

# Democracy & Education

## The Slow Work of Democracy Resisting Reductionist Views of Women and Children

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### Abstract

In her research article “State your defense!”: *Children negotiate analytic frames in the context of deliberative dialogue*, Hauver offers important contributions to the field of elementary civic education that illuminate how young people apply various analytical frames to make collective decisions. First, I highlight significant contributions of her work, namely children’s capabilities to build perspective-taking through dialogue, which I suggest can be more solidly grounded in a sociocultural framework, not a developmental one. Second, I offer suggestions toward such a theoretical framework that loosens determinism for children’s development and offers a less deterministic framework for women. My review seeks to amplify Hauver’s important findings by suggesting more theoretical cohesion as well as more contemporary and critical frameworks.

### This article is in response to

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**H**AUVER’S (2017) WORK demonstrated how young people socioculturally construct their rationale to negotiate and come to consensus about how to use shared resources. She and her research team tasked fourth graders to decide together based on a real scenario of limited resources within their school. The problem involved the students in allocating resources that may benefit themselves or others. Hauver skillfully analyzed the group discussions as well as individual pre- and post-task interviews to understand the frames and rationales the children used and what happened when those frames collided with others. In sociocultural and cultural frameworks, she asked, “How do children frame the problem? What general principles or perspectives contribute to that framing? What happens when children’s frames collide in dialogue?” (p. 2). She reminded the reader that “*sociocultural understandings* emerge from the groups of which we are a part” (p. 3). To answer her questions, Hauver generated five codes on which she presented the results—*fairness, kindness, safety, common good*, and

*self-interest*—and a later added emergent sixth code: *tradition*. In this significant and timely work, she offered a discussion to the ways in which common good and fairness were the most common but particularly challenging frameworks used by the children and self-interest was the least used and accepted.

Hauver’s (2017) work offered several key contributions to the field that I discuss in the next section. In the penultimate section, I

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offer two suggestions for this current research to move toward more coherent contemporary and critical frameworks that would better highlight Hauer's findings. I conclude with final thoughts and suggestions for future research. I seek to amplify Hauer's important contributions to the field and to add theoretical advances, and in some cases theoretical cohesion, to work such as hers.

## Key Contributions

**Slow work of democracy.** The element of time needed for developing specific democratic skills is one major contribution of Hauer's (2017) work. As deliberative democracy frames a process in which free people "justify decisions in a process" (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, p. 7, as in Hauer, p. 2), Hauer's work refreshingly gave attention to the *process* of children's argumentative discourse, instead of just the end product of the decision or a standardized test result. Hauer's work uncovered the real work in civic dialogue, as she stated, "It is not just talking and listening, per se, that matter—rather, talking and listening with humility, in an effort to understand the other, sensitive to her feelings, and in search of common ground" (p. 3). Thus, the effort must not be just going through the motions of holding dialogue but going within the area that is harder to articulate: the desire and effort to understand another's view of the world. This is key work in understanding how we might perpetuate democracy as in the civic mission of schools in the slow work of democracy, allowing time and giving permission for getting it wrong before we get it right, and together, not just as individuals.

More particularly, this study (Hauer, 2017) demonstrated that giving children sustained time, discussing a problem at length, relates to gains in perspective-taking. The findings showed that the group who experienced the greatest amount of growth in perspective-taking spent the longest amount of time in deliberation. Contrariwise, the group who spent the least amount of time accrued the least gains. Although it would not be considered action research, it is relevant to note that the research, in and of itself, created several occasions for students to think about problems, placing youth as capable collective problem-solvers. Hauer (2017) stated: "If children are unwilling to listen to one another, get stuck on one frame, or move too quickly to consensus without unpacking everyone's ideas, children are less likely to benefit from their peers' rich thinking" (p. 11). Productive participation in a civic space, she pointed out, involves "listening as well as talking, striving to understand points of view different from one's own, challenging ideas and proposals rather than persons, admitting ignorance" (Parker, 2003, pp. 87–88, as in Hauer, 2017 p. 3). In particular, quality civic education means *slowing the rush* toward consensus or pushing one's own perspective, or decision-making to allow time for participants to explain, reframe, or gather more information about issues. In today's era of accountability of schools, this would simultaneously mean shifting the fixation of expediency and right answers that often precludes the slow work of democracy.

**Understanding children's collective negotiations.** A second major contribution of Hauer's (2017) work moves our field toward

understanding children's capacity to deal with complex and moral reasoning collectively. Hauer's work focused on children's words and the fine-grained analysis of their reasoning, which gives the field of civics and social studies education large-scale understanding of the ways in which children dialogue with competing and conferring rationales. In particular, she aligned herself with sociocultural theory in her methodological decisions in that she tackled understanding children's frames of reasoning and decision-making as a group and not only as individuals, and how they change.

