



## RISK-TAKING IN YOUTH CULTURE AS A RITUAL PROCESS

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### ABSTRACT:

This paper proposes a theoretical rereading of adolescent risk-taking experiences by adopting a sociocultural perspective. Thus, drawing from E. Erikson's (1963, 1968) conception of identity exploration and experimentation, combined with V. Turner's (1969, 1974) anthropological research on symbols, rituals, and liminal processes, as well as with recent research on the culture of risk-taking in adolescence (e.g., Eagan & Thorne, 2010; Lightfoot, 1997; Thorne & McLean, 2003), this paper argues that the so-called externalizing problems (and, more specifically, engagement in anti-social acting out) embody deep cultural scripts. These scripts, as we construe them, seem to obey a general schema that is crucial to contemporary youth culture and that one may phrase as "less structure and more intensity", in line with Turner's "anti-structure" concepts of "liminality" and "communitas". In addition, this correlates with a sui generis style of reflexive storytelling strongly marked by discontinuity and ruptures, emblematically illustrated by episodes of interpersonal loss and ephemeral deviancy. We maintain that such forms of acting out constitute the embodiment of symbols which are rewritten and ritualized in peer groups, and whose appropriation and reiteration become the determining condition for gaining social recognition and personal worth.

**Key-words:** at-risk youth, antisocial behavior, youth culture, identity, adolescence

### INTRODUCTION

Adolescents' externalizing problems, including involvement in antisocial behavior, are better understood if properly interpreted in light of their sociocultural contexts that bestow meaning and value on them. Instead of emphasizing the fact that those patterns of conduct constitute a transgression of conventional norms and, therefore, express an inability to a successful socialization through the adoption of seemingly maladaptive counter-cultural attitudes, one should investigate the ways in which they prove to be meaningful, valuable and functional for their actors. Developmental



research needs to take an insider perspective in order to envisage and analyze the adolescent's lived experience as consonant and coherent with a concrete walk of life which values openness to extreme experiences, playfulness, belongingness, spontaneity, hedonism and self-transformation. Only by taking the vantage point of adolescents' construal of their own behavior, may one enter the belief system that inhabits specific group dynamics and projects of action. Selfhood emerges, then, from efficacious symbols and rituals. Thus, the engagement in risk-taking by adolescents can be conceived as stemming meaningfully from a cultural framework that gives structure to the process of self-definition and makes risk-taking irreducible to a set of occasional misbehaviors or a psychopathological symptom. This invites one to attempt an anthropological take on the novel ways adolescents innovate in generating myths and rituals. The methodological and epistemological challenge consists in focusing on the dynamic and multilayered self-interpretive adolescent voices that display the complexity of meaning construction. This enterprise would require a phenomenological sensitivity combined with the analysis of semiotic tools in social contexts, and an idiographic stance whose hermeneutic task would aim at understanding a cultural framework from within, as it were, in order to grasp the uniqueness of concrete formations of meaning. Such hermeneutic endeavor invites one to unlearn those prominent scientific interpretive habits that sacrifice the subject as interpreter of experience.

## RISK, PLAY AND SELFHOOD

Risk-taking, externalizing problems, antisocial acting out and offending behavior, are extraneous concepts in the sense that they do not belong to adolescents' self-descriptions. In a phenomenological and ethnomethodological sense, such language is false or at least biased; for it does not cohere at all with the "life world" (Schütz, 1967), the "language games" (Wittgenstein, 1959) or the "routine grounds" (Garfinkel, 1967) of the real actors. Instead, such categories reveal the moral and scientific stance of contemporary westernized adult mainstream culture, and they jeopardize the access to a relevant mode of meaning-construction by implicitly or explicitly placing those phenomena beyond the borders of desirability, legitimacy and normalcy. They are foreign idioms that do not convey the indigenous meaning of experience but rather classify and assess it as though from a superior perspective or from the ideologically detached meta-position of the social scientist.

