

1

Deconstructing adolescent communication

Crispin Thurlow

You're an adult when they want you to be, you're a child when they want you to be.^[1]

Adolescence is first and foremost an economic and institutional construction, invariably marked less by chronological age and biological stage as it is by the conditions and realities established by formal education, the law and employment in the marketplace. Beyond that, adolescence is pretty much whatever adults say it is! In fact, it seems that young people are often the last people to conceive of themselves as adolescents. Caught impossibly between adult mythologies of 'childhood innocence' and 'adult sophistication,' young people's innocence is typically dismissed as naïveté and their sophistication construed as cunning. Not surprisingly, most young people (like the one in the quote above) are seldom able to get it right—which is to say, they find themselves in a double bind of being always too young and too old. And this is a uniquely uncomfortable dilemma which is merely exacerbated by the relentless demands of the post-industrial marketplace. In his searing critique of the corporatization and exploitation of young people, Henry Giroux (2000:4) concludes that there is therefore only one appropriate way to approach the study of adolescence: confronting what he calls the 'politics of culture.'

The politics of culture provide the conceptual space in which [youth] is constructed, experienced, and struggled over. Culture is the primary terrain in

which adults exercise power over [young people] both ideologically and institutionally. Only by questioning specific cultural formations and contexts in which youth is organized, learned and lived can educators [and scholars] understand and challenge the ways in which cultural practices establish power relations that shape [young people's] experiences.

Although it is still very common to hear reference to phrases like youth culture, many contemporary scholars like Giroux (see others below) now reject the tendency to present young people as uniformly oppositional and monolithic in terms of their social norms and cultural values. From this more critical perspective, it is acknowledged that adolescent 'development' and 'trajectories' can only ever be described as patterned generalizations; that for every young person whose life is marked by the proverbial sex, drugs and rock and roll, there are countless others whose lives do not feature unwanted pregnancies, substance misuses and criminal activities. Of course, this is not to say that lay discourse or all academic discourse necessarily follow suit. The persistence of the 'storm and stress' stereotype of the teenage years is still a very powerful regime of truth (*cf* Foucault, 1980) in depicting and accounting for adolescence—as Angie Williams and her colleague have found in their research (see Williams & Garrett, 2002). A striking example of the dominance of this mythology and the complicity of science is found in a brochure titled *Surviving Adolescence*, produced and widely distributed by the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Britain; the opening paragraph of the brochure confidently asserts that

the teenage years can be an emotional assault course for all concerned. Parents and their teenage children can seem always to be at each other's throats. We call this stormy time adolescence.^[2]

One important part of the process of reconceptualizing adolescence has been a concern to describe and understand something of the multidimensional nature and lived experience of adolescent social interaction and peer relations, what Ball (1981:118) refers to as their 'systems of relevance.' Within developmental psychology, for example, there has always been a fairly consistent preoccupation among researchers to align the study of adolescence with the traditional landmarks of biological and cognitive development, and, especially, so-called 'identity formation.' However, as research continues to find even these markers of adolescence to be contextually relative and variable (Adams *et al.*, 1996; Goosens & Phinney, 1996), the relation has, in effect, been reversed so that more social and cultural approaches to adolescence are increasingly becoming the norm (e.g., Ball, 1981; Eckert, 1989; Eder, 1998; Miles, 2000; Wyn & White, 1997). Together with a move away from an undue focus on deviance and pa-

thology, the value of researching young people's 'normal' social orientations and everyday interactions is also seen as more and more worthy of discussion.

On this basis, young people's social interaction and peer relations are not surprisingly one of the key areas of interest in the study of adolescence. Arguably, this is nowadays more important than ever given what Roy Baumeister and Mark Muraven (1996:407) see as the 'newly difficult nature of adolescence.' Lynne Chisholm and Klaus Hurrelmann (1995:130) too suggest that, as a hallmark of late-twentieth century adolescence, 'socialization contexts have become more differentiated and, in the process, peer group relations have accreted [yet] more significance.' It is commonly acknowledged by scholars that young people today face a number of major macrostructural changes which are reshaping their lives in terms of rapid social, occupational and social change (Mortimer & Larson, 2002). It is also obvious that their peer orientations and the organization of sociality will continue to be central to the ways young people manage and make sense of these changes. Young people certainly value their peer relations highly (Youniss & Smollar, 1985) and social relationships are a crucial factor in their well-being (see, for example, Hendry & Reid, 2000). What is of particular relevance to the current volume is that all of these interpersonal needs are necessarily achieved in communication—whether as a channel or a context for social interaction (*cf* Brown *et al.*, 1994; Thurlow, 2001a). Communication is also one of the key resources by which young people may also be better able to shape and, to some extent, control their position in the face of societal change (Youniss & Ruth, 2002). We return to this point in a moment.

