



From ambivalence to agency: Becoming an author, an actor and a hero in a drama workshop[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines ways in which the ambivalence can be recognized as a point of potential transformation and an opportunity to gain voice and agency. Our ethnographic study is focused on a drama workshop with foster care teens in Finland. We analyze the ways in which the youth's expressions of ambivalence are socially recognized as a catalyst for an agentive transcendence of their inner turmoil, conflicting desires, loyalties and visions of possible futures.

While ambivalence is usually seen as a paralyzing state preventing one from making decisions and continuing with life, we develop a positive concept of ambivalence as a juncture at which disparate conflicting discourses from different "worlds" in one's life penetrate each other, creating openings for personal transformation. We see ambivalence as a dialogic tension in coordinating relationships in contradictory, dilemmatic social situations and, as a state facilitating the appearance of a dialogic relationship to one's own self.

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1. Introduction

A persistent challenge for educators and practitioners is knowing how to collaborate with youth who are disengaged from socially acknowledged practices that could promote their creative development, help them engage in (re)defining a meaningful purpose for life and support them as they begin to trust in their own abilities. In this article we examine ways in which art- and play-based activities may help children and youth gain a voice and develop agency through meaningful experiences of authorship. The empirical point of departure for our ethnographic study is a drama workshop organized for youth who live in foster homes or in substitute care in Finland. Research shows (see Berlin, Vinnerljung, & Hjern, 2011) that young people who have been or who are in foster care are more likely than other young people to withdraw from school and fail to pursue their own potential interests in society. Children with a foster care background have experienced many traumatic disconnections and adversities in their social relationships and instability in their life circumstances, and have often developed mistrust toward the people around them (Hughes, 1997; Whiting & Lee, 2003). Therefore, finding ways to reconnect with these children and youth and help them to gain meaningful experiences of belongingness and social recognition is a particularly pressing need in substitute or foster care.

In our analysis of the ethnographic material collected by the first author, we focus on a drama workshop that allowed young people to express a variety of feelings, opinions and positions. We particularly examine young people's expressions of *ambivalence* and the ways in which their ambivalence is socially recognized as a catalyst for transformation and, thus, for increased agency. We

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therefore argue that ambivalence and agency are closely linked phenomena; expressions of ambivalence can be seen as potential sources for agency. This focus was initially generated by the nature of the collected data, as we followed the principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and anthropological conventions in our analysis (Birdwhistell, 1970; Goffman, 1986), and then developed further as we reviewed the current literature and interpreted the data. Ambivalence is a potentially powerful but relatively little advanced concept in the socio-cultural perspective on young people's engagement and disengagement in the contexts of education and youth work. In this study we attempt to develop a socio-cultural approach to understanding ambivalence as a dialogic tension in coordinating relationships in contradictory or dilemmatic social situations (Bakhtin, 1999; Heath, Fuller, & Paton, 2008; Matusov, 1996). We ground this understanding of ambivalence in actual observations, recordings and in the participants' interpretations of social interactions and events (Headland, 1990).

Ambivalence is often understood in terms of the psychological dissonance (Festinger, 1957) produced by the incongruities that exist between “the things the person knows about himself, about his behavior and about his [social] surroundings” (p. 9). In this sense, ambivalence is seen negatively as a paralyzing state that prevents one from making decisions and continuing with life. For instance, Ekstrom (2010) writes:

In a famous passage of his *Confessions*, [Augustine] describes an experience of inner turmoil, torn between his competing worldly temptations, on the one hand, and his spiritual ambitions, including ‘renunciation of this world's joys,’ on the other. He writes, ‘My inner self was a house divided against itself.’ In the ‘agony of indecision,’ Augustine says, ‘I tore my hair and hammered my forehead with my fists; I locked my fingers and hugged my knees’ (p. 374).

This view of ambivalence, as a threat, a risk and a trap for individual agency, persists in the contemporary literature on the development of self (see a discussion in Ekstrom, 2010). However, in this paper we want to develop a positive concept of ambivalence as a juncture at which disparate and conflicting discourses from different “worlds” in a person's life penetrate each other (Bakhtin, 1999), producing “cracks” or “fissures” in one's voice (Ben-David Kolikant & Pollack, 2012), which create openings for personal transformation. This is why we see multivoicedness (heteroglossia) and the existence of a network of diverse discourses and genres that come from different spheres of the individual's life (Matusov, 2011b), along with the contradictions that they bring, as necessary for the emergence, strengthening and reinforcing of agency by leading to the transformation and transcendence of self and the creation of new ways of being.

2. Agency and ambivalence in social relations

Hofmann and Rainio (2007, p. 309) defined agency as “the possibility and willingness of an individual or collective subject to impact (and eventually transform) an activity in whose realization it is engaged”. Furthermore, agency can be seen as manifested in a person's ability to *author* him- or herself through transcending what already exists and creating “new cultural constraints that promote new desires and new subjectivities in his or her own new and not fully predictable being” (Matusov, Smith, Soslau, Marjanovic-Shane, & von Duyke, in preparation). According to Buchanan (1979), “We are, and will be, at least in part, that which we make ourselves to be. We construct our own beings” (pp. 94–95). Thus, agency appears and exists as a dialogic and negotiated characteristic of social interaction, since a person's transcendence depends on the recognition of its value (either positive or negative) by the relevant others and the self (see Matusov et al., in preparation; Rainio, 2010). In this article, we attempt to further develop the dialogic authorial view of agency by describing three modes of agency (*authorial*, *actorial* and *heroial*) that can be identified in complex situations and events involving the presence of and interaction between more than one “world,” e.g., play, games, various forms of performance arts, drama workshops and educational events.

Recently, interesting efforts have been made to use the concept of ambivalence in empirical research on social relations and to combine the individually focused psychological and structurally focused sociological understandings of ambivalence, particularly in the field of sociological family studies. For example, Hillcoat-Nallétamby and Phillips (2011, pp. 204–205) claim that the “relational property of ambivalence, notably its transitive, temporal and transformative dimensions” has been largely overlooked and that ambivalence should be understood as a product of several interdependent elements of the social world and part of the broader relational networks to which people belong. Ambivalence can be understood as a tension in coordinating relationships with the self and others in contradictory and/or dilemmatic social situations. Through our case study we argue that ambivalence prepares a person for transcendence and transformation. Furthermore, we argue that being recognized and supported as unfinalized, ambivalent, fragmented and contradictory to oneself, by others and oneself, may create the conditions for becoming an author of one's own transformation, i.e., for the emergence of one's agency.

From that point of view, Bakhtin (1999) described ambivalence as one of the central aspects of juxtaposing opposites for testing truth in Menippean satire and the carnival. Playing on ambivalence and contradiction, Menippean satire and the carnival create “extraordinary situations for the provoking and testing of a philosophical idea, a discourse, a truth” (p. 114). Bringing the carnivalistic (Menippean) opposites together, according to Bakhtin, is “what might be called moral-psychological experimentation. ... Dreams, daydreams, insanity destroy the epic and tragic wholeness of a person and his fate: the possibilities of another person and another life are revealed in him, he loses his finalized quality and ceases to mean only one thing; he ceases to coincide with himself” (pp. 116–117). Ambivalence is thus, according to Bakhtin, “destruction of the wholeness and finalized quality of a man [...] facilitated by the appearance ... of a dialogic relationship to one's own self” (p. 117). We argue that a dialogic relationship with one's own possible self might lead to transcendence, transformation and potentially the emergence of agency.

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