SUCCESSFUL FAILURE

The School America Builds

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also shared families and watched each other raise six children. Susan Varenne and Shelley Goldman lived the home show with us and made it meaningful while somehow finding the time to work on the details of their own careers. One of us lost a father right before the start of the book, the other right at the end, and we miss them both.

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H.V. and R.M.

Introduction

Hervé Varenne and Ray McDermott

In a way, culture substitutes itself to life, in another way culture uses and transforms life to realize a synthesis of higher order.

—**Claude Lévi-Strauss,**
The Elementary Structures of Kinship ([1949] 1969: 4)

In a famous account of growing up in America, Maxine Hong Kingston tells of her sister's silence when, for the first time, the two of them had to act in a setting ruled by English and the School. She tells of her own inability to speak the character "I":

> It was when I found out I had to talk that school became a misery, that the silence became a misery. I did not speak and felt bad each time I did not speak. I read aloud in first grade, though, and heard the barest whisper with little squeaks come out of my throat. "Louder," said the teacher, who scared the voice away again. The other Chinese girls did not talk either, so I knew the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl.
>
> Reading out loud was easier than speaking because we did not have to make up what to say, but I stopped often, and the teacher would think I'd gone quiet again. I could not understand "I." The Chinese "I" has seven strokes, intricacies. How could the American "I," assuredly wearing a hat like the Chinese, have only three strokes, the middle so straight? Was it out of politeness that this writer left off strokes the way a Chinese has to write her own name small and crooked? No, it was not politeness: "I" is a capital and "you" is lower case. I stared at that middle line and waited so long for its black center to resolve into tight strokes and dots that I forgot to pronounce it. (1975: 166–167)

Kingston grew up to become a master of the American "I." She has written one of the great educational autobiographies of the twentieth century, and she has been duly celebrated for it.

As educators and scientists concerned with action, we are looking for ways to understand the conditions of such achievements. What makes reading "I" easy or difficult? What makes a famous author? What does it take to write an autobiography? Would Maxine Hong Kingston have ever written such a text had her mother stayed in China (or American industry not needed cheap labor to build railroads and clean clothes)? What did Maxine Hong Kingston do that is her own? What is she responsible for?

These are the questions we ask of various lives conducted in and around American schools—the lives of children, teachers, parents, and educational researchers. As cultural anthropologists, we ask these questions of people acting with others and performing various tasks in settings where issues generally thought relevant to education get raised: reading, cooking, doing homework, singing, discussing social issues, taking tests. The questions have a set of easy commonsense answers: People do well or badly "because" something is right or wrong with them or their lives. But we are not satisfied with such answers. What is more, we refuse to be caught by the logic of the questions. We go in a different direction and show that these questions and their commonsense answers are aspects of one encompassing discourse. We refer to this discourse as that of the "School" in "America." We capitalize "School" to indicate we are not referring to any particular school, and we use "America" to indicate that we are interested in particular ways of talking about, and doing, education that no one in the United States can escape—whatever the community, ethnic group, race, class, or gender affiliation. This is the institutionalized framework that must be carefully described if anyone, whether concerned with research, policy, or practice, is to understand the situation of the persons they hope to help. It is a framework that was built over generations—thus our concern with culture.

It is certainly reasonable to focus on Maxine Hong Kingston as an independent, indeed heroic, agent. Few would object if we talked about her personal strength in the face of adversity or about other qualities that eventually allowed her a successful career in schools. Any mention of her talent in weaving a gripping story would make sense. An audience in America would probably accept the need to wonder what might have happened if she had grown up elsewhere, and it would recognize that we should consider the political, economic, and symbolic conditions that pushed and pulled emigrants to California in the first half of the twentieth century. By the dictates of the discourse, it would make sense to mention poverty and exploitation in China, wars and revolutions in Europe, railroads and robber barons in the United States, all conditions that somehow shaped a place for the Chinese who crossed the Pacific.

The political and economic questions are less commonsense questions than the ones about talent and fortitude, but they can lead to new questions we have only recently learned to ask about the role of language, symbolism, and textuality in the shaping of human life. The new questions would have us focus on the very act of Kingston *writing*, in *English*, an *autobiography*, for *publication* and encourage us to talk about the evolution of literary genres and rhetorical forms. We might then mention the *Confessions* of St. Augustine and the texts produced by many others from Benjamin Franklin to Malcolm X, tales of difficult origins, struggles, and eventual success, many of them European tales built on earlier cultural forms and then transformed in the ideological context of the United States, what we call America. This line of inquiry could lead to talk about publishing houses and distribution systems, vast complexes of bureaucracies and technologies that make some personal acts available to a large audience through particular symbolic means. We could then talk about those who read *Woman Warrior* and are moved by it, asking the same questions of them that we asked of Maxine Hong Kingston, and we could analyze the institutions that shape a literate audience, train it to respond to confessional tales, and make it eager to read more.

We use insights from all these traditions to answer what is, fundamentally, one encompassing question: When we celebrate *Woman Warrior*, whom do we celebrate, Maxine Hong Kingston, her readers, or America?

