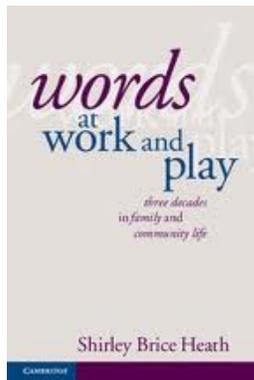


## Professional Book Review

Heath, S. B. (2012). *Words at Work and Play: Three Decades in Family and Community Life*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 221 pp., ISBN: 978-0-521-60303-4 (hc). \$27.99

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In *Words at Work and Play: Three Decades in Family and Community Life*, Shirley Brice Heath revisits, after 30 years, the grown children of the Trackton and Roadville communities she introduced in her seminal 1983 work *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms*. In her new work, as the subtitle suggests, Brice explores how the life experiences of these South Carolina families have influenced their relationships and use of language. As with the original work, this book represents a major contribution to the fields of linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics, and educational linguistics.

In *Words at Work and Play*, Heath takes the same comparative approach that she used effectively in her earlier work, focusing on two of the original working-class communities: a predominantly White community (Roadville) and an African American community (Trackton). She first met the families she describes in the 1960s during the Civil Rights movement, when the communities were dependent on manufacturing jobs. During the 1980s economic recession, Roadville and Trackton families were forced to relocate in order to survive. They developed small businesses and took advantage of the 1990s economic boom, and were able to provide their children with more opportunities. By 2000, access to greater capital and social mobility had enabled the children of the families to trade blue-collar jobs for middle class positions. Heath's purpose, then, is to understand how the life experiences and changes in social class of the grown children of Roadville and Trackton differ from those of their parents, and how these differences are reflected in generational changes of language and literacy practices.

The book contains eight chapters, focusing on the life stories of the children of Roadville and Trackton who have their own families now. Through her ethnographic portraits, Heath examines their new identities as middle class families and how these social changes have influenced the ways they interact and communicate. In the opening chapter, Heath explores the lives of the children who grew up in working-class families. She describes how their parents taught them to talk and socialize, as well as the literacy practices in these communities. Harkening back to her original study, she explains how particularly

the Trackton children struggled when they attended desegregated primary schools because “they found their ways of talking did not match what they had known at home” (pp. 12-13). Heath explains that most of these children now hold bachelor’s and master’s degrees and many of them became teachers. However, the “culturally biased” curricular programs in the South forced them to leave their professions and explore other careers (p.18).

The second chapter focuses on the life of one of the Trackton children who was born in the 80s, but was later placed in a foster home. Heath recounts a powerful story of how she was able to reunite the man with his biological mother based on the audio-recordings that she had collected of his family in the 1980s. In this chapter, Heath narrates the challenges that he had faced as a boy being sent from one foster family to another and ways in which, in spite of his struggles, he was able to succeed academically.

In Chapters 3 and 4, Heath focuses on the third generation of Trackton and Roadville communities and how college education has changed their lives. For example, some of the grandchildren grew up bilingual because their nannies spoke other languages; hence, for these children a result of the families’ increased economic resources – being able to hire a nanny – was the ability to develop bilingualism and acquire associated forms of cultural capital. From a language socialization perspective, Heath describes the ways in which technology has changed children’s interactions with parents and friends.

Heath then returns in Chapters 5 and 6 to the second generation and considers the identity construction and gender roles of Trackton and Roadville children as they were growing up and starting their own families. Although these children struggled in their lives and some of them spent time in juvenile detention centers, she highlights the successful ones who, despite hardships, were able to attend college. She notes, however, that “first-generation university students came from families with few financial resources and even less experience with what higher education required in general knowledge and academic language” (p. 99). Since parents did not read books to them and did not comment on characters and events in the book, the first-generation college students had more difficulty with academic literacy. Significantly, she observes that when they graduated from college and had their own children, they started reading children’s literature to their kids and exposed them to printed materials by enrolling their children in different youth centers, reinforcing her main point about the relationship between social class, educational experiences, and family literacy practices.

The final two chapters explore the language use of the new generation and how it differs from their parents and grandparents. Heath looks especially into parent-child interactions. She explains that the younger generation of educated parents are more used to writing longer texts and hence place greater value on forcing their children to produce written language outside of school. However, she does note that with the children of educated parents “conversations at home or in the car among family members lacked the critical

contextual feature of connection to either long-term personal interest or current projects needing both a backward and forward look” (p. 132). She further observes how families’ talk about race and racism has changed since the 1960s; whereas she notes that the use of racial epithets is less prevalent, she argues that this is not an indication that racism in her focal communities does not exist.

Because of the importance of its content and its clearly written style, this book will interest not only educators in the fields of linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics, but also education policy-makers. While Heath’s main interest is in generational changes of language and literacy practices, through this interest she explores the social construction of many of the realities of American society, including race, racism, identity construction, gender roles, language socialization, child development, social class, poverty, and education. Heath explains that working-class families in the United States do not automatically have access to the linguistic resources that can help them equip their children to succeed academically. Heath quotes one of the women from the Trackton community who lived on welfare and had to raise her three children on her own: “Before where I lived, and when I was growin’ up, I couldn’t talk to people. Now I wanna learn how” (p. 81). Although this book can be viewed and analyzed from various perspectives, the most salient stories are the ones that have focused on the challenges faced by working-class children seeking to receive secondary and college education.

The stories Heath tells of the grown children of Trackton and Roadville who have attained social mobility attest to the determination and agency of families who want their children to have opportunities that they did not have. The life experiences of the children of Trackton and Roadville are repeated in the United States by millions of children in minority communities. Although at the outset Heath states that she does not intend to focus on classrooms, her work is undoubtedly relevant to classroom teachers by vividly illustrating how the expectations of teachers in mainstream classes differ from what children from working-class families bring to the school. The literacy practices that students are exposed to at home are very different from school and, therefore, they are marked as “at-risk.” She concludes by arguing that the life experiences of the people she has documented prove that the U.S. education system needs to change in order to provide equal opportunities for underrepresented and minority groups.