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KALEIDOSCOPIIC PROCESS: THE CONSTRUCTION OF ADOLESCENCE FROM TEENAGERS' AND PARENTS' POINT OF VIEW*

Elena Bordin** and Massimo Giliberto***

ABSTRACT

Looking at adolescence from teenagers and parents' point of view might channel different narratives about what this process can be and how they both construe their relationship. The present work is a two stages preliminary research: in the first one both adolescents' and parents' reciprocal constructions about themselves, the others and adolescence were collected. In the second stage authors presented to the same groups of participants their previously collected perceptions, in the form of Perceiver-Element Grid, and interviewed them about their responses to these. This work will share the outcomes of inviting parents and adolescents to "take the role of the other", to see themselves through the other's eyes. Further both clinical and research applications will be discussed.

Key words: Personal Construct Psychology, adolescence, parenthood, parent – adolescents relationship, Perceivers – Elements Grid (PEG).

This preliminary research is born from the interest in deepen our knowledge about adolescence starting from one particular aspect: the parents-adolescents relationship and how it channels their own and reciprocal role construction.

From the point of view of George Kelly's Personal Construct Psychology (Kelly, 1955) (a theoretical model which refers to the wider epistemological constructivist framework), a person can be considered as scientists who formulate and verify their own theories; who actively and personally interpret and construct the world in which they live. A person who elaborates, working from their own experiences, their hypotheses – as rationally as viscerally perceived – and, in the immediate, verifies them. From

this point of view adolescence could be seen as a process defined by the way adolescent and parent interpret it, taking into account that both are main actors in a process they inseparably co-define together.

Moreover, we have to face its cultural construction, that is, the way in which, in our culture, people construe this age. In other words, both adolescents and parents have to face this common construction in order to give sense to their relationship and themselves.

1. METHOD

Starting from these initial considerations, we created an ongoing preliminary research study, organized in two different stages to understand how parents and adolescents both construe their own and other's role and which processes are implied in this way of construing.

We recruited two groups of participants. The first was a group of twelve teenagers from 17 to 20 years old (5 boys and 7 girls) who defined themselves "adolescents". Ten adults, who defined themselves as "the parents of adolescents", formed the second group of participants. In this group we had four fathers and six mothers. Only in five cases parents and adolescents who belong to the same family attended the study.

In Stage 1 we organized two different focus groups in order to interview adolescents and parents about the perception of both their own and the other's construction of adolescence.

We asked them questions such as:

- How do you perceive the other (parents or adolescents)?
- How does the other (parents or adolescents) perceive you?

- How do you think the other (parents or adolescents) perceives you?
- How do you imagine the other perceives themselves?

After the focus groups, the answers were organised in the form of a Perceiver-Element Grid (PEG) (Procter, 2005) (Fig. 1): a qualitative research method that help to understand reciprocal construction about self and others.

Fig. 1 Perceivers Elements Grid

As in Stage 1, in Stage 2 we tried to involve the same participants in two focus groups, but the two groups were slightly different: the group of adolescents was comprised by 10 people (2 females, 8 males). Two of them had not participated in the first focus group, but were curious to share their ideas about the topic.

Five adults formed the second group of participants. In this group we had two fathers and three mothers. Four of them had a son or daughter who attended both stages of the research.

2. STAGE 1 FINDINGS

2.1 General observations

First of all, it seemed that both groups have a more articulate construction of the other than themselves: parents describe adolescence in a more detailed way than teenagers, and teenagers define parents in a richer way than the parents themselves.

Secondly, apparently, teenagers better construe the parents' point of view than parents construe the teenagers' point of view. The number of constructs elicited by the two groups suggested it.

Thirdly, our participants seemed to confirm a construction of adolescence with its charge of perceived negativity.

2.2. How parents and adolescents construe 'being adolescents'

If we deepen how parents and adolescents interpret 'being adolescents', we could recognise some common and very meaningful labels for both groups, i.e.: conflict, problems, growing up, experience and worries. However, even if common and core, implications for both groups are different: what is a way to make a difference and find a new position for teenagers, for parents is a pure contraposition, without any direction.