This question must be asked of any act performed by any person alive in the United States: Who and what are involved in reading aloud to an audience the symbol "I" on a page? Or, to illustrate from the case studies we present in this book, who is responsible for a child being teased for saying "pisghetti" when all his peers can say "spaghetti"? What is involved in working-class families with similar demographic profiles helping their children with homework and making different places for their children's identification, one as successful and the other as a failure? What difference does it make in the unfolding of lives at the bottom of New York City's social rankings if it can be shown that young adults in a homeless shelter or an alternative remedial high school can perform together complex social tasks that demonstrate care for each other and a complex understanding of their situation? What is the implication, for both theory and practice, of the evidence we present that "who people are," in some kind of abstract psychological space, and even "what people do," as it can be documented through careful description, may be quite irrelevant in guiding the response of the rest of the world to what they do? We can show failed children succeeding at school tasks and successful children failing at similar tasks. And we can show how such performances are sequenced with other performances by other people in such a way that they are dismissed, co-opted, and reinterpreted. Throughout the case studies we show how many people are involved, even in the most local scenes, in establishing the consequences of what happened.

This book is an investigation of who and what are involved in the eventual evaluation of a life as a success or failure in school terms. Who is responsible, and whom, or what, should we celebrate, or blame? Eventually, we come back to celebrating and blaming "America"—not as an abstract system but as the product of what people continually construct with what they find *always already there* around them. To make this point, we follow a consistent path. Where others focus on school success, we could just as easily focus on failure. And thus we highlight the arbitrary and limiting nature of the categories "success" and "failure." They are not categories that can ever capture the good sense of what children do. They directly conspire to prevent all of us from understanding the conditions within which the child's life is constructed (America). This is the paradoxical result of American interpretations that supposedly focus attention on the individual child but do so, mostly, by examining that child and then labeling him or her, thereby stopping the analysis where we think it should begin. Where we begin, always, is with Maxine Hong Kingston as an actor involved in building something. This moves us, always, to a search both for the other actors—the builders—in the constant presence of whom she is acting and for the tools they all find around them. The human world is made up of the remnants of everyone

else's activities. It is an artifact or, in words we like to use, a *cultural fact*, something that was *facted* (from the Latin past participle of the verb "to make"). It is always made and always about to be remade.

Schooling and Cultural Fact

Let us start again with our questions about Maxine Hong Kingston but ask them of the sister she mentions, about whom she says little. This sister, and her silence, can stand for the many who never become famous authors or who, to invoke the more usual standard, do not take the road to a comfortable, middle-class life.

As a personal and institutional success, Kingston could be held up as an exemplar of the ways American institutions, including the schools she attended, whatever their problems, allowed her to express her individual, unique self. The apologists of America have indeed made this case with great persuasion over the past 200 years: America is the field so organized that individuals can shine. Even as we criticize particular practices, the general argument is hard to contradict. The problem, of course, is that not all individuals in the United States get to go where some others go: Everyone can race; only one can win. The problem of relative success is most powerfully etched when we wonder about the fate of the Hong family's silent sister and the many others who never move to something their teachers celebrate. Who is responsible for identified failures? The child? The parents, teachers, social workers, and therapists who have responsibility for the child? Or the peculiar constructions that have been built over the past 350 years in what has become "America"?

Our focus on the difficulties that continue to plague schooling is necessary for moral reasons. Success, the flash of genius that temporarily blinds us and eventually reveals a person's particular glory, is not problematic. Only failure is. It is not by chance the fundamental question in educational research is phrased negatively: Why can't Johnny read? In a later chapter, we play at raising the reverse issue: Why can Sheila read? Our question of Sheila is a variation on the questions we asked of Maxine Hong Kingston, but our goal is not to answer the questions. Our goal is to understand the imperative that makes educational research always start with a hunt for the causes of success and, more poignantly, failure. Given the need to understand education as a broad social process that involves much more than schooling, the puzzle is why the question about Johnny should be made the most pressing. For us, the problem American schooling faces as both a political and a scientific activity is the success/failure system. For journalists and politicians to celebrate those who are "above average," many must be known as "below average." The first are dependent on the latter. Success and failure are the products of the same America. Failure allows for the definition of success, and together they frame everyone: children, teachers, parents, and researchers in the United States (and other parts of the world caught by the schooling system that evolved in Europe).

By the same logic, an understanding of the failure of urban schools requires an understanding of the success of suburban schools. Inner city and suburb do not belong to different worlds. They belong to the same differentiated world. Our task as social scientists is to analyze this differentiation and to highlight what it offers to human action and how it constrains or expands possibilities. To do this, we must struggle with the analytic tools given by the tradition that produced the cultural facts of success and failure in the first place, tools such as standardized tests that measure and identify people as failures or successes. We must confront this tradition and its tools if we are to understand its products. We must focus on the institutions that do the characterizations: Who decides who is a success or failure; when and how is the identification done and in what terms, under what circumstances, and—above all—with what legitimate consequences?

To accomplish the shift in the unit of analysis from the identified individual to the set of individuals working together on their common circumstances, we must return to the original moment when a child who was not quite yet Maxine Hong Kingston, the famous author, confronted "I" on a page in the midst of a classroom filled with children and a teacher in the context of a school filled with still more children and teachers, along with administrators and other adults, in the context of a school bureaucracy in a large city and so forth.

> At that moment, everything is in suspension.
> Nothing has happened.
> And then, the child's delay is *noticed*.

