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Why Can't They Be Like We Were....?

C. M. Achilles and
Harriet B. Crump

"The youth culture and the adult culture have clashed before; they'll clash again. Maybe the clash is one of the rites of passage. Maybe we really prefer it that way."

That dance is disgusting! Why do kids wear those weird clothes? That stuff they listen to isn't music, it's just a bunch of noise. With all that hair, how am I supposed to tell boys from girls? Why don't kids today talk and act right—the way we adults do? "Why, kid, when I was your age. . . ." Similar statements and questions are at the heart of the so-called "generation gap." It's hard to find a better expression of the frustrations than "KIDS" from the popular musical of the early 1960s, *Bye Bye Birdie*.¹

In spite of newspaper headlines, popular media, and our own feelings of frustration, this is not a new problem. Like death and taxes, it might even be one of those "universals" that every generation is foredoomed to experience.

Very difficult for young people these days. Or any days. In what golden epoch was being a teenager a constant joy? *There has always been a generation gap.* It is called twenty years. Too much talk about unresponsive government, napalm, irrelevant education. Maybe the real point is that young lives have no accepted focal point. The tribe gives them no responsibilities, no earned privileges, no ceremonial place. . . . The schools have tried, *in loco parentis*, to fill a vacuum, condition the young on a fun-reward system. It has been a rotten try. . . .

So the kids float. They ram around, amble around, talk and dream, and rediscover all the more simplistic philosophical paradoxes.² (Emphasis added.)

Whether called the generation gap, the youth culture, or counterculture, these ubiquitous complaints have a timeless quality. Among others, Plato, Socrates, and Cicero expressed concern for the behavior of youth of their times. The perceptive dramatist, Sophocles, explored the lack of communication between generations in *Antigone*. Note the exchange where Haemon, the son, vainly tries to offer sound advice to his father, Creon, the king:

Haemon: . . . so, father, pause and put aside your anger. I think, for what my young opinion's worth, that, good as it is to have infallible wisdom, since this is rarely found, the next best thing is to be willing to listen to wise advice.

Chorus: There is something to be said, my lord, for this point of view. . . .

Creon: Indeed! Am I to take lessons at my time of life from a fellow of his age?

Haemon: No lesson you need be ashamed of. It isn't a question of age, but of right and wrong.³ (Em-

phasis added.)

No doubt each reader has a favorite passage identifying youth-adult differences. *Question*: If this problem has been around so long, why hasn't it been resolved long before now? *Suggestion*: Because the problem really involves cultural differences that perpetuate because they are cultural differences. Before the reader condemns this statement as circular reasoning, let's look at the argument carefully. The problem never has been solved, and it may never be solved, but we should certainly keep trying to understand the phenomenon. One reason that the problem persists is that it is related to the definition of *culture*, and the communications barriers that emanate from different cultures—in this case a youth culture trying to establish itself and an adult culture attempting to perpetuate itself.

A Culture in Its Own Right

A youth culture is a culture in its own right. Edward T. Hall, in *The Silent Language*, states that culture is communication.⁴ In a more recent publication, *Beyond Culture*, Hall identifies three characteristics of culture: (a) Culture is not innate; it is learned. (b) All facets of culture are interrelated; touch a culture in one place and everything else is influenced. (c) Culture is shared and in effect defines the boundaries of different groups.⁵

The semanticist (turned politician) S. I. Hayakawa states: "Cultures must have patterns of behavior and designations of role if they are to be

¹ Charles Strause. *Bye Bye Birdie*, A Musical Comedy. Book by Mike Stewart. Lyrics by Lee Adams. London: E. H. Morris, 1960.

² John D. MacDonald. *The Scarlet Ruse*. Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, Inc. (Gold Medal Paperback), 1973. pp. 95-96.

³ Sophocles. *Antigone*. From: *The Theban Plays*. Translated by E. F. Watling. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1967. pp. 126-62, lines 719-30.