Described from within, as in Cynthia Lightfoot's (1997) ethnographical research, risk-taking means a wide range of valuable and transformative experiences in which life and play become one and the same reality. Risk is first and foremost the seriousness of "deep play" (Geertz, 1973: 412-453) that involves unpredictability, high adventure, participation in peer cultural forms, constitution of self-identity, role-experimentation, social recognition and change of interpersonal relationships. Play merges into life and overflows with shared positive meanings, enriching experiences and co-constructed imaginings. Viewed as a form of quasi-ritual play, risk-taking is a powerful expressive and generative activity that creates and maintains socio-emotional bonds where a new social matrix redefines the relational web uniting self, symbols and others (Lightfoot, 1997: 98-105).

Interestingly enough, on highlighting a sharp opposition between identity integration and role confusion, E. Erikson (1963: 261-263; 1968: 17) tends to neglect the positive and meaningful character of adolescent risk-taking (comprising also juvenile delinquency) as means of shared self-exploration and communal self-experimentation. Erikson fails to deconstruct the problem talk that predominates in adult educational and political discourse. However, he acknowledges a level of positive significance by affirming that the dynamics of peer groups where risk-taking constitutes a compelling practical and ideological cultural form offers "a defense against a sense of identity confusion" (Erikson, 1963: 262). Indeed, embracing risky behavior provides the distinctive signs of belongingness, even though the fear of being unvalued may easily and paradoxically destroy the very founda-



tion of selfhood and personal value because of an over-identification to the idealized heroes of cliques and crowds. This over-identification entails gains and losses. On the one hand, it establishes a strong social architecture while dissolving, on the other hand, contradictory selves and self-interpretations into a selfless group mind. “For adolescents”, writes Erikson (1963: 262), “not only help one another temporarily through much discomfort by forming cliques and by stereotyping themselves, their ideals, and their enemies; they also perversely test each other’s capacity to pledge fidelity.” Let us recognize, nevertheless, that Erikson’s concept of “negative identity” (1968: 174-175) expresses, dialectically, the positivity of the negative self-positioning in the sense that it encompasses the adolescent’s perception of a higher intensity and deeper reality in an invented and self-destructive total identity.

During youth negative identity, “i.e., an identity perversely based on all those identifications and roles which, at critical stages of development, had been presented to them as most undesirable and dangerous and yet also as most real” (Erikson, 1968: 174), embraces counter-cultural risk-taking as a symbolic mockery and vindictive stance—a vague form of global hatred—against the status quo, the adult world, the system, them all. The adolescent self chooses to play experimental roles at the border line between loosing and enlarging herself. Self-affirmation and self-destruction are intimately imbricate. For instance, when playing hedonistic roles with generous strangers, a teenage girl knows she is not a sex worker (yet), and she knows moreover that such identification would not encapsulate her true self, but at the same time while she plays on the brink of being and not-being-herself, she does not know what the lasting effects of such inner dissociation will be. What is more, she does not and cannot know whether her not-true-me, hedonistic self, is just a free (and hence reversible) move in a game under her control, or an autonomous and complex (though partly controllable) player, say, a hidden character emerging within herself in certain settings, or even, well beyond that, an unbreakable cycle of infinite play where she has been taken unawares. Erikson’s phrase, “the choice of the negative identity” (1968: 172), misleadingly seems to give a prominent place to agency and self-directed development, whereas it rather signifies the cultural complexity within a multiphrenic and semiotically saturated self (Gergen, 1992). The choice of negative identity is located in a relational web loaded with conflicting ideological values, role models and master narratives. The uniqueness of a self resides in the unique way those relationships can be configured and constantly rearranged. It follows that preferred relationships, that is, differential constellations of socio-emotional ties, imply preferred realities or life worlds that are called personal choices or projects when analyzed under an individualistic lens. In reality, the locus of control is utterly distributed; it is a cultural life form that inhabits selves’ lives.

