

ABSTRACT

Narrating Power and Injustice: How Young People Make Sense About Fairness

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Our concrete embodiments as members of a specific class, race, and gender, as well as our concrete historical situations play important roles in shaping our perspective of the world. The goal of my dissertation was to explore how different socioeconomic circumstances shape adolescents' sense-making about fairness and their capacity to relate to different actors in a social situation including an instance of injustice. Additionally, I explored the systematic shift in youth's sense-making – their capacity to adjust one's ways of knowing and being, depending on the perspective they assume and different others they address. I used narrative methodology to explore linguistic enactments of *relational complexity*, the capacity to imagine and embody the thoughts, feelings, intentions, and values of another person.

The study involved 64 adolescents of high-school age ($M=17$), recruited from contrasting socioeconomic backgrounds of New York City. Narrative as a sense-making tool was used as the data collection/production and analysis approach. Youth's narratives ($n=256$) were elicited as responses to a vignette they read, depicting an ambiguous social situation in which occurrences of deception and exclusion might have occurred. Participants were invited to retell the story from the perspectives of the self, object, and subject of injustice. I explored how diverse youth read

the story in terms of injustice present in it; how they position themselves inside the story. Are they closer to the position of the “victim” or the plausible “culprit”, and which do they humanize more?

The findings, triangulated through three different analytic strategies, point harmoniously at differences in sense-making processes among adolescents from socioeconomically contrasting backgrounds. Youth from less privileged backgrounds showed greater flexibility in adjusting their experience, knowledge, and communicative styles to different others they addressed. They showed greater sensibility for different actors’ perspectives, and seemed to be more skillful at relating to, and performing as, both the object and subject of injustice. These young people narrated more directly about injustice, naming names. Being more sensitive to multiple actors’ perspectives makes these participants better at reading power relations and better at reproducing it.

People sensitive to injustice realize that perspectives of perpetrator and victim differ as an effect of their previous unfavorable experiences, their rights and responsibilities for retribution, their different access to resources in the face of injustice, and their own sense of entitlement (or restraint) to expect and demand mitigation or reversal of injustice. This skill of adjusting one’s ways of knowing and being to different others is a great asset; however, we should not romanticize the reality of the material and psychological challenges that may bestow this epistemic advantage upon underserved youth.