It is noticed by another human being, but not just any human being in a neutral setting. It is noticed by *a teacher* (not a janitor), *in a school* (and not at home), *during classtime* (and not on the playground). Suddenly, the difference between performance and the teacher's expectations has been made into a difference that can make a difference in the biography of the child. The delay has become a "failure" in need of explanation, evaluation, and remediation. The child's act (in this case, the nonact) has been recognized and identified as a particular kind of act that must lead to further actions by possibly a host of other people. In certain schools but not in others, the act-made-into-an-instance-of-school-failure can itself be used as a token justifying an even more consequential identification. The particular act is taken as exemplary of the kind of acts performed by this kind of person; it is now the child, rather than the act, that is identified as a success or failure. The act may be used as a token justifying the identification of the school as a whole; there are successful and failing schools. This can be extended to characterize a group with whom the person is identified. On this basis, arguments are made comparing the success of recent immigrants from the Caribbean to that of native African Americans. In the process, a child's paradoxical "I" disappears behind a "me," behind a persona in a cultural drama that others have constructed with what the child has accomplished.

The process we have just outlined is fundamental to our approach. No person is self-made. We take George Herbert Mead seriously when he states that "the others and the self arise in the social act together" ([1926] 1964: 169).[2]All persons-as-

nown are eventually made through the interaction of the actor and millions of relevant others, most of whom the actor has not met face-to-face. In describing a handful of lives from Japan, David Plath phrased a similar understanding about the interplay between individual biography and its use in the social world:

> Culture, character, and consociates weave a complicated fabric of biography. The process is not only lifelong; it is longer than life. Consociates begin to shape our personal course even before we are born, and may continue to renegotiate the meaning of our life long after we are dead. To this extent, a person is a collective product. We all must "author" our own biographies, using the idiom of our heritage, but our biographies must be "authorized" by those who live them with us. (1980: 7)

More formally, we assume any act by an authorial "I" must be approached as a moment in a complex sequence involving at least three steps, or three positions in a minimal social system. First, a child reads; second, someone else gives this reading a place within a particular symbolic system that transforms the original act into a "success" or a "failure"; third, someone else delivers the consequences of the placement. For Maxine Hong Kingston, reading "I" in school involves her as the student to be evaluated, the teacher as evaluator, and groups that take the evaluation into account (say, parents, administrators, employers, educational researchers, etc.) for their own purposes. Years later, she participates in another version of the sequence: She writes a manuscript, then someone publishes it, and finally the book is celebrated.

Each step is a complex setting where human beings work together and, eventually, achieve something, a "thing" that is recognized as having happened and stands as the fact on which further history can be made. Think, for example, of two strangers meeting on a city street: One asks for the time, the other gives it, the first thanks the other, and they go their separate ways, having asked for and having given the time.[3] Now think of a teacher and a student who know each other well for having spent many months in the same second-grade schoolroom. They may start with the same words as our two strangers, but they can end in a quite different place, the child having been tested for and having failed/succeeded in demonstrating the knowledge to tell time. The same question about the time can, in different settings, play to a quite different purpose: different settings, different struggles, different outcomes, that are made to fit into different systems of consequences.

In the latter stages of most any sequence of activity called educational in America, success and failure are major symbols. The same behavior, knowing what time it is, for example, in a nonschool context likely serves another purpose, and it is unlikely to be evaluated as a success or failure. Even in the second grade at the initial moment of the teacher's asking for the time, neither success nor failure nor even their absence were necessarily relevant. The teacher, momentarily without a watch, may have simply wanted to know the time, in which case it made no difference who answered the question; or the teacher may have been driven to find out who knew how to tell the time, and individual and documentable success or failure became the issue at hand.

Knowing the time becomes an instance of success or failure when the actors are related institutionally to a wider set of persons with an interest in documenting who knows what.

In organizing a cultural analysis of schooling, we need a general framework that preserves the independence of both the person and the person's activities from the systems (economic, political, symbolic, etc.) that provided the resources for the person's activities and made sense of the activities by providing still other persons with the resources for plausible identifications and further actions. All acts, initially, are not part of the system that may eventually acquire them even though it is likely they are already sensitive to that system. "All action," warned John Dewey, "is an invasion of the future, of the unknown. Conflict and uncertainty are ultimate traits" (1922: 12). All actors, initially, are not particular kinds of persons even though they always have at their disposal the resources of the personae others let them claim. The qualities of acts and persons are not intrinsic to the act or person. They belong rather to the sequence of acts, and to the group of persons, within which acts and persons are found. One must thus move from local, fleeting moments when someone like Kingston is confronted by an "I" on the printed page or other moments when, much later, she writes the same "I" with ease and in ways that please her audience to the moments when people concerned with her for some reason (teachers, editors, literary critics) place her act in their own history. At the same time, one must remember Kingston always is fully involved as an active participant struggling with "I," with her teacher and mother, with her publishers and editors. Still, she remains caught in a web of constructions and identifications she cannot escape. The one thing she cannot do is enforce a substitution of the Chinese 我 for the American "I."[4] Even if she had tried to make the substitution as an intellectual game to challenge her teacher into a consciousness of other possibilities, the difference it would have made to the teacher would have been inexorably different from the difference (or its absence) it might have made to her mother. Kingston, like us, inhabits America.

