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Cops, Kids and Culture

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I'm going to address the relationship between young people and police from the perspective of human development. I'm acquainted with mainstream understandings of human development and of adolescence in particular, and of the general approaches used to understand and alleviate the tensions between law enforcement and young people. And while I believe the scholars who generate the theories are intelligent and the practitioners who carry out the interventions are well meaning and caring, I also think that both are working with outmoded and ineffective understandings of people, relationships, development and learning.

But I'm not here to tell you all that's wrong. Far from it. I want to share with you some new understandings, creative practices and exciting discoveries that are happening outside of mainstream psychology and youth development theory. And also to tell you what the historians of science and social science already know—that the truly creative work, the innovative work, the breakthrough, cutting-edge work, the work that turns out to make a meaningful difference in how we as people approach the thorniest problems of the day takes place at the borders, not in the mainstream. Why is this so? Because that location at the border—outside the box, to use the popular phrase—is where you can be

free from what the pre-eminent social psychologist Kenneth Gergen calls “the tyranny of the normal” (Gergen, 1999, p. 2).

The tyranny of normal ways of relating, which look like we’re fixed characters acting out an already scripted play. The tyranny of a still behavioristic psychology that has us believing we can change an individual’s or a group’s behavior, despite repeated failure. The tyranny of the normal cognitive approach to dealing with tough social problems, which assumes that if you learn the facts—how to have safe sex, what the traditions of a particular ethnic group are, or how to act when a policeman stops you—then the problem will vanish.

As I share with you alternatives to these mainstream views, try to be aware of how some might surprise you or be different from how you have thought about these things. First and foremost is to not view human beings as individual passive objects but as social creators of culture. By culture I mean the entirety of how we live our lives, including how we see and understand and relate, where our understandings and beliefs and practice came from and how we as people might transform them. This is a much broader understanding of culture than the usual reference to music, film, theatre, television, etc., or to the ways that different groupings of people dress, the foods they eat, and the holidays they celebrate. This broader understanding of culture means that we need to understand and explore relationships, such as that between the police and young people, as cultural phenomena. And since no one creates culture but people, it also means we

need to take responsibility for the culture we've created, rather than looking elsewhere to place blame or give credit.

A second escape from the normal is to understand people not in terms of behavior—which makes us no different in kind from lions, giraffes, amoebas and ants—but in terms of human activity. I'm not using activity in the everyday sense of the word to mean doing something but in the specialized sense that psychologists on the border use it—to refer to the particular doing of transforming qualitatively who we are as individuals and as a species, in other words, the qualitative transformation that is development and that is culture. Activity draws attention to our capacity to create something new out of what exists, to engage in a process of transforming where and how we are now into something and somewhere other—without knowing what or where we're going to wind up. A human activity perspective relates to people not merely as active agents, but as activity-ists—transformers of our current conditions and environments and perceptions and understandings. As activity-ists, for example, infants become children and children become adolescents (and adolescents become adults) by virtue of engaging with other people in the activity of shaping and reshaping themselves and their environments. Human development is not something that happens to us. We create it through our activity. And if we stop creating together, then development stops.

Intimately related to the importance of human activity is a new understanding of play and performance. The normal view is to see play in contrast to work, something unserious, what little kids do, and what adults sometimes do in their time off. And most play, from

adolescence on, is game play—competitive, rule-governed, with winners and losers. I love games and have nothing negative to say about them. But there's more to play than games. When little children play they usually have no goal other than playing what they're playing. If there are any rules, they're usually made up in the playing rather than beforehand. In play, children creatively imitate and amplify other people in their lives—their brothers and sisters and parents and grandparents, and TV, storybook and toy characters. They create scenes and stories.

This kind of play is more like performing in a play than playing a game of basketball. Unlike later game play, in their pretend play, children are who they are and, at the same time, other than who they are. They are doing what's familiar to them and, at the same time, doing things that are brand new, things that are beyond them. And they do this all day long. We let very young children perform ahead of themselves—speaking before they know how, drawing pictures, reading books and much more. That's how they learn and develop.

This performing kind of play and these spaces for performance are what's essential to development and learning—not only in early childhood but for all of us at all ages. Because it's when we're performing—doing things that are new to us and that don't feel natural—that we are able to break from the tyranny of the normal and create ourselves, our relationships and our culture.

With these new concepts of culture, human activity and play as performance, we can look at the relationship between young people and the police and at approaches to improving it.

By all accounts, relationships between the police and young people are not good. Some argue that this has always been the case and chalk it up to adolescence being a time of rebellion against authority. Others claim that things are worse today, that anti-police and anti-youth sentiment are increasing because of increased violence and increased police presence, adding that the most tense relationships are between African American males and the police. For all the concern, it's curious that not a whole lot of research has been done. And when surveys and interviews of attitudes and perceptions are done, rarely are the voices of young people included or, for that matter as far as I know, are voices of the police included.

Among the few in-depth studies of young people's attitudes toward police was done by CUNY Graduate Center professor Michelle Fine and her colleagues (and published in 2003 in the *Journal of Social Issues*). First they ran two focus groups of high school students to generate questions for a survey to take out to young people. They then trained young adults who conducted street research in all five boroughs, speaking to over 900 males and females, ages 16-21. A small number of those who had reported having a difficult encounter with law enforcement were then called on the phone and engaged in an in-depth interview. Fine and her colleagues analyzed their data by race, ethnicity and gender.