⁴ Edward T. Hall. *The Silent Language*. Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, Inc. (Paperback), 1959. p. 97.

⁵ ———. *Beyond Culture*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1976. pp. 13-14.

cultures at all."⁶ Both Hayakawa and Hall link the concepts of culture and communication by suggesting (a) that they are intimately related, and (b) that communication has a powerful influence on the development and perpetuation of culture. If youth culture is an appropriate designation, then perhaps we should look to some

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characteristics of communication to help describe phenomena of the youth culture, and to help understand how this culture, as shared among youth, effectively defines boundaries between two groups. These groups, of course, are those who are members of the youth culture and those who are not.

We could review youth-adult cultural differences from several viewpoints, such as history, anthropology, or sociology. Another viewpoint is from semantics. Although some define semantics as the science of the meaning of words, that definition is really not comprehensive enough. Some semanticists believe that the true meaning of a term is to be found by observing what someone does *with* it, not what someone says *about* it.⁷ The meaning of a word or symbol is not within the word itself, but in someone's "semantic reaction" to that symbol. Some persons' semantic reactions are fixed and unalterable. These people *always* react to the same symbol in the same way; they fail to make differentiations in meaning when differentiations are necessary because of the context. In their more obvious forms, these fixed reactions are called prejudices, and prejudices are almost inevitably organized around words.⁸ We all tend to believe that the way we use words is the correct way, and people who use the same words in other ways are either ignorant or dishonest.⁹ And, oh, how the kids misuse *our* language ("Who can understand anything they say?"). But by developing new words, or different usages for common words, youth generate their own language—one necessary badge for

membership in their own culture. By using and understanding that language, a person gains one of the cultural rites of passage. When adults start to use the "youth culture" language, members of the culture find new words or word usages and develop new verbal language boundaries. The adults are then once again on the outside looking in!

These ideas parallel those of Hall who defines cultures as either high context or low context.¹⁰ Hall places his emphasis on the nonverbal, unstated realm of culture. In a low context culture, the mass of the information to be communicated is in the explicit code; it is in the language, and especially the stated verbal language. In a high context culture, most of the information is in the physical context, the setting, or the information is internalized in the person in the form of experiences upon which the person can base inferences. In this frame of reference, talking down to someone is "low contexting him." "Low contexting" is giving the receiver much more information than is needed; it is a "put down" because the speaker assumes information that the listener does not have. (Does this ever happen between teachers and students or kids and adults?)

In their research on social and nonsocial speech, Krauss and Glucksberg suggest that we learn two things when learning language: we learn (a) the language itself (sounds, syntax, and vocabulary) and (b) how to manipulate the language to communicate concepts effectively.¹¹ The researchers recognize that the relations between the verbal expression (the reference), and the thing referred to (the referent), "is not in the nature of an unequivocal code."¹² This reflects Hayakawa's emphasis on the definition of a word as being what a person does with that word and Hall's concepts of high and low context.

⁶ S. I. Hayakawa. *Symbol, Status, and Personality*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World (A Harvest Paperback), 1963. p. 95.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁰ Hall, *Op. cit.* 1976. pp. 75-79.

¹¹ R. M. Krauss and S. Glucksberg. "Social and Nonsocial Speech." *Scientific American* 236(2): 100-105; February 1977.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 100.

The Need for "Social Speech"

Krauss and Glucksberg define social messages as characterized by variability because they take into account both the nature of the audience and the context of the conversation.¹³ Nonsocial messages are not intended to communicate information to another person; they can be expressed in the abbreviated, idiosyncratic, private language one uses in writing a reminder to one's self. In this sense, the knowledge and perspective of a particular recipient need not be considered in the formulation of the language. Now apply these ideas to a situation in which youth are using their own language, the modern "jive" that many teachers do not understand. Might youth be using "social" language to communicate among themselves? Is their social language really "nonsocial" relative to the understandings of teachers or the older "culture"? Are they trying to develop their own identity via their "own" culture?

