Narrative Approaches to Conflict Resolution Across Technologically Mediated Landscapes

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ABSTRACT

Young migrants across the globe increasingly interact and socialize with culturally diverse others across technologically mediated spaces. Bicultural and transnational development are becoming norms for contemporary youth as new media technology allows them to engage in interactions with diverse others across multiple cultural landscapes. What cultural tools do young migrants use to resolve conflicts with diverse peers across technologically mediated interpersonal interactions? To answer this question 44 individuals (ages 15-20) participated in a quasi-experimental workshop engaging them in the process of sense-making. During the workshop participants wrote projective narratives in response to a vignette depicting text-massage mediated interaction embedded among monocultural and bicultural groups of peers. Quantitative and qualitative data analyses focus on physical, psychological and communicative conflict resolution strategies used in narrative construction. The results indicate that immigrant youth are able to employ and coordinate varied strategies when approaching conflict resolution across culturally diverse landscapes of social interactions.

KEYWORDS

Bicultural Development, Conflict Resolution, Migrants, Technologically Mediated Spaces, Youth

INTRODUCTION

The widespread use of smartphone-based technologies—such as cross-platform mobile messaging applications—for peer-to-peer communication constitutes a new and important dimension in the study of migrant social and cultural development. Given the speed of contemporary communication and the rapidly increasing movement and mobility of large segments of population, young migrants across the globe are frequently interacting with culturally diverse others across technologically mediated landscapes. Owing largely to time-space compression of interpersonal interaction, migration is no longer seen as a clean, more or less permanent, break with the country of origin (Suarez-Orozco, 2000; Lucić, 2016). Rather, migration is best understood as a multidirectional dynamic movement, a networked system facilitated to a great extent by information and communication technologies such as the Internet and smartphones (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010). As a result, a number of essential questions regarding the abilities of migrants to engage with and maintain interpersonal interactions with others in their host countries, home countries, and across various other transnational landscapes remain largely unanswered.

Human development is rarely a smooth and linear process of growth and maturation. Developmental psychology recognizes that conflict, trouble, crisis, and disequilibrium are fundamentally tied to the development of cognitive and psycho-social functions (Freud, 1923; Piaget, 1932; Erikson, 1968; Kohlberg, 1976; 1981; Bruner, 2002; Turiel, 2002; Daiute, Beykont, Higson-Smith, Nucci, 2006;
Daiute, 2010). For example, Piaget (1932) conceptualizes the development of logical-scientific knowledge as a gradual process of adaptation. He describes adaptation as the establishment of equilibrium between the organism and its environment. Equilibration functions according to the dialectical theory which holds that development occurs when individuals encounter counterevidence to currently held ideas. At this point a conflict caused by the counterevidence motivates a modification to existing logical structures in order to formulate more functional concepts. More recently, within the narrative development framework Bruner (2002) and Daiute (2013) extend the strictly literary element of peripeteia towards the notion of ‘trouble’ in order to highlight its relevance for developmental process. In everyday narratives trouble occurs when something interrupts the expected (canonical or scripted) circumstances, thus disturbing the dramatic pentad. From this perspective, the act of grasping the narrative implicates the developmental process of making sense, through which the narrator or the listener relates its various semantic, pragmatic, and syntagmatic elements to each other. Hence, language actively woven into a narrative serves as a tool for organizing consciousness and perception.

Given the centrality of conflict in developmental theory and the contemporary changes in the mode of social interactions, the question regarding the role of conflict resolution across virtual landscapes is raising to prominence. The present study aims to delineate some answers to this question by empirically examining how young people think about and resolve conflicts with diverse others across technologically mediated spaces, including cross-platform mobile messaging applications and other smartphone platforms that allow for text-based communication. The goals of the study are to situate this inquiry within the framework of cultural historical activity theory and to employ narrative analysis in order to understand what cultural tools are used by youth migrants to resolve conflicts with culturally diverse peers. According to the theoretical perspective advanced in this work, conflict is viewed as normative in social-relational systems, and as such is an integral element of psychological development. Since conflict sometimes has a tendency to harm those involved, it is often tempting to approach it using medical metaphors such as “recovery,” “resilience,” or “treatment” and attempt to mitigate it. Nevertheless, if conflict is viewed as embedded in social practice rather than resulting from bad character, misguided beliefs, or immature judgement, it seems appropriate to consider conflict—like other uncontested social relations—as a developmental process (Daiute, 2006).

Effects of New Media Technology on Social and Cultural Life of Youth

Over the past decade new media technologies, such as the Internet and mobile phones have become deeply embedded in our social life. The primary effect of this shift is that many connections with peoples and social groupings are no longer based on proximity (Urry 2007). New media technologies increasingly allow individuals to keep in touch with a greater number of others by transcending the traditional understanding of space and time (Lucić, 2016). As physical spaces and visceral interpersonal interactions gradually melt into cyberspace, multiple forms of mediated presences increasingly occur throughout objects and carry interpersonal relations across, and into, multiple other social spaces (Chayko, 2007). The second, and perhaps greater, effect is that the states of knowledge, meaning, and understanding are altered and shift as the proportion of technologically mediated interpersonal interactions across contemporary societies grows. This is mainly due to the transition from a spoken to a written mode of communication (particularly in discursive interpersonal interactions via new media), and to the effects of varied modes of discourse in a largely metaphysical environment. A similar shift was earlier recognized and theoretically described by Benjamin (1936), Wittgenstein (1953), and Lyotard (1979) in their respective fields of inquiry.

In our contemporary society, the use of new media communication technologies is especially high among youth. Aided by the convenience and constant access provided by mobile devices, especially
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