Hauer (2017) also illuminated children's capacity of dealing with complex moral reasoning while refuting past studies that claim that young children "are less likely to offer dual or integrative arguments or to understand the significance of evidence for argument development" (p. 2). She gave evidence to counter the belief that children overwhelmingly offer one-sided personal arguments. Later, I suggest she do more of this purposeful work in countering reductionist notions of children being egocentric. Furthermore, she established that a precondition for productive conversations should be the willingness (attitude) and ability (skill) to engage with diverging ideas from their own. As she explained in her findings, "Children who demonstrated a willingness and desire to engage others' ideas were more likely to show gains" (p. 11). Although, as I discuss, these significant findings could be better supported by embracing her sociocultural framework consistently and clearly, she offered sound evidence for the educative and sociocultural supports needed to support young people in seeing others' perspectives and moving toward successful consensus and action. These findings on children's thoughts and actions with increased and complex reasoning can help shape the field of civic and social studies education, both in policy and practice.

## Defying Reductionist Views of Women and Children

It is with great respect for Hauer's (2017) work that I offer two subtle but important suggestions to amplify her contributions. In particular, I hold that fully defying reductionist views of women and children is a crucial step in the work of understanding the complexity of human behavior. When I say "reductionist," I point to explanations of behavior that rely on direct, simplistic, or biological causality (i.e., one is a child or is a woman, and therefore, we can expect a certain type of "natural" behavior). As employed by Hauer, sociocultural frameworks work against reductionist views by allowing scholars to recognize the contextual, social, and cultural influence of norms and behaviors rather than explaining them as a "natural" part of being a child or a woman. More specifically, contemporary critical or poststructuralist theoretical frameworks work explicitly against explaining (a) children as naturally egocentric or (b) women as naturally empathetic, which I discuss separately and more specifically following.

**Children.** Hauer's findings suggest that children do not use or take up self-interest often in comparison to other rationales in their group sessions (although they did in the pre-session interviews). She showed that there was a socially constructed resistance to egocentrism: "When these frames were offered during

dialogue, they were almost always ignored by the other children. Failing to have others pick up on their offering, children dropped these frames.” (p. 8). Relatedly, she also found that the deliberative sessions themselves led to children’s development of perspective-taking capabilities (rather than the passage of time or age alone). A sociocultural framework adheres well to these findings and explains them well.

Still, Hauver (2017), on two occasions, called forth a developmental framework and logic to explain children’s capabilities for perspective-taking. She stated, “Developmentally, it has been argued, children are just growing their perspective-taking ability about this time” (p. 2). Hauver went on to critique this developmental argument, only in part, because it does not help us understand children’s reasoning about problem-solving. She cited Piaget’s early work to justify the age group of children chosen for her study, as they were said to be experiencing a “reduction in egocentrism” (Hauver, p. 4) and a greater ability to acknowledge and understand the motives and intentions of others. Instead of reemploying developmental arguments that frame children as naturally egocentric, I suggest there is a way to more directly resist reductionist frameworks of children’s capabilities by aligning her findings to her main working theory of socioculturalism. This would allow us to better understand the contextual supports needed for children, *or any group of persons*, in using moral reasoning within deliberative democratic practices.

Especially in today’s political climate, where it is commonplace for public figures to show an unwillingness to perspective-take, empathize, or accept others unlike themselves, we should question the premise that egocentric behavior is developmentally determined. Moreover, we may see ourselves and other adults capable of displaying egocentric behaviors, often much like we may expect a toddler to act. Perhaps we as adults have more of a capacity to perspective-take than a young child, but it should be dubious at best that protection of one’s own view without understanding the motives and intentions of others, or egocentrism, is something that should be measured or expected to occur only on a developmental progression. As considering others’ perspectives and values at a young age has been demonstrated as a “springboard” for empathy development in young children (Hoffman, 2001), the process of perspective-taking itself, as aptly described in Hauver’s work, may be the very thing that leads people, children included, out of egocentrism.

Margaret Donaldson, a student of Jean Piaget’s, offered an early alternative view of Piaget’s claim about children’s egocentrism. In her book *Children’s Minds* (1978), she claimed, “Children are not at any stage as egocentric as Piaget has claimed . . . The gap between children and adults is not so great . . . as had recently been widely believed” (p. 58). She argued that context is crucial when it comes to children’s development of language and thought, and with proper supports, children can be more skilled than for which they are generally given credit. This does not mean that children are like miniature adults but that, in regard to egocentrism, the gap is likely not as large as has been assumed (but may be larger for other areas). Donaldson backed up her assertions with practical experiments.