Adolescents, on the one hand, define adolescence as

rebellion, discovery and growth (towards adulthood), abnormality and gorda (in youth Italian slang it means something like full of excitement). Meanwhile, the other side of every exploration, nevertheless, implies danger, anxiety and, sometimes, failure. So, in an adolescents' narrative about adolescence, constructs like problems, depression and conflict with parents and uncertainty also appear.

On the contrary, in thinking about adolescence, parents also elicited labels like exaggeration and a lack of values. This idea, for them, appears remarkable in their construction of adolescence. In this sort of moral flattening, moreover, parents pose constructions like indolence, boredom and lack of responsibility.

2.3 How parents and adolescents construe 'being parents'

Deepening how parents and adolescents construe "being parents", we discovered that teenagers underline, a wide use of comparisons by parents as an educational strategy. According to our group of teenagers, parents appear engaged in comparing and contrasting:

- the adolescence of teenagers with their own adolescence;
- different historical periods;
- the behaviour of siblings.

From these contrasts, teenagers appear to be judged and evaluated, as a proof they are wrong.

In a few words, teenagers construe parents as people who judge through comparisons. Moreover, they impose their judgement on them.

Intriguingly, the group of parents tends (but not completely) to describe themselves as guides and mentors; people open to dialogue with their teenagers, notwithstanding some difficulties.

It is interesting to notice that the group of adolescents, instead of considering parents as guides, see them as insecure and indecisive.

Both groups construe parents as worried. But, while parents stress their worry about the environment, the group of adolescents underlines the lack of trust.

So, both groups share the same construction of experience, but with two different conclusions: on the one hand, parents construe themselves as being legitimately scared, protective and, at the same time, trust dispensers; on the other hand, adolescents construe parents as hyper-protective and lacking in trust. Moreover, teenagers

believe that parents think autonomy is a good thing, but they suffer because of it.

2.4 Sociality games: how I think you think...

From Personal Construct Psychology, Kelly use Sociality to explain that “to the extent that one person construes the construction processes of another, he may play a role in a social process involving the other person” (Kelly, 1955, p. 66). With this preliminary research we wanted to understand to what extent parents and adolescents interpret and construe the way in which the others give sense to their roles, and in particular to their relationships.

When we invited the participants in both groups to imagine how the others perceive themselves, sociality decreased, at least in terms of the number of labels used during the answers.

Strikingly, the first thing that captured our attention is that adolescents construe the point of view of parents, apparently, better than vice-versa. When we invited them to imagine how their parents perceived them, they used more or less the same constructions that parents used.

For example, for them, parents conceived adolescence as a period of laziness, with problems, without values and priorities, a state fluctuating between happiness, amusement and depression and unresolved conflict. Themes actually emerged in the focus group of parents. Although they had different implications, our adolescents think that parents perceive themselves as guides, worried and “I trust in you but not in the others”.

On the contrary, the only things parents were able to anticipate about the adolescents’ constructions of themselves, were: being too oppressive, making them too responsible and not trusting in them. All themes, of course, were linked with the super-construction of conflict.

Anyway, not everything was perceived as totally negative or under the umbrella of conflict. Both groups elicited constructs summarised under a general construction such as a good time, albeit chaotic.

3. STAGE 1 DISCUSSION SUMMARY

In short, after the Stage 1, we reflected that:

- In order to understand why adolescents construe better parents rather than vice-versa, we have hypothesized that since they are in movement - like a traveller that becomes aware of their culture after leaving home, and changing their identity during the journey - our adolescents become aware

of their parents, comparing themselves with them and, at the same time, becoming someone else.

