

Peer Group Communication at the Onset of Adulthood: Algerian Youth in France

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The study of adolescence in language and culture research has undergone a profound transformation: as Bucholtz (2002) notes, the peer group has replaced adulthood as the standard by which to measure teen culture. This shift has resulted in considerable scholarship on how peer groups influence communicative practices during adolescence. Yet relatively little is known about how peer groups influence communicative practices at the onset of adulthood. Eckert (2003) claims that researchers should apply knowledge from language and youth research to adulthood in order to understand how the peer group functions in life stages beyond adolescence. We might then understand whether identity construction, language, and peer groups function together differently in later life.

Although I will not be dealing with adult peer groups in this paper, I hope to begin to respond to Eckert's request by looking at the ways that female peer groups function not only to socialize pre-teens and young teens into transgressive communicative practices, but also to socialize older teens out of those practices. In my research conducted with French adolescents of primarily Algerian descent, I found that peer groups not only facilitate and encourage transgressive communicative styles at the onset of adolescence, but also exert social pressure on girls to abandon these styles as they mature. Here, rather than considering peer groups narrowly in relation to school grade, I define a peer group as children who regularly interact and roughly encompass a similar age set, including age differences of up to several (3 or 4) years.

Early research on adolescence in cultural studies has tended to place undue emphasis on peer groups as agents of social transformation and resistance, a pattern that is even more pronounced in studies of immigrant teens. As Soysal (2001:99) notes, "the main body of contemporary literature on (migrant) youth takes as its vantage point the delineation of (sub)cultural formations and uncritically assigns creativity, and resistance to them." Similarly, Griffin (1993) notes that researchers in both the United States and Britain have tended to describe subcultural forms among male youth as either exclusively resisting or exclusively colluding with dominant cultural practices. Fewer researchers have grappled with the ambivalence inherent to most adolescent cultural practices, which

* This research was completed with the support of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, the University of Texas at Austin, and the French government. I am solely responsible for any errors or omissions.

transcend simple definitions of either resistance or conformity.

Contrary to the model of resistant male teens, research on adolescent girls initially assumed that they had a frustrated relationship to what Hebdige called the “signs of forbidden identity” supposedly typical of youth subcultures (1979:3). However, McRobbie and Garber (1975) voiced an early feminist critique of this assumption which was followed by a rich tradition of research on adolescent girls’ communicative practices in linguistics and anthropology. Such work (e.g. Bucholtz, 2002; Eckert, 1989; McRobbie & Garber, 1975) has emphasized the centrality of girls to teen cultural production without assuming that these practices exclusively represent either social resistance or collusion.

My own perspective emerges from this feminist tradition and, accordingly, assumes that girls’ peer group interactions may involve both resistance to and reinforcement of ideologies of gender and language. The data that I analyze here was collected during ethnographic fieldwork from 1999 to 2000 among French female teens of mostly North African and specifically Algerian descent. Among French children of North African immigrants, the peer group is linguistically and culturally distinct from both their mostly Arabic-speaking parents and from non-immigrant French citizens. Ethnographic research that I conducted in a low-income housing project or *cit * outside Paris, demonstrated that during the transition into adolescence, girls’ communicative practices change a great deal. For example, during early adolescence, girls instigate rounds of ritualized insults and bragging that are considered emblematic of a tough local identity, and by symbolic extension, masculinity. Although girls are sometimes criticized for using these purportedly masculine styles by their male and female peers, many girls frame their use of them as a way to build a youthful personal reputation that is non-traditional, or in the words of one teen, unlike “those girls that stay home to do the dishes.”¹

I will turn now to an example where the peer group acts as a means for a younger girl to practice these aggressive and competitive verbal exchanges with older teens. I argue that this example illustrates the ways that peer groups serve to socialize younger girls in my fieldsite into transgressive verbal practices that represent gender and language norms distinct from their parents’ generation. On a sunny spring day in 1999, I found Mina,² a girl of 12, sitting along the rim of a neighborhood playground where older girls would often gather to talk. Like her peers, Mina was fascinated by my being American and proceeded to tell me about the clothing that her older brother had brought her from ‘les States’. Her enthusiasm for comparing the price and quality of brands of clothing continued to be central to our discussion when two older girls stopped by, Brigitte and Sarah, 14 and 15 years old, respectively. Soon all three girls were comparing brands and competitively bragging about the quality of their clothing and shoes, citing the country that produced each product. Much as these girls and other male and female teens use brands of clothing as resources to construct a local system of social distinction, they use competitive verbal genres to construct their individual reputations as competent performers of local speech genres. Brigitte and Sarah were close friends; their relationship with Mina was based upon being neighbors and attending the same school, as well as knowing her older brothers.