Krauss and Glucksberg describe how adults "tailor" what they say, and how they say it to suit what they understand the knowledge and perspective of their listeners to be. Is the same process true for the youth culture?

Krauss and Glucksberg asked adults to describe six shapes or forms to other adults who could not see the forms. The "listeners" then identified the forms. Even with no feedback, pairs of adults made virtually no errors in their very first try. At the beginning, the speaker's language was detailed, redundant, and expansive. In subsequent trials, the length and detail of the description diminished and soon only one word was used to convey the message. This final short message was adequate only for those who had earlier heard the redundant original message; *it did not usually communicate much to someone who had not participated in the social interaction from the beginning* (that is, to someone who was not a member of the "in" group).

The researchers, in trying to determine how and when youth developed their "social speech," discovered that, unlike adults, young speakers used short, idiosyncratic messages *from the beginning*. This brief initial message was similar to nonsocial speech. The youngsters did not convey the information well and (through seventh grade) improved very little over 15 trials. Are they learning "culture" and experimenting with it? "Ninth

graders, although they showed dramatic improvement in successive trials, still did not attain the virtually perfect accuracy that adults displayed in the very first trial."¹⁴

These findings suggest some interesting ideas when juxtaposed with other concerns in this arti-

"School people must communicate with youngsters and penetrate the youth culture barrier while helping youth enter their own adult culture. . . . The youth culture is with us; it has been with us; and evidence suggests that it will be with us for a long time to come."

cle. Perhaps the "teenage" phenomenon is that point when communication problems of a most frustrating type occur. By the early teens, apparently youngsters recognize the need for "social" speech (that is, speech that provides enough detail to convey a reference point to the listener), but have not yet perfected this technique. Contemporaneously, they feel the need to identify with other youth in a cultural way so they experiment with social speech techniques within their own peer group. They relive a cultural developmental stage as they form their own "youth culture" linguistically. This, of course, is accompanied by appropriate "nonverbals" such as dress codes, dances, hairstyles, and other behaviors. As a result, teenagers use their own linguistic "shorthand" (which is "social" speech for other youth, but "nonsocial" speech for adults). In important or emotional attempts to communicate, youth culture members often get upset when adults (usually parents or teachers) don't have the necessary reference points to understand clearly what is really being said.

In Hall's terms, perhaps at this stage youth have a high-context culture (to those in and of the culture) that adults don't understand because they don't have the necessary language and experiences. When adults try explaining things ("You can talk and talk till your face gets blue"), they are seen by youth as "low-contexting" them (The "When I was your age" syndrome?). Simi-

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

larly, the adult culture has its own high-context elements that youth don't yet understand, and when youth try to imitate adult behaviors, they may be told to "act your age." It seems that those within each culture are trying to understand the other culture only in low-context terms. So, when parents or teachers try to explain something in what to them seems a logical, detailed, and sequential manner, they may invoke from a member of the youth culture some such abrupt response as: "You don't understand," or "You never see things my way," or "That's old-fashioned" (or some more pointed response).

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The Clash of Cultures

Words—and the way words are used—are but elements of the generation gap or the collision of youth and adult cultures. Other key elements in this clash are nonverbal. Cultures consist of shared elements that define the boundaries of different groups. One's self-concept, for example, is enhanced by feeling a group kinship and membership. It helps to be able to identify with a group in a positive way. This is manifest in such statements as: "I'm a member of the football team," or "I'm on the varsity cheerleading squad," and so on. Group members often wear uniforms to designate membership and/or status or role. Thus, a club jacket or letter sweater or sloppy blue jeans become important and powerful badges of membership. Each culture has its own language, customs, roles, statuses, uniforms, and particular nonverbal communication cues. To lose those prerequisites is to lose the feeling of cultural groupness or belongingness. This need for cultural boundaries to effect belongingness provides one basis for a most frustrating situation. If, as teachers or parents, we learn and use youth culture behaviors and language, the youth culture will change behaviors and language; if we do not learn and understand the behaviors and language, we are clearly "outsiders" and suspect.