- Parents, by contrast, seem to suffer this ongoing change, becoming a little disoriented. They might resist any self-reconstruction, choosing not to consider alternative outcomes from their children and to use steady and firm definitions about them.
- Growing up through this sort of differentiation means exploring limits and going beyond borders. And this is understandable. As Kelly suggested, we construe our world through dichotomous constructs, that is difference. In coherence with the previous point, only when we expand our horizons and watch our background from the outside, are we then able to make explicit what was implicit and, creating a new contrast pole, make a difference, take a new position.
- At the same time, related to parents, adolescents also seem to undertake this process but with the aim of protecting the space of their active exploration of their system.
- Both seem involved in minimizing incompatibilities, maintaining either the stability of their world or the search for new worlds. So, for instance, they may think that “the parents are nothing but parents” or “adolescents are nothing but adolescents”. This gives their identities the status of ‘real things’, and a real thing is incontestable. In this case, comparison will tend towards opposition and conflict instead of sociality. And this is what we wanted to further explore through Stage 2 of our research.

4. STAGE 2 FINDINGS

During Stage 2 we showed all the participants both their own and the others’ focus group results in order to acknowledge them and elaborate their point of view. So, the participants first read their own PEG (Procter, 2005) and then viewed the other’s PEG answers. Throughout the entire meetings they were invited to share comments and impressions about themselves and others.

The main question was: in which way will our participants read and compare their constructions and the constructions of the other group?

4.1 General findings while participants read their own previous answers

First of all, reading their own answers elicits very different reactions in all participants. If adolescents

mostly confirmed previous ideas and deepened some elements, parents seemed surprised about the answers they had initially given. Parents shared a need to disconfirm and to distance themselves from their earlier affirmations on adolescents. Particularly, they try to put 'evidence' in favour of the presence of values in their teenagers, despite having previously affirmed the contrary. This issue appeared really threatening to them. Many of them accused one of the parents to have been too "rigid" and to have strongly channelized the first meeting.

4.2 General findings while adolescents read others' previous answers

We noticed two different reactions between the two groups when they read the others' focus group results as well. The adolescents expressed disappointments, sadness and anger in terms of validation of anticipations about their parents' point of view: they hoped to read something different, but they found exactly what they had anticipated.

Linked to this, the sensations of being judged and not completely seen by their parents were present as well. In our opinion, the perceived judgment compromised the possibility for adolescents to see the world through the parents' eyes, most of all, concerning parents' constructions about adolescence: they did not try to understand why parents chose to say some characteristics rather than others, they rejected them as not belonging to them.

Moreover, while comparing their PEG with the one of their parents, teenagers observed that parents had never mentioned comparison as one of their behaviours, and was repeatedly stated by them (teenagers). During the meeting teenagers intensely discussed about this issue and different position arose. Some of them thought that comparison and judgment keep parents safe from question themselves, someone else reckoned that such 'comparison' could be used by parents in order to motivate their children and to drive them towards what they think is a good direction to follow. The main issue was that adolescents feel pushed more than motivated, pressed more than driven.

Interestingly, during the meetings some adolescents tried to understand what parents were engaged in doing so. For example, they observed that parents might consider it important to protect their children.

In the adolescents' opinion, the pole "to protect their own children" is opposite to "total indifference" and could be chosen by parents as way of confirming their

presence, their interest.

Moreover they perfectly anticipate the threat of adult on being parent of adolescents and interestingly they spontaneously try to understand in which way their parents can experiment within the focus group. At the end of the session, they put forward the hypothesis that, during the focus groups, parents could have been feeling judged by other parents, by sharing their experiences or their relational difficulties. The idea gradually emerged that, in sharing their own opinions or experiences, the parents could risk showing their failures to other parents, and therefore it could threaten their parental role.

On the contrary, we observed that the group of adolescents experienced the focus groups as an opportunity to share and encounter other people similar to them.

4.3 General findings while parents read others' previous answers

Parents did not seem interested in the same argument rather structured the words of the teenagers when they indicated some negative feeling or state, like sadness, depression and problems. They expressed apprehension and concern about these perceptions. Regarding the adolescents' view of their parents, the same parents expressed acceptance and agreement.

When the parents examined the characterization adolescents gave about themselves, they immediately focused on negative items, such as: abnormal, problems and depression. Interestingly, they did not try to understand what teenagers meant by these terms (sociality), even when encouraged it was really challenging for them. On the contrary, they became concerned.

