Comments on Tobin's Contribution to Comparative Research in Anthropology and in Education

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Tobin's work has been groundbreaking. Famously, he and his team put together a sophisticated comparative study of three ways of doing pre-school—in Japan, China, and the United States (1989). As such, this study has precedents in anthropology. What is unique in Tobin's work is that he got people from one place to comment on what they saw people from "other" places do, including what these Others said about Them. This is not only a study about cultural difference but, more significantly, a study about what might be called "meta-culture" or "meta-ideology," culture *about* culture, ideology *about* ideology.

Anthropologists have wondered about this but have rarely, if ever, published research that is powerful evidence for the reality that people, even non-anthropologists, can produce culture about culture. Tobin shows that human beings can confront, systematically and deliberately, the grounding of what they do, apparently mindlessly. Much has been written about people acting as if their way was the "natural" way, as if it were a matter of fact that things ought to be done this way rather than another way. There may be many who say such things to interviewers. But Tobin tells us again about something that many anthropologists and other comparativists keep forgetting. "Culture," this most powerful of concept, is not about people becoming blind to the source of their imagination or practices, it is also about the deliberate production of something that responds to an uncertainty ("how are we to teach our young children?"). But all answers are soon challenged. Whether through internal struggles or through its interaction with other people (because of travel, migration, war, etc.) conditions change and new questions keep arising ("should we amend how we teach our young children given what we see elsewhere?"). New productive work is needed, including the work of attempting to maintain what one has been doing. And so history gets made.

I have talked about this process as one of "difficult collective deliberations' (2007), but, in that paper, I was focusing on the uncertainties faced by one set of people, under political controls that make them significant to each others, as they attempt to figure out, often antagonistically, what these controls are and what to do next about them (Varenne & Koyama, 2011). What Tobin has done is show us what can happen when people from different polities, who must work in their daily lives under different kinds of constraints, find themselves having to deliberate about the responses other polities give to similar issues. If a child hits another child in a pre-school, what should their teacher do? If the teacher has not intervened, is this a problem that those in authority (principals, etc.) should be concerned with? Tobin kept asking such questions, and the people kept answering.

Now, this concern with meta-ideology is not exactly new in cultural anthropology, though it has rarely been phrased in this manner. Ruth Benedict (1932) expanded the still developing Boasian paradigm by wondering how it could be that neighboring peoples could have quite different rites of passage even when they knew very well what their neighbors did: "When a loved one dies, how should one display one's grief?" "Should we do anything different if we find out that our neighbors grieve differently?" In principle, this is a version of the questions that concern many in the fields of Comparative Education, for example in Gita Steiner-Khamsi's

work on the processes of policy borrowing (2000, 2012). This is also a version of what Claude Lévi-Strauss meant when he wrote about *bricolage* and refused to analyze myths solely in terms of their local contexts (1966 [1962]). It is a version of the concern with hybridity that is itself a recasting of the earlier Boasian concerns with diffusion and its limits. It is related to what inspires Jill Koyama to write, building on Clifford Geertz and Bruno Latour, about "educational policy as (deep) play" (Koyama & Varenne, 2012).

Tobin, to the extent that he works in this tradition, is not really concerned with "Japan," "China," or "America," as distinct cultures with properties that can then be projected unto individuals making some human beings "Japanese," others "Chinese," and still others "Americans." He is concerned in the processes that lead people to produce what they can be seen actually to produce, in their day to day practices, even when they are fully aware that they could be doing something else. Tobin does write of "Japanese," "Chinese," "American" teachers. But his attention is on *pre-schools* and the differences between the "Japanese," "Chinese," "American" version of these schools. He keeps warning us that Kamatsudani, Dong-Feng, St. Timothy's, are not "typical" but that they are "*in* Japan," "*in* China," "*in* the United States," as they appear *at the turn of* the 21ˢᵗ century.

Comparative research continues to reveal enduring differences, including differences in the manners of the changes that can also be noticed, here or there, now or then. But the best versions raise fundamental questions about the production of these differences. Tobin's work, I believe, is another attempt to reconstitute classical cultural anthropology that this is deeply aware of the dangers in earlier phrasings. It makes a difference whether one writes about "the Japanese," "Japanese pre-schools," "pre-schools and teachers in Japan in 2000." The differences in phrasing are subtle but essential for an understanding of the evolution and impact of the ongoing production of any cultural arbitrary. They are essential in the proper interpretation of the evidence that comparative work in anthropology and related fields has accumulated. As Boas (1887, 1938 [1911]) first began arguing systematically "like causes" (for example the need to take care of young children in ways that go beyond the incidental education they may receive in families or with peers) do not lead to "like consequences" (schools with specific pedagogies and curricula). Even when one takes into account other major matters, like the size of the population, its internal differentiation into classes or occupational groups, its access to various kinds of technology (from irrigation canals to high speed internet), functional needs can be met in any number of ways with further consequences on the historical evolution of institutions and practices. The Boasians pursued this, culminating with Benedict's epoch-making *Patterns of culture* (1934) that Tobin's *Preschool in three cultures* (1989) directly echoes—as well as it also echoes another epoch-making study: Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with words* (1983). All are towering examples of the power of the comparative method in anthropology.