A word about *adolescence*

Before we move on, it would be remiss of us not to at least acknowledge the politics of labeling by saying something about the problematic inherent in the very term 'adolescence.' We have, like John Coleman (1974) long before us, decided to make no substantial attempt in this volume to define adolescence or to justify its existence. As Coleman says, adolescence 'can be defined in various ways depending on one's perspective, and social, economic or political notions do not always accord with a psychological viewpoint' (p. ix). In some respects, the term 'teenager' often proves to be a more useful label simply because it is a less ambiguous, age-based description (*i.e.*, *thirteen* to *nineteen*). By contrast, 'adolescent' opens up the whole debate about when this still culturally determined period begins and ends. Certainly, the two most common boundary markers of adolescence are themselves of little real use. First, because the onset of puberty (typically indicated by menarche and spermarche) is understood to be substantially earlier than it was some 100 years ago (Wyn & White, 1997),

even so-called biological hard-wiring is unable to offer an absolute starting/cut-off point. Second, as Chisholm and Hurrelmann (1995) and other writers have shown, socioeconomic indicators such as the termination of education and the start of employment also no longer guarantee the same clarity they once did, with young people increasingly delaying both either by force or by choice. In fact, it is partly for this very reason that Jeffrey Arnett (2000) proposes the conceptual and sociological merits of what he describes as ‘emerging adulthood’ (between 18 and 25). By the same token, underpinning Johanna Wyn and Rob White’s (1997) well-known book *Rethinking Youth* is a concern to rethink both the labels and the period of the lifespan they describe.^[3]

We have already noted above the extent to which adolescence is constructed and mythologized, and, as scholars of language and communication, we are ourselves very conscious of the potential for distinctive but vague labels like ‘adolescent’ or ‘adolescence’ to overcategorize people and, in this case, to exaggerate social distances between young people and other people. In terms of social identity theory, we know that this is often all that is needed for adults to construe and experience their communication with young people as a form of intergroup or even intercultural communication [see Garrett & Williams—chapter 3—for more on this point]. Although it is by no means a perfect solution, we ourselves tend, for the most part, to use the term ‘young people’ in order to eschew chronological specificity and cultural connotations of ‘adolescent’ as something inferior or undesirable (see below); we also value the lifespan perspective inherent in their still being regarded as people, however young.

Notwithstanding this, and following the lead of so much research on this period of the lifespan, we take ‘adolescence’ to index an experientially and discursively recognized period of the lifespan which stretches anywhere from the age of eleven to twenty-one or twenty-two. However, like Burman (1994), we are also concerned not to assume, or to depend too heavily on, the naturalized, prescribed compartmentalization of the lifespan—so long the hallmark of mainstream developmental psychology. As we understand it, development is a lifespan affair, and many of the concerns and issues discussed in the chapters that follow are, neither quantitatively nor qualitatively speaking, necessarily any less germane to adult life.

This perspective has important implications for many of the topics dear to the hearts of conventional adolescent researchers—most notably, identity. For most social theorists and critical scholars, it is now received wisdom that identity (cultural, social or otherwise) is an intensely dynamic, *lifelong* project (*cf* Giddens, 1991; Hall, 1996). In spite of the volley of postmodernist (i.e., feminist, postcolonial, Queer) critiques, however, this is an idea to which developmental psychology appears exceptionally resistant in its fixation with normative trajectories and stages (Côté, 1996).^[4] Developmental psychologists and other practi-

tioners (see Royal College of Psychiatrists, p.2 above) often seem very reluctant to discuss identity as a dynamic process, that we all work with multiple identities, that the cultural-structural landscape itself is simply changing, that context plays a role in all domains of adolescent experience, and, finally, that identity is not the particular ‘task’ of adolescence.^[5] Nevertheless, it is also true to say that traditional models of adolescent identity resting on notions of crisis and developmental stages (e.g., those of Erik Erikson or James Marcia) are coming under critique; the linearity and unitariness of their conceptualizations of identity can no longer account for the variability, multifariousness and fluidity that identification entails.