After discussing this sudden reaction with them, it emerged that it is quite important – we would say core – to be informed of whether their sons and daughters are fine or if they need help, because as parents they need be there for them. The teenagers' previous hypothesis seemed to be confirmed. Only one parent in five thought "rebellion" is fundamental and healthy during adolescence.

On the other hand, while the parents looked at the adolescents' description of them, they, unexpectedly, did not ask many questions about it. They seemed to readily accept the adolescents' responses without any further in-depth analysis.

4.4 Something more about differences

Through sharing and comparing the different points of view, both groups identified fundamental themes at the

basis of their relationship, such as: trust, dialogue and power. What captured our attention was that, despite sharing these constructions, adolescents and parents give them opposite meanings. To deepen this process, we will now present the how participants construe the dimension of trust in their relationship.

4.4.1 Two different constructions of Trust

When speaking about parent-teenager relationships, adolescents seemed to look at trust as the range of space that allows them to undertake experiments and have experiences. It is like the space they need in order to move.

Parents, meanwhile, consider trust a reward in the case of adolescents following their “rules”. Parents feel that their trust in their children should not to be shown so explicitly.

The parents describe themselves as trust dispensers and, additionally, they need to be protective and repeat healthy warnings many times.

Unfortunately, as you will notice, a vicious circle emerges: thinking they can trust the adolescents, parents want to be sure they understand rules and follow their advice. But adolescents do not interpret this behaviour as protective, but, rather, as a form of control.

In this scenario rebellion appears: adolescents explained to us that they sometimes choose something they would never do (i.e.: smoking, drinking, misbehaving) to defy the control they are experiencing.

We suppose that with this rebellion adolescents would experience the chance to choose and to have a prominent role in their own life, even if a slot change might be necessary.

We think that, in most parents’ eyes, rebellion is nothing but the sign adolescents do not deserve trust.

And the circle goes on.

5. FINAL DISCUSSION

In both stages the parents’ group use processes like: to minimize incompatibilities, try to justify their hypothesis as the correct ones, define adolescence and adolescents as “nothing but...” something. They seemed scared by their potential reciprocal judgement from other parents. Perhaps, for this very reason, they tended to limit their elaboration of both the results of their own PEG and the adolescents’ one. Working with them was not so easy. The threat was increasingly evident when they tried to use us as psychologists or to extort our confirmation.

Many differences arise between the two groups, often

in terms of considering processes in the opposite way. Adolescents consider ‘trust’ to be a necessary space to explore. Parents think of ‘trust’ as a prize for the correct way to behave. Adolescents construe ‘dialogue’ as sharing experiences and opinions. They think that parents are not able to do this, and this was confirmed from parents’ answers. In our group of parents, indeed, ‘dialogue’ means to be listened to by the teenagers.

If, generally speaking, adolescents look more able to construe the processes of construction of their parents and also appear more elaborative than them, both groups are threatened by considering the areas where the others are more ready to experiment: ‘exploration’ for adolescents and ‘protection’ for parents. Parents intended exploration as a dangerous and unpredictable behaviour, but also a threat to their role. The more aggressive the adolescents are, the more protective the parents become. Adolescents, although not completely, perceive protection as control. The more protective the parents are, the more rebellious they become. Both groups feel they are not recognised by the other.

In both stages parents and adolescents seem involved in the attempt to maintain a precarious equilibrium between maintaining their relationship and the necessity to take into account the fact that everything is changing.

6. Further elaboration

This preliminary research helped us to deepen a clinical issue that is not always easy to elaborate: the parent – adolescents relationship. We think that a wider analysis and research is needed to confirm this previous hypothesis. But on these bases we think that this work can provide some clinical consideration, such as the need:

- To help parents to construe their role as a process (not something static), which can be modified and revised.
- To help parents to elaborate the anticipation of the invalidation of their core role that their children’s experiments do arise.
- To help parents to construe alternatives in education starting from the understanding of their own and their children’s experiments.

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