TEENAGERS *IN* COMMUNICATION, TEENAGERS *ON* COMMUNICATION

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With adolescents commonly depicted by adults as communication ignorant and inept, the need to find out what young people actually understand by, and know about, communication is discussed in this article. In this vein, two pieces of research that have investigated "communication awareness" in adolescence are reviewed, and ideas for further research in the area are offered.

Keywords: *communication awareness; adolescence; communication stereotypes*

SETTING THE SCENE: WHY THE INTEREST?

There are at least three important ways that research concerning young people's experiences of, and ideas about, communication promotes itself. Perhaps the most obvious of these is the straightforward but legitimate academic impulse to want to redress an existing gap in the literature on life span communication and social psychology. The second, perhaps more substantial, reason for looking at adolescent communication lies in the more transactional or instrumental value of communication as a developmental and social resource; as Haslett and Bowen (1989, p. 27) suggest, it is the honing of communication skills that helps "develop self-identity, establish social relationships with others, and provide the basis for collective social activity." Nowadays, there also is increasing importance attached to finding more effective ways of "empowering" young people with what one might call "communication capital" (Thurlow, 2001, after Bourdieu, 1999) and with the critical understanding that they need to face even more complex social challenges and to access diminishing economic resources (see Chisholm & Hurrelmann, 1995; Home Office, 2000). Having said that, the current preoccupation in much education policy for communication as a "key skill" (see Cameron, 2000) is often theoretically reactionary and inadequate to the expressed needs of young people. Although

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uncomfortable with the notion of communication "skills," Fairclough (1999) stresses the importance of a "critical," needs-based approach in enabling people to respond to the heightened communication demands of contemporary life.

The third, but related, reason for research in this area goes beyond technical empowerment and toward a sense of "advocacy"—specifically, the more politicized desire to challenge some of the received stereotypes of adolescent communication. Described by Males (1996) as the "scapegoat generation," teenagers (and especially male teenagers) too often are defined as inadequate communicators or language users, and it is not infrequently that one hears the exaggerated folklinguistic complaint "I just can't understand what teenagers are saying these days—It's like a different language!" Communication between young people and adults is thus all too frequently construed in both public and academic discourse as *intergroup* communication. Certainly, very recent research merely confirms this common tendency of adults to problematize adolescent communication (Drury & Dennison, 1999; Williams & Garrett, 2002). In many ways, adolescents are a social group routinely misunderstood by adults and whose communicative power (or capital) is greatly reduced (i.e., devalued or dismissed), just as Cameron (1990) describes the experience of women.

IMAGES OF ADOLESCENT COMMUNICATION: GETTING A BAD PRESS

Media representations are one good example of just how prevalent this attitude is. At one point in their extensive overview of the literature on adolescence, Coleman and Hendry (1999, p. 80) note that, in the face of evidence to the contrary, there continues to be little explanation for the persistence of the idea of a "generation gap" in public discourse. One possible explanation, they propose, is the negative stereotyping of teenagers in the media. In particular, it is the familiar "storm-and-stress" image of adolescence that feeds this characterization and the representation of young people more widely in the media (cf. Porteous & Colston, 1980). Although there is the possibility that teenagers do not necessarily identify with, or recognize themselves in, these negative media images (Falchikov, 1986, 1989), there is more recent evidence from Britain that young people are often frustrated with the way they find themselves being characterized by adults (Home Office, 2000).

There is in fact a great deal of academic literature that points to the prejudicial impact of the social construction of adolescence. For example, an increasing number of writers in sociology and psychology also recognize the extent to which their disciplines commonly view adolescence in an unrealistically uniform, largely negative, and ultimately

one-dimensional way. As Griffin (1993, p. 25) describes it, " 'youth' is/are continually being represented as different, Other, strange, exotic and transitory—by and for adults." It is precisely for this reason that Davis (1990, p. 2) proposes that it is the gap between image and reality itself that is ultimately in need of explanation. Given this bad press, and to reiterate my point from above, there is, I think, certainly a sense in which one might reasonably approach the study of communication in adolescence with the same kind of ideological sensibility and political advocacy as those writers in sociolinguistics, like Cameron, who are concerned with the linguistic disenfranchisement and alienation of their own target groups. In some respects at least, adolescents too are a political minority (cf. van Heeswyk, 1997), and an important part of the "myth of adolescence" (cf. Hockey & James, 1993) is their apparent ignorance (i.e., lack of skill or awareness) of ("good") communication.

