ADOLESCENT COMMUNICATION WITH ADULTS IN AUTHORITY

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Adults in authority (teachers, employers, police officers, doctors, benefits officers, etc.) have been found to view adolescents as lacking in communication skills and even the motivation to communicate with them. Adolescents themselves, on the other hand, highlight issues of power and a lack of respect in causing problems in their communication with these adults. This review suggests that mutually antagonistic representations might feed into the interaction between the two groups; recommends more fine-grained research on such interaction; and argues that initiative to improve young people's "communication skills" may serve as part of an individual-blaming agenda.

Keywords: *adolescence; communication; authority figures; identity*

THE ADULT PERSPECTIVE

An overwhelming impression from the research is that adult authority figures perceive adolescents as having "problems" with communication. Young people are said to be uncommunicative and even hostile, and professionals report a growth of antiauthority attitudes among young people (MacDonald, 1998). The implication is that many teenagers lack the skills, and indeed even the desire, to communicate as well as they "should."

This raises the question of what these adults count as "communication skills." Police officers have been found to conceptualize adolescents' communication skills in terms of motivation; young people are said to not want to communicate with them (Drury & Dennison, 2000). Similarly, benefits officers refer not only to a lack of knowledge and experience but also to young people's attitude (Drury & Dennison, 1999). Doctors too complain that their adolescent patients are unforthcoming, sullen, and hostile (Wrate, 1992) and cite them as among their most difficult patients to interview (Maguire, 1984).

"Good communication" between themselves and adolescents is often defined by professional groups—teachers and doctors[1] in particular—in terms of disclosure from the adolescent. Listening (on their own part) is another quality that professional adults state constitutes good

communication with young people (Dennison & Drury, 1998), although Loader's (1996) ethnographic study suggested that police officers understand effective communication simply as a one-way process: of getting a message across to young people.

There is ambiguity in adults' accounts of the extent to which their own power plays a role in their communication with adolescents. For example, most of the benefit officers interviewed by Drury and Dennison (1999) acknowledged that their own power was an issue, but at the same time some also denied the importance of power. Among the professional adults interviewed by Dennison and Drury (1998), police officers were the group most likely to attribute communication problems to power difference. However, they explained the problem in terms of adolescents' perceptions of themselves (the police) as authority figures rather than their own (use of) power itself being a problem. Moreover, like most of the other professional adults interviewed by Dennison and Drury, police officers stated that they aimed to be honest, open, and not talk down to adolescents: in effect, to gloss over the power difference by treating adolescents as equals (Drury & Dennison, 2000).

Recent research has examined the role of language not simply as a tool of communication but as discourse that positions speakers and listeners in various ways. This research has demonstrated the (often detrimental) consequences of particular constructions operating as part of the interaction between adolescents and adults in authority. In particular, Griffin (1993, 1997) has detailed how certain "representations of youth" have shaped theory and policy on adolescence. Thus, the dominant biologistic "storm and stress" model of adolescence as a sudden period of endogenous turbulence has rationalized policies in which "youth is trouble" and therefore needs to be controlled by professional adults. The related discourses of "youth at risk" have similarly been shown to be mobilized in the service of increased surveillance of, and intervention into, young people's lives by schools, police, health services, and juvenile justice systems (Kelly, 2000).

These and other discourses may feature, as rationalizations and explanations, in adults' accounts of their communication with adolescents. Thus, the police officers interviewed by Drury and Dennison (2000) explained young people's unwillingness to communicate with them in terms of the latter's anti-authority attitudes, which in turn they typically attributed either to the inherent "storm and stress" of adolescence or to irrational peer group pressure. The function of such discourses is to absolve the adults themselves of responsibility for poor communication: They are rendered as merely the passive recipients of unreasonable hostility from adolescents. Drury and Dennison's (1999) interview study with benefit officers identified further discursive repertoires. On one hand—and consistent with an "underclass" representation (Bagguley & Mann, 1992; MacDonald, 1998)—benefits officers

stated that adolescents as a group lack communication skills and motivation. On the other hand—and consistent with contemporary discourses of individualization (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997)—benefit officers typically denied that generalizations about young people were possible and instead stressed individual responsibility. Hepburn (1997) argues that the use by teachers of individualizing discourse when used to deal with bullying among students may actually exacerbate the problem by reifying the students' behaviors as given features of their identities.

THE ADOLESCENT PERSPECTIVE

A recent survey of more than 4,000 adolescents found that they typically explained good communication with adults outside the family in terms of the communicators' personal abilities and skills, and their own achievement of practical aims (Catan, Dennison, & Coleman, 1996). However, most of the research on communication between adolescents and adult authority figures has examined dissatisfaction and conflict. Adults' perceptions that their communication with young people is often problematic is reciprocated. In Catan et al.'s (1996) survey, the number of young people describing experiences of bad communication with adults outside the family outweighed the number describing good experiences, whereas the reverse was true for experiences of communication with adults within the family (Drury, Catan, Dennison, & Brody, 1998). Moreover, whereas adults outside the family commonly attribute communication problems to the young people (Dennison & Drury, 1998), young people themselves tend to attribute problems in communication to the adult (Catan et al., 1996).