Young people told them they were upset and disappointed that most adults—and they included police, guards, social workers and educators—view them as suspect, untrustworthy and potential criminals. In addition, increased surveillance techniques made them more upset, adding to their feeling of betrayal and of not being welcome in public spaces. The common explanation the young people gave for adult attitudes was stereotypes of urban youth of color. 47% said that they “worry much of the time that I’ll be arrested.” Largely critical of the police presence in their neighborhood, and having had unpleasant and disrespectful personal encounters with police, about half of those surveyed were nevertheless ambivalent and even empathetic toward the job of crime prevention.

What might we see if we look at these findings culturally? Well, one thing we see is that these attitudes and feelings aren’t private between just police and youth. They don’t exist in a vacuum, but are a characteristic of the broader culture, which includes the ways families, friends, acquaintances and strangers relate in homes, schools, churches, neighborhoods and public spaces. Another thing to see is that while we all share in this broader culture of our own creation, at the same time we also create and live in separate subcultures within this shared broader culture.

Youth culture and police culture are two such subcultures. The ways they perceive each other both comes from the broader culture they exist in and reflects and reinforces their separate subcultures. They view each other with suspicion. They have their own

definitions of who the other is. Their ways of interacting are scripted. The gap between them can seem vast and uncrossable.

Attempts to close this gap are usually based in the mainstream goal of changing behavior, either how young people behave or how the police behave. Some programs set up dialogues and forums where each side can air its views. Others seek to provide one or the other side with glimpses of the other as real human beings by playing sports together—the game sense of play I mentioned earlier. The assumption underlying both these kinds of programs is that if the young people understand what is expected of them and why, they will change how they behave, or that if the two groups play sports together they'll begin to see each other as less threatening and be more understanding and better behaved. And some of these programs do accomplish those discrete behavioristic goals. But what about the relationship? What about trying to effect a cultural change? Rarely do interventions begin with the relationship, and with the invitation to qualitatively transform who *they* are together.

Here is where activity and play as performance comes in. What is there in the broader culture that might help to bridge the cultural divide between police and young people? Sports might come to mind at first and sports programs have been part of the Police Athletic League's programming for decades. What is missing from playing sports, in my opinion, is the improvisational performance aspect of childhood play—the being other than who you are, the taking of risks, the looking foolish, the not knowing what you're doing or where the road you're creating might take you. We all know what it is to

perform as an athlete, to play to win, to be on a team. Some do it better than others but it's a role both young people and police are very familiar with. Playing games doesn't place the demand on people to create something entirely new, culturally speaking.

There's something else besides sports that can be taken from the broader culture of which the youth and the police subcultures are a part. And that something else is performance, as in theatrical performance. What might happen when police and young people perform together—create a skit or play together, or an improvised dance or movement together? In one way we don't know. In other way, we do. We know that in performing together, they will have done something they have never done before. They will have created a new piece of culture out of something in the broader culture and their separate subcultures. They will have this new performance in their individual and collective experiences. They will have added a new element to their overworked scripted ways of relating to each other. Having done that once, they could do it again. In the future they may or may not choose to exercise this performance option when they encounter each other on the street. But they now have that choice. And that is no small thing. Creating choices is how we grow. Performance is a means of growth because it gives people the license to make new choices of how to relate to oneself, to others and to the world.

Because of my belief in the power of play and performance to transform human relationships and allow people to do something more humane and creative with each other than most of us currently do, I have sought out, studied and supported performance-based projects all over the world. I am a huge fan of the programs of the All Stars Project,

both here at 42 St and in other cities that utilize the All Stars model. With my colleagues at the East Side Institute I have spearheaded a number of projects that bring a performance approach to educational and therapeutic environments. I am familiar with hundreds of community-based projects in urban centers, towns and rural villages in Africa, South America, Asia and Europe—many from first hand experience. The research I've done convinces me that this is where the new understandings, creative practices and exciting discoveries in youth development are coming from.

I believe that bringing a performance approach to police-citizen relations is a real breakthrough with enormous promise. In Brazil, where because of recent history the people despise the military police, thirty police men and women in Bahia, the poorest state in the country, formed a dance troupe. They perform in neighborhoods all across the state as a catalyst for dialogue with the community. But they also invite young people to learn to dance from and with them. In Chicago, Live Bait Theater brings teens and police together through improvisation and creative writing. The Theatre was originally contacted by the Chicago Police Department to create a play on teen crime to tour in Chicago Public Schools. They made the counter offer of officers and teens writing and performing their own script. After learning theatre games, sharing and writing stories, the teen-police group eventually wrote and performed their own play. The young people's views about why they like the program say a lot about why performing is so important for transforming relations. They say that it creates a place where they and the officers are equal. Where both the police and the teens risk embarrassment when they perform in

front of each other or a larger audience. Where each is reliant on the other for the scene to succeed. Where together the two groups invent different ways of relating.

This afternoon we'll be hearing from Dr. Lenora Fulani about another program that invites police and young people to perform, giving them the opportunity to grow and transform their relationship through the activity of creating something new together.

These three programs—and it's my hope that there are many more that we are not aware of—are a practical-critical challenge to mainstream psychology and youth development theory. They are equally a challenge and an invitation to all of us—no matter our age—to become free of the tyranny of the normal. Because the discovery from outside the box is that this is what it takes to grow and develop, and to create a new culture.

Fine, M. et al (2003). "Anything can happen with police around": Urban youth evaluate strategies of surveillance. *Journal of Social Issues*, 59 (1), 141-158.

Gergen, K. (1999). Forward. In L. Holzman (Ed.). *Performing psychology: A postmodern culture of the mind*. New York: Routledge.