YOUNG PEOPLE *IN* COMMUNICATION

Outside of social psychology and communication science, there certainly has been much written about the development of children's linguistic and communicative "competence." In fact, linguistic competence is always, and communicative competence is usually, dealt with by just about any textbook on developmental psychology (e.g., Hoffman, Paris, & Hall, 1994), psycholinguistics (e.g., Forester, 1996), and sociolinguistics (e.g., Coupland & Jaworski, 1997).

Nonetheless, research on both linguistic competence and communicative competence seldom goes beyond considering the development of language and communication in early childhood to look also at the communication of older children and adolescents. What is more, for all its semiotic breadth, neither does the mainly North American study of "communication competence," which again remains largely unsubstantiated in practice with regard to both adolescents and children. This is in spite of the fact that, nearly 20 years ago, Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) made a point of recommending that attention be paid to the development of communication competence, albeit in the life span context of childhood.

In his presidential speech at the International Communication Association's annual conference, Giles (1999) spoke of an inherent ageism in communication research and, among other things, exhorted communication scholars to "work toward understanding the injustices allied to all phases of the life span [and] to rebel against these" (p. 170). Although speaking of the other end of the life span, Giles's comments might just as easily refer to the relative neglect of communication issues in adolescence and childhood. Too often, it seems, there are important perspectives not attended to outside of mainstream "adult" communication—which is to say between age 18 years and retirement!

Furthermore, this academic silence or hiatus to which Giles refers merely exacerbates the communicative disenfranchisement of adolescents referred to above. In particular, however much may be said by adults about communication in adolescence, there has been very little research that has sought to understand communication from the perspective of young people themselves.

YOUNG PEOPLE *ON* COMMUNICATION

In spite of the relative paucity of research in the area, there is a small handful of writers who have begun to consider adolescent experiences of, and thinking about, communication. What these researchers have in common is their having begun to explore aspects of the understanding and awareness that underpin adolescent communication practices. As such, in asking young people, either directly or indirectly, to discuss communication, these writers have begun to reveal something of the phenomenological "life-world" (Schutz, 1972) or *verstehen* of adolescent communication. Within the field of language and communication research, for example, Baxter and Goldsmith (1990) attest to "the rich communicative resources with which [teenagers] frame their everyday accounts to others of their own and others' communicative practices" (p. 383). Other examples in this area are Garrett, Coupland, and Williams's (in press) work concerned with the language attitudes of young Welsh English-speakers, and de Klerk's (1997) work on adolescents' use of expletives. In both these latter cases, young people have been asked to consider their own and others' communication practices. There also are examples of writers within developmental psychology with an interest in more practical aspects, or contexts, of adolescent communication, most notably, adolescent-parent communication (Noller & Bagi, 1985), teenagers' communication targets (Hortaçsu, 1989), and topics with parents and friends (Youniss & Smollar, 1985), as well as young people's communication about sex (Rosenthal & Peart, 1996).

In addition to these isolated contributions, some of the only research to focus explicitly on communication from the point of view of young people has been the large-scale study by the Trust for the Study of Adolescence (TSA) examining the locations, purposes, reasons for success or failure, and attributions of blame or credit in adolescents' everyday communication (see Catan, Dennison, & Coleman, 1996; Drury, Catan, Dennison, & Brody, 1998), and my own work in which I have looked to theorize and prioritize pedagogically the notion of "communication awareness" (see Thurlow, 2001). Just as some of my findings support those of the TSA study, young people's ideas about, and experiences with, communication are also often consistent with interactional and communicative patterns described elsewhere in social and lifespan

psychology. In the rest of this article, therefore, I offer just two principal themes from these two pieces of research that help identify areas for possible future research in language and social psychology.