Adolescents are acutely aware of the power imbalance inherent in their relationships with adults in authority (Emler, 1993; Emler & Reicher, 1995), and indeed power is one of the explanations offered by young people for their dissatisfactory communication with these adults (e.g., Drury et al., 1998). The other main explanations adolescents give for the communication problems with adults in authority include one-sidedness and a lack of respect for the adolescent's point of view. For example, in the case of doctors, adolescents complain that they are not being listened to. They also feel that they are patronized, lectured, and given unsolicited advice; that doctors side with their parents; and, finally, they do not always understand the doctor's questions (Wrate, 1992). In the case of police officers, it is often the style and demeanor of police officers (brusque, aggressive, impolite) rather than specific outcomes of contact (such as being arrested, charged, or helped) that is the focus of young people's complaints about the police (Hopkins, 1994; cf. Fielding, 1984). One of the reasons for not wanting to communicate with the police—even when the adolescent is the

victim rather than the alleged perpetrator of an offense—is the perception that complaints will not be listened to (Loader, 1996).

Research has examined young people's empathic abilities and their understanding of effective communication in different social contexts (Brody & Catan, 1999). In Kerby and Rae's (1998) study, young offenders used references to the normative role of the police to characterize their own identities in a way that indicated their own awareness of others' perspectives. Reed, McLeod, and McAllister (1999) found that, although adolescents tend to perceive skills associated with empathy as relatively more important for their communication with peers, communication skills related to discourse management strategies were deemed more important with their teachers.

Although some discourses of adolescence position young people as the objects of adult surveillance and control, adolescents may use language to construct alternative identities and relations between themselves and powerful adults. Thus, Rymes (1995) shows how high school dropouts use grammatical limiters to mitigate their agency in explaining violence with teachers. Such discursive work serves to construct these adolescent speakers as ordinary people trying to be good rather than heroes or villains.

Youth subcultures can provide an "argot" for young people that marks out the boundaries of an identity distinct from that of rival (sub)cultures and the adult world (e.g., James, 1995). More generally, the peer group can be a source of solidarity and liberating constructions for adolescents. Thus, in an innovative study of girls' expressions of anger, Brown (1998) shows how, in the peer group setting, adolescent girls appropriate (and subvert) the language of others in line with their own needs. For example, linguistic creativity was used by the girls to collectively problematize their middle-class teachers' use of dominant definitions of femininity to interpret their experiences and behaviors.

THEORIZING ADOLESCENT COMMUNICATION WITH ADULTS IN AUTHORITY

The research on (conflict) communication between young people and adults in authority described above suggests a series of oppositions in their perceptions of their communication with each other. One way of conceptualizing the operation and maintenance of these oppositions is as a dynamic or struggle, with consequences for social identities. For example, police officers' representations of youth as hostile to authority rationalize expectations of uncooperativeness or even outright aggression (Drury & Dennison, 2000). By the same token, where young people themselves bring to an interaction the expectation that police behavior will be illegitimately and

indiscriminately hostile and disrespectful, this would rationalize an initial lack of cooperation. Adolescents' response to the perceived threat posed by the police—particularly if supported by the peer group—could serve to confirm police officers' initial expectations. Hence, within this context, the most readily available and effective form of communication open to young people might seem to be defiance (Loader, 1996). Oppositional identities and reputations are thus confirmed (Emler & Reicher, 1995): Police come to be defined as "pigs" (Hopkins, 1994), and the young people are defined as "anti-authority."

This account of conflictual communication as a site of collective identity-construction derives from research on intergroup dynamics (e.g., Drury & Reicher, 2000; Reicher, 1996; Stott & Reicher, 1998) and the social identity approach, according to which each individual is the locus of multiple social identities reflecting their various group memberships (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). However, although recent (sociologically oriented) work on "youth" has embraced the notion of multiple (and conflicting) identities (e.g., Rattansi & Phoenix, 1997), (psychological) work on "adolescence" continues to be dominated by a "personality" approach to identity inherited from Erikson (1963) and Marcia (1966), according to which self or identity is unitary and with a single core (e.g., Coleman & Hendry, 1999; Kroger, 1996).

If communication between adolescents and adults has consequences for identity, research is needed that can detail the actual processes involved rather than merely infer them. What is necessary, therefore, is some kind of interactive study, able to take contemporaneous measures of adolescent and adult communication and perceptions across time. A study using ethnographic researchers would be able to gather fine-grained contemporaneous data on the actual interaction between young people and adults in authority, tracing possible processes of "scaffolding" (Rogoff, 1990) or identity struggle in vivo.

It has been argued by some that a developed communicative ability may enable young people to be more equal partners in interactions with the adults around them, allowing them to negotiate their own place in the social world (Lerner & Busch-Rossnagel, 1981). However, what are experienced as problems in communication may arise not because adolescents or professional adults are communicating "ineffectively" but because one side or the other may have aims that conflict with the need for good communication. Thus, for example, for police officers, "good communication" through disclosure—in the form of explanations or apologies—may be incompatible with other concerns such as the need to maintain one's authority (Fielding, 1995; Southgate, 1986).

Moreover, a focus on improving the communication and other skills of the adolescent historically has been part of an ideological agenda

that has worked against disadvantaged young people by focusing on individual "deficits" rather than the structural factors that discriminate against young people (Griffin, 1993; Pollock, 1996). Young people's possible communicative "empowerment" therefore needs to be understood in its broader context of unequal power relations.

NOTE

1. For the relation between adolescence and the effective communication of health promotion messages, see "Adolescent Risk Behaviors and Communication Research" (McKay, 2003 [this issue]).

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