In the playful bragging and ritualized insults about clothing and brand names that

¹ Her original words in French were, “*On n’est pas comme ces filles qui restent   la maison pour faire la vaisselle.*”

² This name is a pseudonym as are the others in this paper.

follow, Mina and the older girls turn their keen interest in these status markers into a motif on which to build a verbal competition. Mina's attempts to out-brag these older girls seems to be a bid for their attention as well as an attempt to craft a verbal performance that would earn their approval. Featured in this example is the genre of competitive bragging which teens in French *cités*, or suburban housing projects, refer to as *mettre un coup de pression* or 'to make a blow of pressure'.

- (1)
- 1 Sarah *Moi, mon pul c'est un Décathlon*
Me, my sweater is a Décathlon
- 2 *et mon slip c'est un Sloggy, alors hein, ta gueule!*
and my underwear's a Sloggy, so huh, shut up!
- 3 Brigitte *C'est quoi la marque! C'est quoi la marque!*
What's the brand! What's the brand!
- 4 Mina [pointing to the other girls' sweatpants and then her own]
Hé Décathlon, Décathlon, Décathlon et k- et et Air Max.
Hey Décathlon, Décathlon, Décathlon and k- and and Air Max.
- 5 *Alors s'il te plaît ta bouche maintenant*
So please shut your mouth now
- 6 *et **ka'b** chez-toi don- **druk!***³
and go home no- now!
- 7 Brigitte *Hé Mina elle met des coups de pression en ce moment.*
Hey Mina's making those blows of pressure lately.
- 8 *J'n'sais pas ce qu'elle a dans le cul.*
I don't know what she has up her ass.

This exchange demonstrates how adolescent girls use tough, competitive verbal styles that are common to this and other French *cités* in order to distinguish themselves among their peers. The example also illustrates the importance of the female peer group for socializing younger speakers into these potentially gender-transgressive practices. In a pattern common to this genre of verbal competition, here two of the girls, Sarah and Mina, exchange bragging and insults while a third, Brigitte evaluates the interaction. Initially, the older girl Sarah challenges the other girls by bragging about her Decathlon sweater and her Sloggy underwear, completing her utterance with the insult, "so huh, shut up" (in line 2). The younger girl Mina responds to this challenge by pointing out that both she and Brigitte are also wearing Decathlon and by bragging that only she is wearing Air Max sneakers (in line 4). Like Sarah, she completes her counter-challenge with insults: "shut your mouth" and "go home now" (in lines 5 & 6).

The older girls' recognition and apparent approval of Mina's verbal challenge is evidenced in Brigitte naming it as a "blow of pressure" in line 7 and by her irreverent but

³Bolded words appearing within examples are loan words from Arabic.

playful teasing of Mina, “I don’t know what she has up her ass” in line 8. However, elements of Mina’s performance demonstrate that she is not yet as confident a performer of these exchanges as her older peers: Mina corrects herself and repeats ‘and’ (in line 4) and initially mispronounces *druk*, the Arabic word for ‘now’ (in line 6). This hesitancy seems indicative of Mina’s status as a younger and less experienced verbal challenger, who loses her nerve when responding to the older girl, Sarah. Nonetheless, Sarah’s and Brigitte’s willingness to engage Mina in this interaction shows how these ritualized interactions are a means for older adolescents to socialize their younger peers into performances of local speech genres. In addition, due to their local affiliation with toughness and masculinity, these performances are evidence of the ways that older girls socialize younger girls into communicative styles that transgress the conservative gender norms typically espoused by their parents.

I will turn now to evidence of the ways that female peer groups may also serve to socialize adolescent girls out of transgressive communicative practices during late adolescence. During follow up research in 2004 and 2006, I observed that my older female consultants exhibited transgressive communicative styles significantly less often, including speech and dress styles thought to be tough and, by some, purportedly ‘too’ masculine for girls’ use. In contrast, my male consultants did not exhibit a significant shift in verbal and dress styles, although they too were at the cusp of adulthood. During late adolescence, girls experience pressure to conform to heterosexual norms for gender and sexuality that is sometimes played out in moralistic discourses that invoke the stigmatized space of the *cit *, (or low-income housing project).