In these terms, the dominant paradigm of adolescent identity formation is clearly problematic on at least two fronts: its apparent essentialism on the one hand, and its undue ascription to adolescence. What, one might wonder, of the enormous identity challenges inherent in the complexity of long-term relationships; the responsibility and revelations of parenthood; the chronic servitude of work; the unexpected ravages of serious illness; and the challenges and discoveries of old age? All these lifespan factors unpredictably and variously release a barrage of demands on one’s self-esteem and sense of self. The storms and stresses continue unabated! To suggest otherwise is not only to reject the critiques of contemporary writing, but to deny the full experience of life. That we, as adults, learn to feel it in silence—or rather to feel it silenced—is another matter. We simply learn to be ‘grown up’ about our uncertainty and confusion in the struggle to tell a meaningful, coherent story about ourselves. It is for this very reason that, in debunking the notion of an exclusively adolescent ‘identity crisis,’ James Côté (1996:167) argues that, far from being a matter of ‘formation’ or ‘achievement,’ identity entails diffusion and dissipation. As such, the communicative process of identification never ceases; it is certainly not unique to young people, nor is it their sole preoccupation.

Communication in adolescence

This book most obviously concerns itself with the role of communication in structuring and facilitating the lives of young people. In his presidential speech at the International Communication Association’s annual conference in 1999, Howard Giles 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’ (Giles, 1999:170). Although speaking of the other end of the lifespan, Giles’ comments might just as easily refer to the relative neglect of communication issues in adolescence and childhood. Too often, it seems, there are impor-

tant perspectives not attended to outside of mainstream adult communication—which is to say between age eighteen and retirement! What is more, this academic silence or hiatus to which Giles refers merely exacerbates the communicative disenfranchisement of adolescents. On this basis, there are at least three important ways in which academic research and writing concerning communication in adolescence might promote itself. Given what we just said, perhaps the most obvious of these is the understandable impulse to want to redress an existing gap in the literature on lifespan communication and (“developmental”) social psychology. To our mind this is a legitimate goal in and of itself.

A second, perhaps more substantial, reason for looking at adolescent communication, however, lies in the more transactional or instrumental value of communication as an obvious identificational and relational resource. In the process of exploring and sustaining their relationships with parents, siblings, peers, and so on, young people must necessarily learn to understand others’ feelings, others’ goals, social rules, and others’ minds (Dunn, 1988). They must also learn to understand and judge the complex role of power in everyday communication (*cf* Ng & Bradac, 1993). Arguably, much of this learning relies on their being adept and self-aware communicators. As we suggested above, there is nowadays also increasing importance attached to finding more effective ways of empowering young people with the communication capital *and* the critical understanding they need to face even more complex social challenges and to access diminishing economic resources (Thurlow, 2003). Now more than ever before, young people must also negotiate and make sense of an intensely semiotized world as post-industrial economies are premised increasingly on symbolism, imagery and ‘design-intensity’ (Lash & Urry, 1994: 193). As John Gumperz and Jenny Cook-Gumperz (1982:4) note, for quite some time this has also been a world of immense cultural diversity and rapid change:

The role of [communication] has...been radically altered in our society. The ability to manage or adapt to diverse communicative situations has become essential and the ability to interact with people with whom one has no personal acquaintance is crucial to acquiring even a small measure of personal and social control. We have to talk in order to establish our rights and entitlements.

For all these reasons, Norman Fairclough (e.g., 1999) and others stress the importance of critical, needs-based approaches in enabling people to respond to the heightened communication demands of late modernity. Certainly, however well-meaning, cookbook approaches to teaching adults and young people about communication (e.g., the PBS *Frontline* program, next paragraph) and the current preoccupation in education policy for communication as a ‘key skill’ (Cameron, 2000) not only are theoretically and politically reactionary, but may be

simply inadequate to the expressed needs of young people [see Thurlow & Marwick—chapter 4, this volume—for more on this point]. Arguably, for many young people, an important aspect of the diversity of communicative situations to which Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz refer lies in the experience of living in an increasingly globalized, interconnected world (*cf* Pennycook, 2003). The importance of communication to young people as a more operational resource is perhaps even greater also for those young people living in larger and more economically deprived (urban) environments.

