal opportunities, individualism, distrust of the state) is much more foregrounded and explicitly discussed, whereas Scandinavian values are left implicit. National identity is articulated in the private, embedded routines of everyday life. The indirectness of this national language makes it in many ways a very powerful instrument of Scandinavization: there are some written rules, but far more unwritten ones, about how to be a good Scandinavian, according to Löfgren.

Considering Norway in particular, anthropologists agree on two variables that distinguish it from most other societies (Kiel 1993, Klausen 1995): strong emphases on equality, and on belongingness to the local community. Eriksen 1993 suggests calling the democratic ideology peculiar to Norway “egalitarian individualism,” noting that it is characterized by a strong rejection of formal social hierarchies. These comparative accounts of Scandinavian countries in contrast to the US stress the importance of recollectivization over individualism, and of cultural homogeneity over diversity – as well as the existence of implicit and taken-for-granted rules about what it is to be a good citizen in Scandinavia, as opposed to the more explicit and foregrounded civic values in the heterogeneous US (which may well relate to the need for clarity to aid the rapid assimilation of immigrants).

The dinner-table conversations recorded in Norway are replete with examples of Löfgren’s concepts of cultural homogeneity and taken-for-granted rules about what it is to be a good citizen in Scandinavia. In the American families, by con-

trast, stories told tend to focus more on unusual events, e.g. excursions and family trips, than on minor deviations from the daily routines of home or preschool; and stories in general, with their capacity for reflecting social meanings, were much less frequent than explanations. The explanations were also less likely to be requested or offered in social domains; explanations for individual behaviors and feelings were significantly more common than in the Norwegian conversations (see also Beals & Snow 1994). This complex of findings seems consistent with a notion of American culture as valuing personal independence over group orientation, and as valuing the expression of personal viewpoints over developing shared perspectives.

These findings may contribute to our understanding of children's acquisition of a linguistic habitus in everyday routine conversations. We have found subtle differences between the two cultures with regard to genres in which the children are invited to participate, and in the ways of talking that they seem to appropriate during mealtime conversations. The subtlety of the differences, and their invisibility to natives of either culture prior to this examination, lead us to relate these differences more to Bourdieu's habitus than to notions of cultural prescriptions or constraints.

This study of mealtime conversations has identified some interesting similarities, as well as differences, in the ways that narratives and explanations serve as cultural resources for young Norwegian and American children as they learn to take part in family conversations. In the myriad everyday routines of which table conversations are just one example, children acquire a "habitus [which] tends to generate practices and perceptions, works and appreciations, which concur with the conditions of existence of which the habitus is itself the product" (John B. Thomson in Bourdieu 1991:13). In their mealtime narratives, Norwegian families talk about the ordinary day, as if the parents are trying to build a model of what ordinarily happens at home and in preschool, and are demonstrating that slight changes in the routines of the day justify a narrative. The American families talk less about school and more about what the families experience outside the home. They also more often explain aspects of the object world for their children. The Norwegian parents seem to build on a folk model of development close to the script tradition, while the American parents seem to be more Piagetian in their understanding of development, relating more to the child as a young individual researcher trying to construct his or her world.

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