Risk-taking may correlate with self-destruction when “negative identity” goes hand in hand with a “total identification” appealing to a gross denial of all value and being, like a patient of a psychotic break that would adhere to an abstract hatred against everything. “At any rate”, explains Erikson (1968: 176), “many a sick or desperate late adolescent, if faced with continuing conflict, would rather be nobody or somebody totally bad or, indeed, dead—and this by free choice—than be not-quite-somebody”. Referring to “free choice” implies, in our opinion, a narrow ego-centered view, although fully intelligible within Erikson’s psychoanalytical mindscape. As depicted in various compelling artful expressions, such as “Rebel without a cause” (1955) or “Elephant” (2003), when some youth are dramatically shaped by nihilistic semiotic frames energized by cultural values, social webs, in-group fidelities and ritual practices, the decision-making process involves a large ecological system that diffuses the locus of control and renders personalized accountability impossible. Thus, the eventual tragic episodes that stem from those events are not reducible to individual actions; they demonstrate the convergence of many channels, modes and degrees of action.



## RISK-TAKING EXPERIENCES AS SOCIAL DRAMAS AND RITES OF PASSAGE

Our theoretical hypothesis attempts to demonstrate that risk-taking behavioral patterns unfold social dramas in which “public episodes of tensional irruption” (Turner, 1974: 33) transform the personalities and selves of social actors, that is, social dramas that fulfill the function of “rites of passage” (Van Gennep, 1960). It follows that most youth risk-taking experiences, including a significant part of antisocial ones, are essentially transitional and correspond to critical developmental thresholds in psychosocial symbolic trajectories, an idea that is clearly consonant with Moffitt’s (2006) bold distinction between life-persistent and adolescence-limited antisocial behavior. Embarking in risk-taking activities entails the establishment of new social ruptures and alliances, marked by more or less overt manifestations, or celebrations, that include a threefold transformation encompassing a period of approach and modeling (i.e., the social learning stage), a period of metaphorical and performative re-birth accompanied by social re-identification (i.e., the entrance into a qualitatively new identity role with its formal acceptance and recognition by a social system), and a period of reiterated validation of an acquired identity role and symbolic status (i.e., the progressive involvement in communal practices leading to a collective assessment process that translates either into an increment of symbolic personal worth or into a devaluation of one’s cultural competence). On unifying different periods into one—albeit internally differentiated—process, the schema outlined above follows Turner’s (1969, 1974) reinterpretation of Van Gennep’s proposal of a tripartite classification of rites: “I propose to call the rites of separation from a previous world, *preliminal rites*, those executed during the transitional stage *liminal (or threshold) rites*, and the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world *post-liminal rites*” (Van Gennep, 1960: 21). In the context of contemporary youth cultural forms, the experiences of *passage* are pervasive and imply personal and group strategies of identity shaping but, in contrast with highly structured cultural environments (as those described by Van Gennep and Turner), symbolic practices seem to be very plastic and allow all possible configurations and sequences, namely progressions and reversals as well as dissociations and overlappings. Another striking difference concerns the degree of local improvisation in designing the dynamic architecture of psychosocial passages. Indeed, youth rites of separation, transition and incorporation, although they possess long-standing properties, show a deep instability in its specific semantics and choreography that confines the efficacy and the contents of their myths and rites to a peculiar age group or sex group of a certain generation. It is remarkable that the acceleration of cultural invention and consumerism strikes at the heart of adolescent role-experimentation and role-exploration, to such an extent that most cultural youth identities emerge and vanish nowadays in less than a decade.

Since the first wave of globalized youth symbols and role-models in the sixties, the speed of creation, broadcasting and appropriation of new identity symbols has been increasing at a high rate, providing, therefore, massive resources for permanent innovation and fluid multiplicity in self-identity formations. At the same time, the current wave of identity symbols have lost the ideological boldness of past generations, such as the one of the hippie movement with its strong anti-war and anti-colonial claims that manifested the most socially visible side of a deeply critical view on politics, religion and western culture as a whole. Presently, however, youth wiki-subcultures, countercultures and fringe cultures exhibit a clear dissymmetry between its cognitive or ideological structure and its quest for experienceable intensive magnitudes. Instead of professing a kind of ideological romanticism and focusing primarily on novel—and revolutionary—social ideals, they seek for a sophisticated self-image. Consequently, the self tends to come to social life through simulacra deriving from a playful and fanciful imagination void of ideology. For the end of the era of crystallized ideologies, master narratives and hard identities (Bauman, 2005; Bell, 1960) seems to be simultaneous to a postmodern replacement of cultural semantics by performative aesthetics. In a word, self-aestheti-





zation becomes the widest cultural style of identity invention. Risk and danger symbolize, then, an aesthetic value and an aesthetic experience whose emotional intensity and challenging nature generate a group trance, felt as a transformative optimal state or flow of consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Paradoxically, a potentially very destructive range of psychosocial experiences is incorporated into individual lives as a new realm of positive and valuable experiences, interpreted as contributing to well-being and self-actualization.