A third 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 young people and their communication practices. Described by Mike Males (1996) as the ‘scapegoat generation,’ young people (and especially young men and boys) are too often defined as inadequate communicators or language users and it is not infrequently that one hears the exaggerated folk-linguistic complaint, ‘I just can’t understand what teenagers are saying these days—it’s like a different language!’ As suggested above, communication between young people and adults is thus all too frequently construed in both public and academic discourse as *intergroup* communication. Research merely confirms this common tendency of adults to problematize adolescent communication (Drury & Dennison, 1999; Williams & Garrett, 2002). Again, we find dramatic examples of this at every turn. In 2002, for example, a US Public Broadcast Service *Frontline* documentary called *Inside the Teenage Brain* had as one of its central topics the problem (sic) of ‘teen-adult’ communication, and, among other things, scientific research was cited to explain communication breakdowns as a function of neurological differences.⁶ It seems hard to imagine that for any other major social group defined, say, by race, age or sex, would it nowadays be acceptable to seek explanations for interpersonal and interactional differences on the basis of biology or anatomy. In many ways, therefore, young people may be rightly viewed as a social group routinely misunderstood and even mistreated by adults. Just as Deborah Cameron (1998) describes the experience of women, young people are a group whose communication capital (Thurlow, 2001b after Bourdieu, 1991) is always greatly devalued or denied. Indeed, media representations like the *Frontline* program are one good example of just how prevalent this attitude is.

‘Teen talk’: Getting a bad press

The excesses of the young provide a little of the excitement otherwise lacking. The outcome is a growing shallowness. ... An adolescent culture is one that

lives on the surface, unencumbered by memory, light on knowledge and devoid of wisdom. (Jacques, *Guardian Newspaper*, 2004)

At one point in their extensive overview of the literature on adolescence, Coleman and Hendry (1999:80) note that, in the face of evidence to the contrary, there continues to be little explanation for the persistence in public discourse of the idea of a generation gap. One possible explanation, they propose, is the constant stereotyping of teenagers in the media. Certainly, few people in Britain can have missed the cinema debut of *Kevin*, the parodic embodiment of popular beliefs about adolescence by the television comic Harry Enfield.^[7] Meanwhile, in his allegorical critique of contemporary British society and what he calls the ‘Western condition,’ journalist Martin Jacques (quote above) epitomizes the more negative way in which youth is commonly portrayed in the mainstream media. In fact, this common representation of adolescence as an attack on adulthood is something which Johanna Wyn [see chapter 2, this volume] discusses in more detail; suffice it to say, however, that this discourse runs completely contrary to Giroux’s (ibid.) assessment of the contemporary ‘assault on youth,’ prompting someone like Males (1999) to declare the last decade of the twentieth century as the ‘most anti-youth period in American history.’ It is the same old ‘storm and stress’ image of adolescence which feeds this characterization and the representation of young people more widely in the media (Porteous & Colston, 1980). And central to this mythology of adolescence is the non-communicative or communicatively inept young person.

There are several academic literatures that point to the prejudicial impact of cultural constructions of adolescence. As already suggested, writers in the fields of critical linguistics and feminist sociolinguistics have demonstrated clearly how the way in which members of political minorities are spoken about can be instrumental in their prejudicial and unequal treatment (e.g., Cameron, 1998; van Dijk, 1992). Elsewhere, and with specific attention to adolescence, an increasing number of writers in sociology, psychology and cultural studies have addressed the extent to which adolescence is widely portrayed in unrealistically uniform, largely negative, and ultimately unidimensional ways. As Christine Griffin (1993:25) describes it, “‘youth’ is/are continually being represented as different, Other, strange, exotic and transitory—by and for adults.”^[8] Indeed, the academic treatment (in all senses of the word) of young people has also been very influential in further feeding the media with its own already robust images of adolescence. And so it is that a sharp contrast is drawn between the ‘somewhat mundane lives and attitudes of the majority of contemporary young people in actuality and the range of considerably heightened images of youth that is to be found in much of the popular and professional social theorizing of recent years’ (Davis, 1990: 2). It is for this very reason that John Davis goes on to propose that it is the gap between image and reality itself which is ultimately in need of

explanation and remedy. If so, this again demands the attention of communication scholars who are ideally placed to investigate the role of language, visual semiosis and mediatized representation in constituting social realities.

In much the same way that cultural critics have sought to do with other minoritized social groups, the intention must be to show that the ways young people are treated in cultural representation is part and parcel of how, in the words of Richard Dyer (1993:1), ‘they are treated in life, that poverty, harassment, self-hate and discrimination...are shored up and instituted by representation.’ Although lay discourse is often slow to change, and even though adults can remain very resistant to scholarly evidence which explicitly contradicts popular framings of young people (see Gilliam & Bales, 2001), these are surely important steps within academia.