Culture in Question

In the fragment we quoted earlier, Kingston writes, "I knew the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl." In the process she offers an interpretation of "the" silence. We must confront this interpretation. As far as we are concerned, Chinese girlishness is not a state of being.[5] Not talking is not a trait, among others, that Chinese girls possess more than people born to parents who came to the United States from other parts of the world. It is something that happens to some girls in American classrooms, something that is identified with China and then used as an explanation for the particular biographies of the people who have been so identified. It is an *American* cultural fact, one that is specific only in the peculiar house that dominates the human landscape in the United States.

Our point is complex, and we address it throughout the book and particularly in Part 2. At this stage, we simply want to sketch the problem in its relation to general

political discussions about schooling. In the process, we introduce, first, the understanding of "culture" that we inherit from the anthropological tradition on which we build and, second, our position with regard to the interplay of culture with education broadly conceived. A concern with culture is nothing new, certainly not in the field of education. John Dewey, in *Democracy and Education* ([1916] 1966), was aware of the multiplicity of human societies and of the ways in which participation in various societies transformed the lives of people who were born into them. The first generations of anthropologists, from Franz Boas (1928) to Margaret Mead (1928), had an abiding interest in education in both social scientific and political terms. Psychology has lagged behind in its use of the term "culture", although with the rise of cultural deprivation theories of school failure (Deutsch 1967), it has been invoked repeatedly in any effort to explain the fate of the poor in the United States. It seemed good common sense and altogether liberal to expect people to adapt themselves to their conditions, including poverty, to develop "cultures" that responded to their needs and then to pass the cultures along to their children. Although a radical critique revealed the severe limitations of the analysis, it has nonetheless remained a plausible account of the behavior of the disenfranchised. It regularly reappears in educational research, and we must deal with it repeatedly throughout this book.

Among anthropologists and many other educational researchers, "cultural deprivation" and "the culture of poverty" explanations dropped out of favor, and starting in the 1970s, particularly through the work of sociolinguists, alternate explanations of school failure among the poor were offered. Researchers began to focus on the linguistic, ethnic, and racial differences that appear to have a profound impact on American classrooms. From the sociolinguistic point of view, the harsh conditions to which people had adapted by developing a "deprived" culture were not so much the product of poverty within the United States as they were the products of historical processes by which industrialized societies invaded and colonized. People pushed out of their areas of origin and pulled to major industrial centers gave their children something of their past that did not fit in classrooms organized on different ("dominant," "hegemonic," "middle class," "American") principles. It seemed obvious that this process would lead to miscommunication and other kinds of trouble.

By implication at least, Maxine Hong Kingston appears to have been operating with what is now called the "difference" theory of trouble in School. She and her peers were silent "because" they were Chinese, children of immigrants from China with different understandings of proper behavior in schools not adapted to them. She was also a precursor of a movement in educational policy that has its roots in the intellectual argument about difference but that simplifies the anthropological understanding of culture. Culture, in classical anthropology, is about borrowing, transmission, learning, and transformation. The "difference" analysis, by contrast, emphasizes the unchangeable self as constructed in early childhood. Given such an analysis, it makes sense to call for the development of special programs to train teachers and students to learn each other's ways and perhaps reach some kind of middle ground. In recent years, a more extreme and essentialist theory has been argued under the label of "multiculturalism." It may be less a theory than a political cry for the good society, but it is too close to our interests for us to ignore it. In most versions, multiculturalism starts with the same assumption of difference in historical origin and evolution that anthropological understandings of culture have developed. Popular multiculturalism overrides good sense in arguing that every group has a definite membership of persons who have been made, through birth and early socialization, both the same as each other and different from others. At its worst, multiculturalism implies that every person has but one true or legitimate culture (Kingston is first and foremost "Chinese"), that the legitimacy of the claim is based on lines of descent (Kingston is Chinese because her parents are Chinese), and that the claim is about the ownership of a culture by its members (being Chinese is Kingston's own culture; it is "her" culture).

Anthropologists, since Boas's (1938) struggles against nineteenth-century racial theories of humanity, have protested loudly against theories of culture that emphasize descent and ascribed membership. Even those who stressed early enculturation operated with a theory perhaps best summarized by Margaret Mead ([1942] 1965) when she asserted that any human infant, whatever its background, can become a full participant of any group, however different the groups may be. Claude Lévi-Strauss ([1955] 1963c) went further in claiming that all personality types were possible in all cultures if only because anyone can reject the local cultural imperatives of the places where they were born. A person has no choice about living with these imperatives but can nonetheless confront them on every detail. A human being is never frozen in a particular pattern. Human beings learn, and they never stop learning. Being Chinese is not a matter of being but of becoming. Being Chinese is not a matter of identity but of identification, as a person's work is recast by the person's consociates as a particular kind of work. When one is born in the United States of parents who migrated from China, "being Chinese" is not a fate; it is an achievement. Being Chinese American is something that is worked on by a child in relation to parents, school, neighbors, detractors, and crosstown bigots. It is an achievement fashioned out of material bequeathed the whole population by America.