So, given all the evidence that in "advanced" "industrialized" "capitalistic" or "neo-liberal" polities, pre-school education can be practiced in significantly different ways, what conclusions should we draw? That is, what are the implications that similar practices might be ignored here and sanctioned there? If we say that some practices are "Japanese," while others are "American," what, exactly, are we implying? Are we still saying that the practices are different "because some teachers are "Japanese" while others are "Americans"? Or are we now saying something else?

In summary are the observed differences a matter of:

- different enculturation whether through early experiences or through later learning in teacher education programs?
- different historical processes within a nation-state and its policies that have produced now inescapable prescribed routines?
- ongoing bricolage with both the probably differentiated personalities of the people in the school, as well as with administrative or other political imperatives?

In other words, are we to talk about:
- individuals and their culturally shaped identities or *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977 [1972])? Should we search for ways to write about "Japanese teachers" and the impact of their internalized ways on their practices?
- panoptic and hegemonic institutions shaped by a long historical evolution (Foucault 1978 [1975])? Should we search for ways to write about "Japanese schools" and the impact of their organization on the lives of all involved?
- moments of intense work by people struggling with everything that is put at their disposal or stand in their way (Garfinkel, 2002)? Should we search for ways to write about teachers or schools "in Japan" "in the late 20th century"?

As Tobin writes here, the trick for anthropologists is to write about their observations without conjuring an image of "a" culture as a timeless object. The Boasians, of course, were well aware of that what they were observing was a product of long histories. Boas insisted that archaeology be one of the "four fields" that made of anthropology one of the first "multi-disciplinary" social sciences. Some of the critics of Boasian anthropology accused it of "historicism." In a similar vein, the French traditions associated with Saussure and Lévi-Strauss spring out of historical studies of the ongoing transformation of all languages and other forms of symbolic imagination. But anthropologists, mostly, were not very careful in their formulations. As I argue elsewhere (1984), even the post-Geertzian anthropologists who started the critique of the tendency of anthropology to forget history, wrote about *the* so-and-so as if "they" (the Balinese, Sherpas, American poor people in their sub-cultures) had essentially stable properties through some epoch.

Tobin, to his credit, went back to the sites of his initial ethnographies (Tobin, 2011). He reports, comparatively, on what happened to two sites and can now write, as few if any anthropologists have ever done, on the differences in the *historical* evolution of *both* sites. At Kamatsudani fighting children are still left alone to sort things out for themselves under the detached eye of young teachers. In China, what is striking are the changes. Thus we can now compare and contrast two histories and are led to wonder about the deliberations (controversies, negotiations, shifting of resources) that produce an appearance of stability in one place and an appearance of change in another. Japan might comfort those who imagine culture as the reproductive effect of deeply embedded early enculturation. China stands against this, particularly if we added to Tobin's evidence all the other evidence, from other sources (Tsang 2000), that shows that China may have had more school policy changes in the 20th century than any other major polity. But China also stands as a challenge to an interpretation of Japan as "conservative," or "traditional." It is not only that Japan changed much over the past 150 years, but that even periods of stability must be approached as periods of a particular type of ongoing work to produce and preserve one form of cultural arbitrary in a context of both internal and external challenges to the status quo.

In his inimitable way, Bourdieu once wrote:

1.1.1. Insofar as it is a symbolic power which, by definition, is never reducible to the imposition of force, Pedagogical Authority can produce its own specifically symbolic effect only to the extent that it is exerted within a relation of pedagogic communication. 1.1.2 Insofar as it is symbolic violence, Pedagogical Authority can produce its own specifically symbolic effect only when provided with the social conditions for imposition and inculcation, i.e. the power relations that are not implied in a formal definition of communication. (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977 [1970], p. 7)

What I think Bourdieu is saying is that a teacher, whether or not she intervenes when two children fight, always relies on a specific, rather than general, form of symbolic representation that shapes her ways of relating to the people who may be concerned about the children fighting (the children themselves, the administration, the parents). In other ways she does it within a cultural arbitrary because she cannot rely on a simple "imposition of force" (or rational functionalism for that matter).

So, we are back where Boas and others first took us systematically: We cannot understand human action apart from a robust theory of culture as a matter of arbitrary associations between objects and tasks, as well as the manner of the sanctioning of particular practices in terms of these arbitrary associations. Cultures, in their peculiarities, arise and evolve in history. At any joint they may be modeled but, in the practices of all involved, either in a classroom, a principal's office, or a ministry, the sanctions that attempt to maintain a set of associations require ongoing, deliberate and deliberative work that, at times, will involve metalinguistic, meta-pragmatic, and meta-ideological matters. And so will other attempts to imagine alternatives to their institutionalization and shifts in what is to be sanctioned.

The evidence for all this is overwhelming and we can only get blind to it if we drop comparative perspectives whether within any version of the present and across history. The comparative perspective, in anthropology and the fields concerned with the comparison of education, schooling, and other formal practices, must be the foundation of all theories of human action, including pedagogical and political action. What "must be done" here or there cannot be determined through calls to universalistic rationalism and functionalism. It can always be done different, and, soon, it will.

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