Deconstructing adolescent communication

Given this bad press, and to reiterate our point from above, there is, we 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 who have been concerned with the communicative disenfranchisement and alienation of their own target groups. In some respects at least, young people too are a political minority (*cf* van Heeswyk, 1997) and an important part of the ‘myth of adolescence’ (Hockey & James, 1993) is their apparent ignorance (i.e., lack of skill and/or awareness) of (‘good’) communication.

And so, in putting this book together, we cannot help but be provoked by the deconstructive agenda set out by Erica Burman (1994), herself inspired by the critical stance of Gayatri Spivak (1990: 103), who writes:

In one way or another academics are in the business of ideological production [and] our institutional responsibility is of course to offer a responsible critique of the structure of production of the knowledge...

In this regard, those of us contributing to this volume are concerned in different ways to speak on behalf of a group whose voice is often silenced or at least consistently devalued. Having said this, we cannot help but recognize the imperfection of our attempt to take on the role of advocate. As Deborah Cameron and her colleagues (1992) note, advocacy—speaking as experts *for* others—as a scholarly goal is fraught with problems; ideally, they argue, scholars should look instead to *empower* people by doing research *with* them and arising from their own agendas and needs. Of course, for practical economic and institutional rea-

sons this is often not possible when it comes to young people. As editors, Angie and I also openly acknowledge, for example, that our collection here is largely Anglophone in its demographic coverage even though we have papers from Britain, Australia, South Africa and the United States of America. (One exception is Kloep & Hendry in chapter 10 of this volume, who cite their research with young Swedish people.) We cannot—nor do we claim to—therefore speak of all young people; others are able to do this with much greater authority (e.g., Brown *et al.*, 2002).

Notwithstanding these constraints and limitations, what we as editors hope to achieve in our own research and by putting together a volume such as this is to critique (or deconstruct) both the pervasive stereotype of the communicatively ignorant or incompetent teenager, and, thereby, the overly homogenizing and pathologizing notions of adolescence *per se*. We do not presume to *know* what it means to be a young person growing up nowadays and no young people have actually asked us to speak on their behalf; however, we do know that many young people do not recognize themselves in the way adults so often characterize them (Falchikov, 1986; 1989) and that they are often frustrated by these tired misrepresentations (Home Office, 2000). Instead of dismissing the stereotypical ‘teenage’ complaint ‘you just don’t understand’ as mere folly and fodder for adult othering, perhaps it is time that adult researchers at least start paying more attention to the ways in which communication is organized and experienced during the teenage years. As Giroux (2000) recommends, criticizing misrepresentations of young people in adult discourse and adult-controlled institutions is an end in itself; in doing so, we go some way at least toward combating the ongoing ‘attack on youth’ which continues to gate-keep and structure their lives in very material, disadvantageous ways.

The structure and content of this volume

In putting this book together, we start from the understanding that all communication is about social relationships and, therefore, a matter of identification. Regardless of where one is in the lifespan, human interactions are necessarily mediated by our concerns for identity and relationship. By the same token, people’s identities and relationships are constituted primarily through communication, which is to say linguistic, nonverbal, visual or other meaning-making practices. It is for this reason that we have deliberately avoided trying to divide up our volume into some of the usual categories or tropes of adolescent research. For example, to present young people’s identity processes as being somehow separate from other aspects of their lives seems to us theoretically and phenomenologically nonsensical. Therefore there is no section here on ‘identity in

adolescence.’ Instead, we have chosen to group chapters into three broadly defined parts: (1) adult constructions of young people’s communication; (2) young people’s communication in peer contexts; and (3) young people in communication with adults.

Part I: Adult constructions of young people’s communication

In the first part, we start with four chapters whose authors are in different ways concerned to challenge the framing of young people’s communication by adults. As we suggested above, young people are in many ways a communicatively disenfranchised political minority—partly because their ways of speaking are often regarded as having low cultural capital or prestige, and partly because they themselves seldom have control over the very mechanisms of representation which perpetuate dominant stereotypes about adolescence—most obviously in the media, which is precisely where we start.