If one takes the example of *Emo* subculture as a compelling illustration of the contemporary dynamics of the global spread of identity creation and learning, it is noteworthy that such youth subculture is easily available to symbolic consumption through a vast web of internet sites offering a ready-made set of symbols to be appropriated, including a wide range of cultural products (music, clothes, make-up, etc.). To be sure, such paraphernalia of symbols and codes do not block the possibility of personalization because their prêt-à-porter character is subtly combined with the need for a synthesis that expresses uniqueness and creativity within a subcultural orthodoxy. Moreover, the globalized merchandizing that promotes and distributes that system of *Emo* symbols does not cohere into a consistent univocal monopoly. There is obviously a shared core of values/images or a conception of selfhood and a general commoditization of experience. However, as the *Emo* movement globalizes, its orthodox homogeneity surrenders to a complex burst of creativity galvanized by the differential cultural tensions and oppositions between *Emo* meanings, personal resources and local management of culture, although various market forces intervene to impose a set of desirable commodities to be possessed and used in order for one to become an *Emo girl or boy*. When “nothing feels good” (Greenwald, 2003), being *Emo* feels right and provides a symbolic world in which the nausea of nothingness supplies one with new personae, ecstasies, metaphors and performances.

Youth subcultures allow of a differentiated and creative management because they are not subordinated to a structural organization, that is, to “a more or less distinctive arrangement of mutually dependent institutions” regulating the trajectories of psychosocial actors (Turner, 1974: 272). Instead of structure, they are essentially composed of liminality and *communitas* that, in Turner’s terms (1969, 1974), mean anti-structure. His definition and description of “liminality” underlines transformation and ambiguity:

Liminality [...] occurs in the middle phase of the rites of passage which mark changes in an individual’s or a group’s social status and/or cultural or psychological state in many societies past and present. Such rites characteristically begin with ritual metaphors of killing or death marking the separation of the subject from ordinary secular relationships (in which status-role behavior tends to prevail even in informal situations) and conclude with a symbolic rebirth or reincorporation into society as shaped by the law and moral code. [...] Symbols and metaphors found in abundance in liminality represent various dangerous ambiguities of this ritual stage, since the classifications on which order normally depends are annulled or obscured—others symbols designate temporary antinomic liberation from behavioral norms and cognitive rules. [...] Liminality is usually a sacred condition protected against secularity by taboos and in turn prevented by them from disrupting secular order, since liminality is a movement between fixed points and is essentially ambiguous, unsettled, and unsettling. (Turner, 1974: 273-274.)

As to *communitas*, Turner (1969: 99-106; 1974: 273-275) holds that it corresponds to the specific type of interpersonal relationships among people who are experiencing deep transitions, marked by closeness and authenticity:

In liminality, *communitas* tends to characterize relationships between those jointly undergoing ritual transition. The bonds of *communitas* are anti-structure in the sense that they are undifferentiated, equalitarian, direct, extant, non-rational, existential, I-Thou (in Feuerbach’s and Buber’s sense) relationships. *Communitas* is spontaneous, immediate, concrete—it is not shaped by norms, it is not institutionalized, it is not abstract. (Turner, 1974: 274.)



Communitas entails a normative disengagement from norms. Therefore, its apparent anomic nature contains an intensive work aiming at the production of new social norms and the struggle for recognition within a peer subcultural group testifies to a nascent conformity based on the belief that truth, goodness and beauty cannot be crystallized and must remain in a processual mode. Turner adds that the suspension of norms by communitas does not destroy the social order because it is a transient condition:

Communitas does not merge identities; it liberates them from conformity to general norms, though this is necessarily a transient condition if society is to continue to operate in an orderly fashion. (Turner, 1974: 274.)