This way of thinking about culture recaptures what has always been powerful about the concept and has established its place in the social sciences. There is something specific about any arrangement of human beings. On the basis of a universal biological constitution, human groups always elaborate new ways of organizing themselves that must take into account both their biological constitution and, more important, the human history of the group, including its many and continuing contacts with other groups. This is the import of the statement by Lévi-Strauss that we use as an epigraph. In history something is made that then forms the world newcomers, whether infants or immigrants, have to inhabit. Kingston's mother came to California, where she found the category "Chinese," and she had to struggle with the identifications those already in California proposed for her. In the same manner, the surviving Amerindians, the Mexicans, and the newly arriving Europeans had to reconstruct "China" through their encounter with these other immigrants. A genera-

tion later, Kingston entered school and its evolved identifications for Chinese children, including probably the identification of Chineseness with "silence." Was that identification self-generated by the Chinese, as Kingston, along with most readers of her book, might assume, or was it jointly produced by them and their non-Chinese contemporaries, as we suspect? Was it a quality of Maxine Hong Kingston, or was it something she and her teachers constructed together? Was it a cultural fact?

A classic case of systematic silence developed from the study of black children in school.[6] As was demonstrated repeatedly by William Labov (1972), this silence was situation-specific, and extraordinary fluency could be found in nonschool settings (see Gilmore 1985 for an exemplary study). Black children are not silent as a trait of their personality or even their culture. Silence is not their identity. They *appeared* quiet-in-school-with-white-teachers. To claim silence as a personality trait is different from claiming silence as a situated accomplishment. The institutionalized existence of the linguistically deprived, silent black child says more about educational stereotypes than about black children. Since the stereotype was disallowed by sociolinguistic research thirty years ago, we have been forced to watch an amazing shift in identification as black children have gotten to be known as precisely not silent but violently aggressive. Blacks are not now, and never have been, acquiescing and simple-minded Uncle Toms. Nor are they, not now, not ever, not only, not simply, the scary rap singers adopted and demonized by the media (Giroux 1996). Still, and whatever the behavioral facts, all blacks in the United States, along with all whites, native born and newcomer, do have to struggle today with the images and the performances that Uncle Tom and Ice-T are made to suggest. What no one can do in the United States is to act as if the pieces that make American culture are not there. Uncle Tom and Ice-T are cultural facts.[7] As cultural facts, they are constructions with more solidity perhaps than the cities, suburbs, and highways that make up the landscape.

Success and failure, like dangerous black maleness, silent Chinese girlishness, and so on and so forth, are categories, scripts, and stage directions that frame joint human action. These labels do not exist for their accuracy but for their powers of evocation, and they must not be confused with the people for whom they may at times be used. From our perspective, black maleness is not a property of black males but of American culture. It is not that black maleness exists outside of the people who together perform it for each other. It is rather that black maleness may be scripted more by white males, and black and white females, than by black males alone. Conversely, what is to count as "white" has been continually transformed by the Africans have who had to deal with those who brought them to the Americas and by their descendants who continue to resist their conditions. Together Europeans, Africans, Asians, and Amerindians have produced something unique in the world: an America that does not belong to any one of them. Some of their descendants may have more power in shaping America than others, but all have participated, if only through passive resistance and the fact of their presence. For those who begin life in the United States, whether child or immigrant, America is the fact they inherited, and it will frame them for the rest of their lives.

Culture and Context

Culture has little to do with the habits parents train their children to have; it has everything to do with the environments parents build for their children to inhabit. These environments, houses with their many rooms, including the classrooms and homes that concern us in this book, are usually talked about as the "contexts" in which particular traits, such as silence or aggressivity, become visible. This phrasing assumes the independent consequentiality of the trait: a Learning Disabled child is, inherently, learning disabled even though the disability may show or may be consequential only "in certain contexts." Indeed, most specialists in such matters, assume that a special disability, wherever it comes from, whether from genetic defects or a difficult early socialization, must somehow be hardwired in the body of the child.

We take a different position, grounded in an old intuition in sociology and anthropology. From Émile Durkheim ([1897] 1951), we accept the idea that "deviance" is constituted by what is made normal. And we follow Ruth Benedict's (1934) suggestion that particular cultural patterns might generate particular problems for particular people. Most starkly, Learning Disability (LD) may be a *product* of America, not something that is *revealed in* America. LD is a room well stocked with all that it takes for some children to be demonstrated as carriers—whether they are carriers or not, whether there is such a thing as LD for any human being to carry, whether LD would make a difference for anything if there were no rooms for its identification, and whether special treatments are required once it has become common sense that it is an affliction that a proper democracy should take into account. From this perspective, one concentrates on all the activities performed around a child, activities that identify the child as Learning Disabled, and make contexts for still others to act in terms of the identification. LD is a room that constrains not only the children made to stand inside but all the other children and adults who visit the room and keep it alive. The idea here may be explicated through various metaphors, each of which highlight one property of our model. Birdwhistell (in McDermott 1980) once explained "context" using the analogy of a rope: "I like to think of it as a rope. The fibers that make up the rope are discontinuous; when you twist them together, you don't make them continuous, you make the thread continuous. . . . The thread has no fibers in it, but, if you break up the thread, you can find the fibers again. So that, even though it may look in a thread as though each of those particles is going all through it, that isn't the case. That's essentially the descriptive model."[8]