In chapter 2, Johanna Wyn examines the competing discourses which shape media images and representations of young people. At a broad level, she identifies the tension between a narrative preoccupation with ‘youth as (violent) threat’ in the context of *generational* change, and ‘youth as hope for the future’ in the context of *socioeconomic* change. In either case, it seems young people are positioned unfavorably and, in the words of Henri Giroux (1998: 23), as projections of ‘the desires, fantasies and interests of the adult world.’ Where, in the case of the first discourse, young people are typically portrayed as a threat to adult security and the traditional order, the second discourse promotes a romanticized but equally narrow view of young people.

Given the media context outlined by Wyn in chapter 2, from an intergroup communication perspective, Peter Garrett and Angie Williams (chapter 3) present a review of intergenerational and lifespan communication research, including their own, which time and again demonstrates the negativity of adult perceptions of young people’s communication practices. But their work also shows that evaluations of age outgroups change across the lifespan as people claim and relinquish membership of such groups. As Garrett and Williams point out, an ingroup-outgroup perspective is not confined to interaction between strangers and acquaintances but can manifest itself in close relationships too—such as within the family.

In chapter 4, Crispin Thurlow and Alice Marwick turn their attention to another institutional context in which adults may be seen to prejudice—or misjudge even—the communication of young people. In this case it is academics who inadvertently devalue young people’s needs and experiences as everyday communicators, by seeking to evaluate them against competence-based models

of communication. Using the example of communication apprehension, Thurlow and Marwick note how, among other things, dominant scholarly and popular discourses promote a normative ideology of ‘talk as good communication’ as well as a decontextualized, pathologizing framework for understanding young people’s communication.

In the last chapter in Part I, Cynthia Carter and Stuart Allan return to look at the role of media in shaping the lives of young people. In this case, however, they focus on the value of media education in helping young people to find a political voice. In doing so, they also offer a powerful critique of past and current institutional discourses about citizenship, literacy and democracy. As Carter and Allan note, these plans are often ideologically problematic and misconceived in making grave assumptions about the political and instructional communication needs of young people. They then demonstrate the positive impact young people can have when given interactive opportunities to express their own opinions.

Part II: Young people’s communication in peer contexts

In Part II, we have grouped together those chapters which focus primarily on the practices and experiences of young people in communication with each other in the context of so-called peer culture. For most young people peer relations constitute the primary communities of practice by which they construct and reproduce their place in the world. For this reason especially, we are pleased to start this part of the book with a contribution by Penelope Eckert, whose ethnographic work in this area is so well known.

In chapter 6, Eckert focuses on language and the stylistic practices of young people and their peer groups, specifically—‘language is a resource for constructing social meaning.’ Style, according to Eckert, creates ingroups as well as outgroups. It defines and marks one group as distinct from another, and although group labels are important, this goes far beyond group labels. Speech style therefore constructs identity as much as do clothes, makeup, jewelry and so forth. As she points out, styles are created when linguistic resources are appropriated and recommissioned to make something new and unique. Stylistic elements in themselves do not signal category but indicate a set of stances, beliefs, attitudes, and values—a lifestyle—that in turn indicates the category or group membership.

Building on this theme and continuing the focus on language, Vivian de Klerk discusses slang and swearing in chapter 7. Again, here we see the use of language as a primary resource for the indexing of ingroups and outgroups. In her discussion, de Klerk makes a useful distinction between slang and swearing.

As a versatile way of maintaining group boundaries, slang is ever changing, innovative, and often used by adolescents to create distance from adults and other outgroups; it is also flexible enough that it can be changed to maintain distance if outgroups acquire and use the code (and therein attempt to reduce distance). Swearing, on the other hand, is more enduring and stable but might be used to create distance through its shock potential. De Klerk also provides a useful discussion of the way that slang can be used as a means of coercion (for example, in maintaining mainstream gender distinctions).

In chapter 8, Lauren Berger, Dana McMakin and Wyndol Furman outline what they call a *behavioral systems* approach in order to identify some of the primary communicative aspects in establishing and maintaining romantic relationships during adolescence. Focusing mainly on the experiences of young people who identify as heterosexual, Berger and her colleagues explore how patterns of affiliation, sexual behavior, attachment and caregiving frame young people's initial experiences of love and desire. Although research shows that they negotiate status and conflict in many of the same ways as adults, there are also some important differences which reflect the particular social and institutional challenges faced by young people.