However, it must be noted that the highlighting of the transiency of communitas is just a post facto description of a process. Such description denies the quality of the inner experience because it is not lived as being truly ephemeral and reversible by its actors. What is more, that process shapes many lives in transition, making them embark in irreversible journeys. From within the lived experience of identity transition, there is no transiency at sight. The transition is understood as an everlasting discontinuity and is lived as an ultimate change that makes collapse a previous state of things. To be forever young (Danesi, 2003) has become the most intense desire of a whole culture which means that liminality and communitas are highly regarded as the symbolic model of true life, the one really worth living and dying for, as if the pure experience of endless and formless becoming were the final meaning and the supreme criterion to assess the value of human life.

## **CONCLUSION: ETHNOGRAPHIC DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY OR THE WILL TO UNDERSTAND**

Liminality constitutes the anti-structure in which self-experimentation, self-exploration and self-creation make sense. For many youth subcultures, liminality is not conceived as a moment of metamorphosis but rather as an everlasting psychosocial style that involves refusal of social norms, praise of moral creativity, resistance to all constraints and provocative, antisocial self-expression through risk-taking initiatives. It follows that presentism, hedonism and nihilism can dialectically feed each other and convert life into a playground of the extreme.

In a sense, the nihilistic subcultures stem from the post-war generation's incredulity in meta-narratives (Lyotard, 1984) which has translated into the deep crisis of religious formal institutions and political ideologies, and culminated nowadays in identity configurations that are nothing but the aesthetic embodiment of social fragmentation and dispersion. Goths, Punks, and Emos, among many others, propose the emptying of conventional master ideals and grand narratives, and find solace only in their own acute self-awareness of being in the side of hurtful and liberating truth (see Bell, 2001; Epstein, 1998; Gelder, 2005; Goodlad & Bibby, 2007; Hall & Jefferson, 1993; Hebdige, 1979; Jenks, 2005; Muggleton, 2002).

Adolescent psychology is epistemologically and methodologically challenged to acquire a finer sensitivity to the living flesh of perishing symbols that infuse increasingly more intensity and increasingly less structure to the experience of crossing an ambiguous threshold of multiple thresholds. The erosion of structure is complete in communitas, that is, when the process of becoming oneself entails being with other peers, especially if they have long experienced the absence or loss of significant adult others. Understanding the liminal dynamics and rich local semantics of communitas through an ethnographic developmental reading on adolescence would surpass the blind accounts of peer group activities as unsupervised and unstructured urban pastimes. These are regulated experiences, perceived as positive opportunities for self-definition that require initiation and validation group rituals (performing new possible selves that fluctuate between globalized ortho-



doxies and local unorthodox improvisations). Fluid and unstable as it may be, the group symbolic organization gives rise, nevertheless, to shared expectations, projects and sign systems, anchoring the construction and/or destruction of *personae* and identities. Among the psychological modes of self-construction, autobiographic storytelling deserves a vantage status thanks to its processual and interpretive character making it peculiarly apt to convey the tension between multiplicity and unity as well as between continuity and rupture (Eagan & Thorne, 2010; Kroger, 2004; Thorne & McLean, 2003). The paramount importance of instantaneity in communication and change of one's own mythbiographical accounts—selfhood being then a continuous creative self-rewriting before an imaginary audience—brings to the foreground the youth cyberworld as the main workshop of meaning and life as an on-line autotelic realm, that is, an organic and wiki-artwork. Psychosocial ethnographic research must, consequently, begin grasping the thickness of lived experience at the innermost matrix of world-making, the cyberfield. For the present youth generation, the physical world and the cyberworld are no longer opposite poles in the continuum of reality and sense-data. Their daily experience reveals that the window and the screen have entirely merged together and become more than simply interdetermining representational fields. Indeed, they seem to affirm and deny each other, not as moveable mirroring surfaces, but rather as mutual metaphors built on self-fictional processes multiplying disanalogies and discontinuities. The excitement of risk-taking lies not only in the access to a group trance but also, and above all, in the border-line sensation of a playful coincidence between a reason for living and a reason for dying. Their naïf belief in control and power—even in face of unpredictability—triggers the most extreme forms of acting out, those in which the action devours the actor.

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