Numerous contemporary researchers also have found that children possess ethical concerns and the capacity for moral judgment and perspective-taking from a young age (Adair & Colegrove, 2014; Killen & Smetana, 2014; Nucci, 2001). Barron’s (2014) innovative research, as another example, has used sociocultural theory and critical race theory to show how educational and social practices impact the ways in which children see themselves (identity) and others as they determine their possible options for action. Hauver’s (2017) work may add to and purposefully join this body of work, as she found self-interest was one of the least-used frameworks in her current study; the fourth-grade students in her study rejected self-centered rationales. As she stated when discussing her findings, “When these frames were offered during dialogue, they were almost always ignored by the other children. Failing to have others pick up on their offering, children dropped these frames” (p. 8). That deliberation is an antidote to egocentrism is an important finding that works against Piagetian logic and could be highlighted as such.

Theories that assume children are “naturally” egocentric reduce the importance of and possibilities for actively promoting civic dialogue at a young age. Hauver’s (2017) mention of Parker’s (2003) work on the critical idea of *epistemic privilege*, in that some frameworks have more authority than others (socially, as children are negotiating), could be further explored to better explain children’s social creation of the norms of dialogue. *Epistemic privilege* may also allow for a purposeful and complex entrée to analyzing issues of race, class, and gender beyond biological explanations.

In our research on kindergarteners engaged in philosophical discussions (Mitra & Serriere, 2015), we rejected the notion that young people are incapable of considering others’ perspectives at an early age or are naturally egocentric, as some early developmental theorists have assumed (Kohlberg, 1984; Piaget, 1997). Like Hauver’s work here on fourth graders who rejected self-centered rationales, we found evidence of kindergarteners eager and willing to investigate multiple perspectives on an ethical dilemma at hand. Thus, it is important that we as scholars and teachers critique egocentrism as a necessary part of childhood or a linear development. Instead, we can frame, understand, and explain it as something that can exist at any age. Perspective-taking is possible across ages and contexts, which should give us ever more reason to engage in cultivating citizens who can deliberate and take on others’ perspectives with a *sociological imagination* (Mills, 2000) required to move us toward a more just world.

**Women.** Hauver (2017) utilized the seminal work of feminist Carol Gilligan (1982) two times in her article to frame her research in this article. First, Hauver pointed to her work to cite a need for mutuality in civic dialogue. Second, Hauver employed Gilligan’s research to point out that the process of becoming an empathetic person “begins earlier for girls, due to their tendency for attachment” (as in Hauver, 2017, p. 4). Indeed, in her book *A Different Voice* (1982), Gilligan asserted that women are bound to interpersonal ties and represent a “different” voice than men. Seeking to right a wrong of an androcentric research tradition, Gilligan used historical data and interviews with women to show how women

are more empathic, relational, compassionate, and more anxious about separation from loved ones. Gilligan is not the only researcher to point out sex differences in potential for and self-reporting of caring and empathy (see review by Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983). Today, these differences might be reinterpreted as the result of socioculturally created norms for women rather than innate biologically.

With empirical evidence, Walker's (1984) work directly countered Gilligan's in showing that there is no gender difference between women and men in scoring on Kohlberg's scales of moral reasoning, as Gilligan asserted in her book. More recently, feminists in education increasingly use critical, queer, or poststructuralist frames to trouble the discursive and material structures that may limit how we think about gender and its constructions (Pierre, 2010). Calling upon the distinct separations between the sexes is not as useful to understand the range of possibility for human behavior because children exhibit agency in socially constructing gender norms and possibilities for mutuality, as conferred in Hauver's article. Although Gilligan's work is seminal, most educational research has and should move past deterministic frameworks for gender, including theorizing ways in which we perform gender and are called upon to do so (Butler, 2011). Such work includes analyses of gendered findings, not limited by categories such as girls or boys as a group but instead looking for and expecting variations across groups, time, and space.

## Conclusion

Hauver's (2017) work has given important insight in our understanding of young people's peer-to-peer dialogue and how to set elementary-aged students up for experiencing agency as they grow in utilizing civic skills. Further research could specifically enhance our understanding of how groups of people (adults and children alike) can grow together in perspective-taking and the contextual factors that may impede or foster productive deliberation (such as within the next step when the students in Hauver's study work with the PTA in actualizing their playground plans). Hauver's work can explicitly join the contemporary work of scholars showing the complexities but also the possibilities of civic dialogue and engagement in schools. Specifically, scholars in civic education should uncover and theorize the complex ways in which children experience and perform their possibilities for civic engagement. Children may be working to challenge and transform the civic identities and norms presented to them by public figures, and it is crucial to get the framing right, so we can support them in doing so. A better understanding of children's active and agentic cocreation in their civic environments, both in process and in product as Hauver has shown, moves our field closer toward supporting and promoting justice-oriented citizenry for all.

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