While Berger and her colleagues acknowledge the heterosexual bias of their chapter, Sarah O'Flynn's chapter (9) serves to present another important side of the 'love story.' Based on her experiences as both a community volunteer and a scholar, O'Flynn examines the impact of institutional 'silence' in the lives of young lesbian, gay and bisexual people, noting how they remain one of the most underrepresented groups in the research literature. Communication is a central feature of these young people's lives in two particular ways: on the one hand, they are obliged to verbalize and constitute their sexual identity in language; on the other hand, much of their lives is marked by an *absence* of communication in the face of cultural and political sanction.

In chapter 10, Leo Hendry and Marion Kloep open up the focus on peer relations to consider the culture of leisure which serves as both a context and a channel for relational and interpersonal communication (*cf* Brown *et al.*, 1994). Framed conceptually by their own Lifespan Model of Developmental Challenge, and with reference to the firsthand accounts of their own young research participants, Hendry and Kloep organize their discussion neatly around three interactional patterns or 'styles': communication as leisure, leisure for communication, and leisure as communication. It is in this way that Hendry and Kloep are able to show the vital role that leisure plays as a context for development and identity work in the formation and maintenance of relationships, building ingroup membership and so forth.

In the final chapter of Part II, Susan McKay, Crispin Thurlow and Heather Toomey Zimmerman examine the ways in which 'new' media offer the potential

for some young people to counteract their long-standing disempowerment by, and misrepresentation in, older media like print and broadcast news. As such, the chapter by McKay and her coauthors usefully extends the issues raised by Carter and Allan in chapter 5. In debunking the popular myth of the ‘net generation’, McKay, Thurlow and Toomey Zimmerman note how communication technologies are ever evolving, but so too are the ways young people shape technology to satisfy their need for information, entertainment and socialization.

Part III: Young people in communication with adults

Although young people are themselves powerful in creating and regulating their own social meanings, it is invariably adults who dictate the institutional structures and ideological frameworks for so much of adolescent life. In this third part of the book we therefore include a series of chapters which attend more directly to young people’s communication with adults in several key contexts of interaction.

In chapter 12 Pat Noller comprehensively reviews a rich academic literature concerned with a variety of risk factors such as stress that negatively influence outcomes for young people, as well as protective factors such as positive communication that may buffer the effects of psychosocial stressors. Grouping these factors in terms of family stress factors, protective factors and risk factors, Noller explores the impact of each on young people’s psychological adjustment and ‘problem’ behaviors.

Picking up on our general concern for the misrepresentation of young people’s communication, in chapter 13 John Drury shows nicely how adults in authority typically view adolescent communication as unskilled and/or unmotivated compared to that of adults. There are significant consequences here of an inherent power imbalance in these relationships. Importantly, however, Drury explains how young people are aware of such imbalances and their communication strategies may represent various ways of coping with such situations. For example, Drury considers various ways in which young people may creatively attempt to redress the imbalance.

Focusing attention on yet another adolescent-adult communication context, Chesebro in chapter 14 draws on instructional communication research, so far conducted mostly in US colleges, to illustrate the possible similarities and differences in young people’s learning environments. Reviewing research on teacher skills such as nonverbal immediacy, content relevance, teacher clarity as well as out-of-class communication, Chesebro looks to provide direction for

future research along these lines, pointing to theories that may help to summarize and promote further understanding in this area.

In drawing the volume to a close, in chapter 15 Susan McKay discusses 'health' as a context for young people's communication. Echoing the various adult-adolescent contexts elsewhere in Part II, McKay starts by noting how young people are often construed as problematic or 'at risk,' and how such discourses frame adolescent interaction with adults. Although McKay refers specifically to health contexts, these are common practices of adult communities interacting with young people. In this case, adolescent risk is typically viewed in terms of a variety of social problems, from teenage pregnancy to smoking, drug abuse and other sensation-seeking risky behavior. McKay considers the various social contexts (such as peer and family relationships) that may influence young people's connection with health and health providers. Nevertheless, the message here is clear: young people are construed as 'at risk' and, in some cases, this simply establishes itself as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Summing up before moving on