COMMUNICATION IS REGARDED AS POSITIVE, CONTEXTUAL, AND RELATIONAL

Both studies challenge adult stereotypes of the communication-ignorant teenager; young people seem consistently to construe communication in complex and varied terms, clearly recognizing its basis in relational-contextual variables such as motivation, power inequalities, and empathic insight. For example, although my participants revealed a preoccupation with verbal communication (i.e., communication as talk), they saw communication not only in transactional or instrumental terms (e.g., knowledge and lack of apprehension) but also recognized the importance of relationally or interactionally oriented factors (e.g., notions of sociation such as friendship, trust, sharing, hanging out, empathy, support, etc.). As such, communication is conceived more as social intercourse than message. Although they were concerned to examine young people's accounts of "bad" communication, the TSA researchers in fact found that their young participants reported more good experiences than bad ones. Having said that, any bad communication was more likely to be attributed to Other rather than Self, especially by younger teenagers.

Young people's conceptions of communication appear to share the same basis as their more general relationship ideals: reciprocity, similarity, self-disclosure, and emotional support (cf. Savin-Williams & Berndt, 1990). Just as the TSA found that "empathy and intersubjectivity" were central issues, the prototypical "good communicator" for the young people in my study was a good listener, someone attentive, responsive, and nonjudgmental. Not surprisingly, therefore, young people's experiences of good communication are usually explained in terms of the quality of the relationship (e.g., giving advice, keeping in touch, and socializing). Not least given their limited contact with external adults, young people's own experiences of good communication also are presented almost exclusively in the context of family or—as is more consistent with other research (Youniss & Smoller, 1985)—friendship.

GIRLS AND BOYS UNDERSTAND AND VALUE COMMUNICATION DIFFERENTLY

Noller and Bagi (1985) have suggested previously that girls are more socially adept in close interpersonal situations, whereas boys favor more impersonal contexts. Similarly, Coleman and Hendry

(1999), in reviewing existing developmental literature, conclude that "girls have deeper, more emotional and personal relationships while boys have more instrumental, action-centered relationships" (pp. 142-143). With comments like these, it often is hard to know where (and if) the line between social stereotype and social practice is being drawn. Nevertheless, I have found that, as a function of their actual experiences and socialized values, teenage boys and girls come to understand, value, and pursue communication differently and in ways that more often than not simply mirror broader cultural discourses about communication (Thurlow, 2001, p. 227; cf. Cameron, 2000; Philipsen, Horkley, & Huhman, 1999). Whereas girls tend toward a more *affective* notion of "real communication," boys tend toward the more *effective* "good communication." Girls in my study consistently prioritized friendships and the interactional bases of communication (e.g., in terms such as personal qualities, trustworthiness, problem solving, understanding); boys, on the other hand, prioritized more transactional concerns, thinking in terms of computers and technologies of communication and more technical or formal qualities (e.g., skillful orator, being knowledgeable, speaking good English). Whereas girls predicate their good communication (and friendships) on intimacy, boys do so in terms of more "superficial contact" (Catan et al., 1996, p. 52), with friendships being formed instead through mutual activity.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

As I suggested above, establishing what young people know about, and understand by, communication addresses an otherwise noticeable hiatus in the academic literature; other writers have for some time recommended this as a worthwhile exercise (e.g., Sypher & Applegate, 1984). Pursuing this line of inquiry a little further is, therefore, an outcome in itself. However, such research can also complement and extend existing literature in social and life span psychology. Patterns of interaction and so-called youth culture are changing all the time, and so research that seeks to report afresh on any aspect of the lives of young people helps to sustain the validity and currency of both academic and applied understanding (e.g., Thurlow, 2002). To this end, and as a way of concluding this short contribution, I would regard any or all of the following topics as worthy of future research in our field: young people's attitudes and perceptions of adults' stereotyping of their communication; critical media analyses of representations of young people's communication; young people's peer orientations, social-type labeling, and name-calling in countries other than the United States and United Kingdom; the communication capabilities and experiences of young

people in more diverse settings (e.g., rural areas, non-Anglophone countries); young people's perceptions of themselves as communicators; and, especially, young people's perceptions, readings, and operationalizations of the kind of "good listener" they value so highly, or, by contrast, the "empathic inhibition" they disdain.

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