Older girls that foray too far outside the confines of respectable feminine communicative styles are admonished by their peers and parents to will stop acting like *une fille de la cit *, or ‘girl from the *cit *.’ This negative social label implies a girl’s inappropriate affiliation with the tough, urban space of the low-income housing project in which they live. At play is the fact that public space in this and other *cit s* is locally and nationally constructed as morally stigmatized due to a supposed affiliation with illicit behaviors such as drug dealing. Thus acting like a “girl from the *cit *” through exhibiting symbolically related dress and verbal styles is considered potentially damaging to older girls’ *respect* or ‘respect’. This apparent moral and communicative shift at the onset of late adolescence and adulthood seems linked to the potential of becoming sexually active, when female peer groups begin to emphasize an appearance of *le respect* in observance of Arab-Muslim cultural models for young women’s sexual and social modesty. These moral discourses are played out in the context of diaspora, where cultural and religious practices bound to achieving *le respect* are measured and evaluated against supposedly more traditional cultural and religious practices in the ‘home country’ or *bled*, in this case usually Algeria. That is, *le respect* is not just a reproduction of Arab-Muslim values that are imported wholesale from North Africa, but a set of moral discourses and practices that emerge in France.

To illustrate how older girls socialize each other out of transgressive practices, I draw upon the following excerpt recorded while sitting in the playground with another group of adolescent girls, that again includes Brigitte (14), and two other girls, A cha (15) and Fatna (16). In the excerpt, the younger girls perform another transgressive verbal genre that I call ‘parental name calling’. By using first and last names of a peer’s parents in a public context, adolescents subvert a name taboo—that is, the avoidance of personal names—widely practiced in North Africa. In example two, the two younger girls A cha (15) and Brigitte (14) construct aggressive hypothetical reported speech for the parents of

a nearby male peer, and publicly use their given names, Yemina and Omar Ramdani (in lines 1-4). Through these culturally transgressive performances, young Arab-French teens construct their peer group in contrast to the cultural ideal of *le respect* (or ‘respect’) that their immigrant parents embody. On this particular day, however, Aïcha’s mother happens to be sitting across the playground, in hearing range of the exchange. Upon noticing this fact, the eldest girl, Fatna, promptly scolds Aïcha for breeching rules of *le respect* in view of her mother.

- (2)
- 1 Aïcha *J’m’appelle Yemina Ramdani.*
 My name is Yemina Ramdani.
- 2 *Y’a un problème!? Y’a un problème!?*
 You got a problem!? You got a problem!?
- 3 Brigitte *Yemina Ramdani! Y’a un problème!?*
 Yemina Ramdani! You got a problem!?
- 4 Aïcha *J’m’appelle Omar Ramdani. Y’a un problème?!*
 My name is Omar Ramdani. You got a problem?
- 5 Fatna *Shh! shh! Ta daronne est en train de te dire*
 Shh! shh! Your mom is telling you
- 6 *“mais qu’est-ce qui te prend? Normale toi?”*
 “what is wrong with you? [Are] you normal?”
- 7 Aïcha *C’est vrai?* [whispered talk]
 Is it true?
- 8 Fatna *Bah elle te regarde.*
 Well she’s looking at you.

By attempting to curtail Aïcha’s loud public performance through shaming her (e.g., “what is wrong with you? [Are] you normal?”), Fatna demonstrates that she is attentive to her peer’s mother’s need for ‘respect’ in this public setting. Furthermore, the example demonstrates an older adolescent, Fatna, attempting to get the younger Aïcha to conform to a standard of respectful behavior. Fatna seems to be attempting to socialize Aïcha into a standard of respectful interaction that fulfills expectations for mature adult female behavior in a public setting.

In negotiating such conflicting interactional expectations, Aïcha and Fatna are also negotiating what is considered ‘respectful’ behavior in an intergenerational setting. This example shows Aïcha and Brigitte using parental name-calling on terms that are consistent with the face-needs of her own adolescent peer group. In this way, adolescents are developing an emergent code of behavior, in which parental name-calling and other aggressive verbal play figures centrally, despite or perhaps because of its flouting of adult rules for ‘respect’. At the same time, the example shows Fatna’s interest in conforming and urging her younger peer to conform to adult standards of respectful interaction in this intergenerational setting. As such, the exchange shows the ways that during late adolescence, girls take on new social and verbal stances toward the cultural value of *le*

respect.