This phenomenon manifests itself nonverbally in many ways. Let's look at several common nonverbal cultural boundaries. Where do all these new dances come from? When adults begin to learn and dance a youth culture dance, the teenagers find a new dance. Adults learned the "bump," and immediately there was the "double bump," "hustle," or "roller coaster"! If adults start to wear youth culture clothes, youth styles change rapidly. When female teachers emulated teenagers and moved their own hemlines up, the students' hemlines went up even further. (Remember the mini and the micro-mini?) When this escalation reached the "reductio ad absurdum," hemlines started down. When "hippies" had long hair, they were different; their long hair defined them as a group of their own. When adults sported long hair, beards, and mustaches, the hirsute flair faded and lost its power as a badge of group membership.

If culture is communication, we must also heed Hall's admonition to read communication in context and realize that we never get all of the context. A continuous screening occurs; we never really understand all of what we know. (This interesting idea is similar to Polyani's idea of "tacit" knowing.)¹⁵ When persons of the same culture meet, they have some common understandings that do not need to be stated explicitly. Hall emphasizes that: "It is important for conversationalists in any situation . . . to get to know each other well enough so that they realize what each person *is and is not* taking into account."¹⁶ (Emphasis added.)

This understanding of what each other is and is not taking into account is critical to understanding generation and communication gaps. Further, it is important to recognize that people have a need to belong to groups and these groups take the form of "culture." Rules of communication, status, and role all apply. Thus, it seems that there will always be a generation gap if there are different cultures.

Because school people have a particular role in society, their problem in the youth culture-adult culture clash is acute. School people *must* communicate with youngsters and penetrate the

¹⁵ Michael Polyani. *The Tacit Dimension*. New York: Doubleday, 1966.

¹⁶ Hall, 1976. p. 78.

youth culture barrier while helping youth enter their own adult culture. The sensitive and perceptive school person must learn and recognize the language and nonverbal elements of the youth culture, but not try to adopt, adapt, and use these as elements of his/her own culture. The acculturated adult and educator either models or demonstrates favorable elements of an adult culture and shows youth ways to cross over into that culture. At the same time, this adult and educator also respects the positive elements of the youth culture that must be assimilated as that youth culture moves on and becomes an adult culture in its own right. Skillful educators understand and communicate with the youth culture. They recognize that the youth groups need to exist as "cultures" that will mature into adult cultures; they work to seek bridges between their established culture and the metamorphosis of the new "youth" culture without trying to intrude into the youth culture. The youth culture is with us; it has been with us; and evidence suggests that it will be with us for a long time to come. The youth culture and the adult culture have clashed before; they'll clash again. Maybe the clash is one of the rites of passage. Maybe we really prefer it that way. Maybe it's comforting. Maybe it's a "TRADITION." [E]



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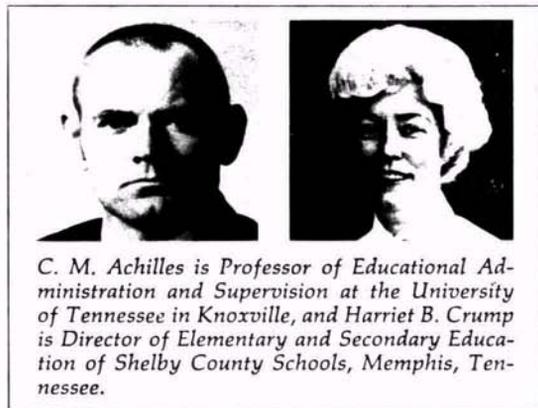
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C. M. Achilles is Professor of Educational Administration and Supervision at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, and Harriet B. Crump is Director of Elementary and Secondary Education of Shelby County Schools, Memphis, Tennessee.

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