Out of multiple discontinuities, threads, or persons, an event of a new order is built; ropes or LD become facts. The fibers do not make the rope. A mass of fibers is not a rope. An aggregate of persons in a crowd does not make a cultural institution. But once fibers are made into a rope or a crowd into an institution, something new has happened for all those who encounter it and cannot ignore it or escape from it. The rope needs fiber. LD needs children and teachers. A child's life will evolve differently whether he is "acquired by LD" or escapes it. But LD itself is not produced by the child. Our interest in this book is LD as an institution and the American School

as the even thicker rope of which LD is but a strand. Much has been done on the impact of institutions on persons. Comparatively less analytic attention has been given to the daily workings of institutions, particularly with a culture theory not caught in the tangles of representing culture primarily as something having to do with learning. This is what we want to develop.

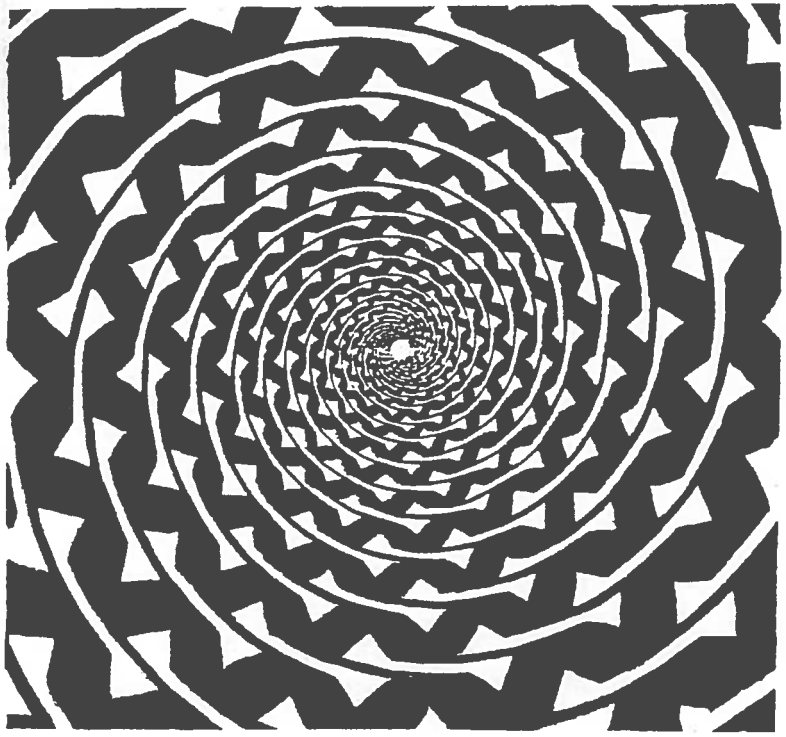
Institutions, of course, are not literally ropes, and the metaphor can go only so far. We also want to highlight how self-evident and inescapable a constructed world can become. The problem for children identified with LD or any other kind of school failure is that the diagnosis appears so commonsensical. This issue of perception invites another analogy. In 1908, Fraser discussed what he called the "twisted rope illusion" (see Figure I.1). It is a set of black and white geometrical shapes so organized that they do two things. On the one hand, they give the overwhelming impression, to a commonsense observer, of *one*, *spiraling*, black and white, twisted cord. On the other hand, from the point of view of an analyst, the same shapes can be said to be the representation of a *series* of twisted cords arranged in a set of *concentric circles*. The effect is strong enough that if one is asked to follow any of the circles, one's finger easily follows the eye into the center of the circle; one must work hard to resist one's senses enough to trace concentric circles (one trick is to place a circular mask such as a small coin at the center of the figure). The difficult point is that there is no rope on the paper, just alternating streaks of black and their apparent absence, the latter made significant by contrast to both the black streaks and the black squares. It is not just that the rope "fibers" are analytically unavailable when one looks at parts of the design, it is rather that half the fibers have no representation except in contrast to other fibers and other parts of the background Still, the rope and its fibers remain overwhelming events on observers caught by the design and unable to escape something that was made for them.[9]

From Benedict to Lévi-Strauss and Birdwhistell, anthropologists have found a figure-ground argument congenial to their understanding of what happens in culture when individual traits begin to have institutional consequences in particular localities or, to use the more traditional language, when traits are "incorporated into a culture." The same intuition is often summarized with statements that go something like "All parts of any system define all other parts of the system." The point is that the elements that together make a pattern, much like the black markings on Figure I.1, gain their particular power to move people in particular directions because of the ways they are arranged with other elements, not because of their own properties. When a child who may find it difficult to do certain things at certain times enters those settings in school where LD is going to show up, it is not so much that the child changes as that those around the child change the way they respond and thereby (temporarily) construct the child as a particular, LD, kind of person.

The rope metaphor highlights how higher-order events appear in the history of humanity as cultural facts for all to take into account. The twisted-cord illusion highlights how the individual pieces that appear to make these cultural facts are themselves "made" by the pattern, not perhaps in their physical substance but certainly in their social consequences. Still, these metaphors do not highlight a central theme of our own understanding of culture: Fibers in ropes, black stains on white paper, all are static objects dependent on the activity of some observer to activate their potentiality. The twisted-rope image is an illusion to the extent that it produces various effects on observers (including the designer of the image), but it is the observer who is active, whereas the image itself does not move. In culture, the situation is quite different. The fibers are alive and active, taking into account that they are made to be in a rope they do not control.