In this way, adolescent peer groups serve not only to socialize speakers into transgressive communicative practices early on, but also to socialize older speakers out of these transgressive practices. This process can be viewed in terms of girls' own shifting moral position toward the cultural value of *le respect* as they move toward womanhood. At play here too might be Fatna's desire to demonstrate her own shift toward a more respectful demeanor in my presence as an adult researcher. Even so, this impulse would indicate a desire on her part to conform to expectations for mature or 'respectful' female behavior.

A similar type of negotiation among female adolescent peers occurs in relation to gendered values regarding styles of dress. Although the last example showed Fatna championing 'respectful' feminine behavior, she herself was criticized by her peers for adopting dress and verbal styles that were considered transgressive due to their association with masculinity and a tough *cit * identity. In example three, Amel and Mounia (both around 12) discuss Fatna's transgressive dress styles with two 25-year-old male tutors, Momo and Sami, in a neighborhood association. At the time of the recording, the two younger girls were sitting with the adult mentors in the kitchen when Fatna walked in to greet them and then entered another room. When she had left, Mounia initiated a critical discussion about what she was wearing. In this exchange, Mounia notes that Fatna's 'feminine' dress style (consisting of jeans rather than a sweat suit) was uncharacteristic. The conversation then turned to comparing her former style to that of a 'racaille', a symbolic masculine icon of French *cit s*, known for drug dealing and tough behavior, that corresponds roughly to the American gansta persona. Finally, Mounia voices her disapproval of Fatna's 'masculine' dress style to the older girl by attributing the group's critical talk exclusively to the adult mentors, Sami and Momo.

- (3)
- 1 Mounia *H  elle a son jean Fatna? Vous avez pas remarqu *
Hey is she wearing her jeans Fatna? You didn't notice
- 2 *qu'elle s'est habill e en meuf pour une fois?*
that she's dressed like a girl for once?
- 3 Momo *Ah ouais c'est vrai en plus.*
Oh yeah, it's true even.
- 4 *Je croyais qu'elle  tait en racaille avec un gros survet.*
I thought she was in 'gansta' style with a big sweat suit.
- 5 *Tu te rappelles avec sa veste rouge?*
You remember with her red jacket?
- 6 Sami [laughter]
- 7 Amel *Elle l'a encore?*
Does she still have it?
- 8 Sami *Allez!*
Let's go! [Let's start on your homework]

- 9 Amel *Hagar!* [to Momo]
Bully!
- 10 *Fatna! Ils parlent de toi!* [yelling to Fatna in another room]
Fatna! They're talking about you!
- 11 *Ils disent ta veste rouge ta' bakri de bakri.*
They're talking about your red jacket from before from before.
- Ils ont dit combien de fois tu t'habillais en mec.*
They said how many times you dressed like a guy.

[Fatna comes into the kitchen and looks accusingly at Sami and Momo.]

- 12 Sami *Nan on se permet pas.*
No we wouldn't allow ourselves to do that.
- 13 Momo *Tu sais très bien qu'on se permet pas nous.*
You know very well that we wouldn't allow ourselves to do that.
- 14 Fatna [To Amel and Mounia]
Sur le Qur'an, toujours en train de manger.
On the Qur'an, [you're] eating all the time.
- 15 *Vous ne changez pas vous.*
You two don't change.

The younger girls' criticisms of Fatna's dress styles and Fatna's critical response to them, "eating all the time, you two don't change" (lines 14 and 15) are indicative of the ways that the peer group reinforces normative gender roles specific to age. In this exchange, the two younger girls shame an older adolescent for violating norms of femininity. The example thus shows that it is not only older girls that socialize younger ones into normative gender roles. Rather, socialization within the peer group seems dependent upon the age of the girl in question, with transgressive gender behaviors becoming increasingly non-normative during late adolescence and at the onset of adulthood. To corroborate this point, during follow-up research in 2004 and 2006, Fatna had dropped all vestiges of her purportedly masculine styles and had long dyed blonde hair, and wore jewelry along with feminine-styled clothing.

My data demonstrate that peer groups not only contribute to transgressive communicative practices in early adolescence, but also serve as a vehicle for adopting more conservative gender and cultural values at the onset of adulthood. It is my hope that this research will contribute to an understanding not only of how cultural values are transmitted among young French Muslims but also to the comparative study of peer groups and communication at the onset of adulthood.

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