As we have suggested elsewhere (Thurlow, 2005), there is a need always to examine, to bring under academic scrutiny, and to problematize the hegemonic benefactors of 'adolescence'—especially those adults (professional and academic, among others) who control a society's mechanisms of representation. Writers like Burman and Griffin remind us that we need always to be wary of merely perpetuating the very category we mean to deconstruct, in the way that the sociolinguistic analysis of gender has, until recently at least, tended to do (e.g., compare the 'two-cultures' and 'performativity' approaches to gender identity; see Cameron, 1997). More often than not, we (as adults) explain, interpret and frame (or simply dismiss) young people's behavior and language as *adolescent*. For this reason at least, it is important that we begin to establish what young people think about themselves (*cf* Williams *et al.*, 1997) and their own communication (*cf* Thurlow, 2001b). We also need to start talking (and publishing) about young people in terms other than their youth; like adults, age is one of any number of identities they may orient to (e.g., ethnicity, class, nationality, institution, physical ability, sexuality, gender). While we cannot be sure that we (as editors and contributors) have ourselves been wholly successful in this regard, a theme which does occur across most of this collection is the authors' concern to challenge many popular assumptions about adolescence. Indeed, a number of the authors are also specifically concerned to confront institutional and academic complicity in misrepresenting or disadvantaging young people.

Notwithstanding this, perhaps the greatest strength of our volume, we believe, is that it covers such a wide range of scholarly backgrounds, theoretical perspectives and methodological styles while focusing on young people's communication experiences and practices. Although there are authors who identify themselves as scholars of language and communication (e.g., de Klerk, McKay, Eckert, Garrett, Chesebro, and ourselves), there are others from social and clinical psychology (e.g., Drury, Noller, Kloep, Hendry, Berger and her colleagues), media and cultural studies (e.g., Wyn, Marwick, Carter, Allan), and education (e.g., O'Flynn, Toomey Zimmerman). We think it is especially important given the topic (i.e., communication) and the domain of social life (i.e., adolescence) that we can offer a more interdisciplinary volume in which contributors are able to draw on their own diverse research in reviewing existing work in each area and pointing to directions for future study. As editors, we are pleased to be able to offer to the growing literature on intergenerational and lifespan communication (see for example Williams & Nussbaum, 2001) this first substantive contribution focused on adolescence.

Notes

1. This comment was made by one of the young male prisoners interviewed by Anita Wilson (2003: 175).
2. This leaflet is also available (24 January 2005) online at <www.rcpsych.ac.uk/info/help/adol>.
3. In a very informative discussion with Johanna Wyn on the issue of naming practices, she and I discussed our reservations also with the pejorative tone of 'youth' in some contexts which, additionally, often implies young men and boys. One is, we concluded, obliged always to select the lesser of several evils.
4. Of course there are exceptions such as more lifespan-oriented scholars like Richard Lerner (e.g., 2002) or Laurence Steinberg (e.g., Steinberg & Morris, 2001).
5. In addition to a chapter on 'communicating with adolescents,' psychiatrist George Orvin's (1995) book *Understanding the Adolescent*, for example, has principle sections titled *Who Are Adolescents?* and *Problems in Adolescence*, chapters in these sections include 'normality and adolescence,' 'adolescents' evolving personal identity,' and 'adolescents' evolving sexual identity.'
6. This program is accompanied by an elaborate website available (25 January 2005) at <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/teenbrain>>. The full program can be viewed in segments by streaming media; we recommend the segment titled *You Just Don't Understand*. Elsewhere on the site, under the heading *Do your teens seem like aliens?*, the producers make available 'resources for parents and teenagers to help improve mutual understanding and communication.'

7. For more on *Kevin*, see the BBC's own webpage at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/guide/articles/h/harryenfieldandc_66601360.shtml>.
8. In the USA, one pop-cultural litmus of social attitudes towards adolescence is the widely syndicated cartoon strip *Zits* by Jerry Scott and Jim Borgman (see www.kingfeatures.com/features/comics/zits/). Setting the tone for many of these apparently harmless portrayals, *Zits* invites readers to 'enter the life of Jeremy Duncan, a 15-year-old aspiring rock musician, riddled with angst, boredom and parents who don't understand anything. Let him show you the wonderfully lousy world of being a 15-year-old. [Also] meet Jeremy's parents ... watch as they continue to try to figure out the mysterious science of parenting a teenager...'
9. Shortly before completing this introduction, I was fortunate to be asked to review the 2003 volume edited by Jannis Androutsopoulos and Alexandra Georgakopoulou (see Thurlow, 2005). While some of the thoughts expressed in the book review are repeated here, I mention it only because I recommend their volume as an excellent complement to our edited collection here. In taking a more micro-level, uniformly qualitative angle, Androutsopoulos and Georgakopoulou present a series of sociolinguistic studies in diverse domains of adolescent life.

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