The first two metaphors focus our attention on the fact that children, teachers, parents and administrators, as "children," "teachers," "parents" and "administrators," do not "exist" independently of the School that defines them all for each other in their particular school qualities. There can be no "students" if there are no "teachers," and no "success" in the absence of "failure." This is not to say there are no human beings there. It is to say that they are hard at work taking into account, whether

FIGURE I.1
The Twisted Rope Illusion



SOURCE: (Fraser 1908: 325).

they are reconstructing or demolishing, the particular position that has acquired them or that they have inherited. These positions and the properties, rights, and privileges attached to them are utterly without power in the absence of all the other categories. The properties of the cultural pattern are maintained by the activity of the people who are caught within it. In the School, it is people, active single biological agents, that hold each other accountable to being what they must be to each other, that is, teachers, students, and administrators. In any school, the successful and the failed are the specific products of long interactional sequences involving much work by many people. The successful and the failed do not originate all made up in their particular qualities. They are slowly fashioned until the overall picture looks right enough that other active powers do not get upset by what was done, or not done, more locally. The people are all together, entwined with each other, one rope, one culture of consequence for all.

To state the general point we are making about culture, we can use still another metaphor, that of the house. For us, *culture has less to do with the habits we acquire than with the houses we inhabit.*[10] Culture is certainly about construction, though more about the houses that are *always already there* when people get born than about those they may try to build during their lives. Culture is about the words people use, the clothes (in French, *habits*) they wear. It is also about rooms in the sprawling mansions, along with the servant quarters, that history has built. This is the metaphor that is implied in our subtitle: This book is about "the School America builds" with its many rooms, positions like success and failure, Learning Disability and talent, positions that eventually get filled generation after generation with the people who are at any time required to fill them. There would be no schools or families, successes or failures, if no one performed what needed to be performed for the event to have happened.

It is certain people do change the rooms in which they are placed. We document many such changes. Families in similar conditions may arrange different local worlds for their members to inhabit. Teachers may implement programs far from stereotypic school tasks. But such changes can go only so long before neighbors, administrators, competitors, near and far get concerned. All human action is joint, partially under the control of many "significant" others—interpreters and enforcers with the power or authority to reconstruct the walls that local activity always damages. Eventually, as each person checks the closest others, as each small group checks other small groups in the neighborhood, the culture into which they were all born or recruited gets reconstructed, though perhaps not exactly in the same shape as it was. We do not believe there are actual plans to the house America builds or an actual architect. Analytically, the School escapes everyone, and particularly the many who think they are in charge of it. A first step in reorganizing this unplanned but ever present and ever changing house is to take its power into account.

We use five case studies to illustrate the usefulness of such an approach. Above all, we explore the implication for research of looking at success and failure as two rooms within the *same* house that many people inhabit and are at work maintaining, reconstructing, and, it is hoped, remodeling.

Adam, Sheila, Joe, and Others at Cultural Work

We started with the emblematic figure of Maxine Hong Kingston to introduce our interest in the cultural construction of schooling and its consequences for all who live in the United States. We can now proceed with the particular versions of this question raised by each of our ethnographic reports. In the first, we offer the LD story we have already started to tell: When we are informed that Adam, the child who appears in Chapter 1, is Learning Disabled, what do we see? Is it Adam, the Learning Disabled child? Or is it LD, the cultural fact? If it is the latter, as we are quite convinced it is, what about him and the other people at work with him? And how does LD fit within the broader American landscape? As we begin answering these questions, new areas of investigation begin to emerge. In the next four chapters of Part 1, we show in turn how small groups can transform their local conditions; how relative strangers can get involved in a complex, focused activity; how activities can be reconstructed as they get noticed and replaced within broader social sequences; and how local performances are made to fit within the broader canvas.

We do all this by looking carefully at fleeting moments in the everyday life of various people when, together, they construct something the School would recognize as educational. We look at children cooking in an after-school club (Chapter 1). We look at other children and their parents doing homework together (Chapter 2). We look at young men and women singing in a choir (Chapter 3). We look at adolescents performing a teacher-initiated task in an alternative urban high school (Chapter 4). We look at other adolescents endlessly competing with each other in an upper-middle-class junior high school (Chapter 5). In each setting, we focus on a few seconds or minutes to be constantly reminded of the activity of the people about whom we write. They are not automatons somehow determined by the system of which they are a part. In each setting we focus on a few seconds or minutes in order to be continually reminded that the people about whom we write are not enacting dumbly a script they do not understand. People are active, at work, and the culture that came before them would not remain alive without their activity. In the detail of their local practices, we can see people struggling, and we can see the conditions against which they struggle. This type of intense gaze on what people do in the detail of their everyday life is what we understand as ethnography, a mode of investigation that is particularly well suited to bringing out aspects of the human condition that the human condition itself always conspires to hide. Where people will be found, we have learned, can never be fully predicted from a knowledge of their initial conditions. Even initial conditions are hard to account for, since most of the descriptions we have of them say both more and less than what needs to be said. Usually the most significant features of their conditions, those with the most consequences on future action, are least available to common sense. One hundred years of ethnography has confirmed the usefulness, indeed the absolute necessity, of inductive searches carefully tracing what people do in specific places and at specific times, what they take into account and what they may be making for themselves and their consociates.

To develop analytic categories true to the ongoing, sensuous engagement of people building their lives together, we often vary the lenses we use.[11] Sometimes we focus in detail on the moment-to-moment unfolding of a single interactional sequence. At other times, we summarize many such sequences and trace their connections over a range of persons and events. In all cases, we are interested in seeing how the participants themselves reveal, *in their very behavior*, that which they cannot escape in a particular setting, that which is *always already there* when they start and remains when they end. At the same time, these lenses allow us to notice the many ways in which the people do not quite do what they might be expected to do, the ways in which they do more or do something else—at the very same time they take into account that which others have made for them.

The case studies we present in the body of this work were conducted over the past twenty years in different contexts. In each case, we have asked the same fundamental question about the conditions of personal action, and we answer it by engaging the conditions guiding personal action in the most local circumstances.

We start with Adam in Chapter 1. Something in his activity as it is sequenced with the activities of others around him makes him salient and problematic in certain settings. What and who makes Adam's activity "special"? We continue with Sheila and Joe in Chapter 2. What is it exactly Sheila and her parents do to make it appear that doing homework (and succeeding in school) is easy for them, whereas it is difficult for Joe and his mother? Next, in Chapter 3, we look at a group of late adolescents famous for their low self-esteem and inability to work together: How did they perform a complex and novel task directed by a person with little personal experience with their social and cultural background? We then move to the schools because in America, they are the legitimate grounds for the determination of success and failure. In Chapter 4, we show how an innovative program in an alternative high school can appear to be both a success and a failure. In Chapter 5, we end the ethnographic part of the book with an account of the activity of a whole school and community, and we wonder how one should understand the constant testing, quizzes, and competitions among students who are virtually fated to succeed on sociodemographic criteria alone. What is behind their parents' anguish and frantic activity to train them ever more rigorously for these competitions?

These questions are variations on our original question about Maxine Hong Kingston's puzzle when confronted with the printed "I." Our questions keep us puzzled at precisely the same point. What is it that makes this "I," and the individual to which it points, the center not only of political legitimacy but of research into human processes?

Although Chapter 1 starts as if it were the story of Adam, it quickly turns into a chapter on the four Adams that the people in his life constructed for various purposes in different settings. The case study is based on work Michael Cole, Lois Hood, Ray McDermott, and Kenneth Traupmann conducted in the late 1970s. They started looking for Adam as a person with qualities. Adam, it was officially said, was Learning Disabled. And yet the more they looked for Adam as he acted in

concert with others, the less they saw "Adam." What they saw, eventually, were people making certain qualities salient at certain times but not others. These qualities were sometimes performed by Adam, and those who looked at him were sometimes justified in their identification of his LD qualities. Still, each identification made a difference in interaction only at certain times. At other times, the Learning Disability disappeared for all practical purposes. At still other times—particularly when major decisions about his future placement in schools were being made—the disability was all there was.

Learning Disabilities of all types (whether grounded in biology, emotional traumas, or cultural difference) are consequential only to the extent that they are made to fit within a cultural system that identifies them. The inability to read fluently is a problem only if it is noticed at particular times by particular people who must mete out the consequences of having been noticed as not being able to read. In the early 1980s, Hervé Varenne, Ray McDermott, Hope Leichter, Vera Hamid-Buglione, and Ann Morison looked at familial literacy, focusing eventually on two closely matched working-class families of Irish descent in the same, mostly Polish, neighborhood of New York City (Chapter 2). In one family, the child of focus was known as doing well in school, in the other, as not doing well. The identification of Sheila's and Joe's qualities were the product of the families' own symbolic system. No school professional was involved—actually both children were doing moderately well by the standards of diagnostic tests—but the process was the same. At particular moments within more broadly defined settings, Joe's symbolic identification was not only affirmed by what the people said about him but was specifically performed as an occasion for celebration or degradation.

Particularly striking is that the symbolic identification of a child with a quality is performed by the same persons who, a few minutes later, may not make this identification as they let the same behavior they earlier noticed pass as irrelevant. Thus it is not because Adam had to act in concert with particular teachers and psychologists that he was identified as Learning Disabled. These very teachers and psychologists, as soon as they shifted out of the positions where the disability was visible, lost the ability to see it. What they could do had changed. They, like Adam, were multiple. "Being a teacher" is not a quality of a human being. It is a quality of a culture that requires at certain times, and not at others, that "teacherliness" be displayed, a display that involves making success and failure visible and documentable. We show how this "teacherliness" can be performed in family groups and how it can be sequenced with other activities, some of which have to do with being in a family together and others which have to do with what other institutions (particularly the School) require of a family. In the process we continue the demonstration that "culture," as a pattern of interaction among certain people, is itself not a property of persons and thus must be investigated by looking directly at interaction. It is interaction that makes people visible as particular types of people, not the other way around.

The third case study (Chapter 3) is about a group of late adolescents in an agency for "street kids" in New York City. For a few months, they came together around a