



Communicative Competence, Practical Reasoning and the Understanding of Culture¹

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Two papers which have appeared in the pages of *Phenomenology + Pedagogy* were originally written in the context of a research project entitled "Critical Social Theory, Communicative Competence and Practical Reasoning." This project formed part of a large effort conducted under the title of "The Problem of Self-Reflection and the Study of Children's Culture." Originally, the issues we wished to address in this project were formulated to respond to questions raised in a complex discussion between phenomenology, hermeneutics, ethnomethodology, critical social theory, and the radical form of conversationally oriented inquiry which Alan Blum and Peter McHugh have introduced² as an alternative to positivist or data-oriented research.

All of the orientations in inquiry mentioned above were to have childhood ("children's culture") as their themes. Conceptions of childhood, adulthood, upbringing, maturity, development, education, and the like, were to be employed as starting points for an examination of the attitudes and dispositions of inquirers toward these themes. Thus the ground for the inquirers' theoretical and/or methodological commitments were to be identified and become subject to reflection. It was expected that the boundaries between the traditions of theorizing and research mentioned above would become more fluid, and that a process of dialogue could be initiated which would establish new relations between these traditions. To some extent, we believe that this has been accomplished by the two papers which have appeared herein.

Heather Berkeley's "Mental Retardation as Social Identity" (P + P, Vol. 3, No. 1) introduced the theme of personal identity into the

frame of our discussions. The institutional formulation of immaturity and incompetence, as it is applied to a mentally retarded person, serves as a background to a personal, but also methodologically relevant, reflection on the relation between a person who is treated as "immature" (who is treated "as a child," as we often say colloquially) and a person who can rely on all the ordinary supports for social recognition of adult maturity. What is revealed is that these supports are, for the most part, taken for granted by anyone who is not subject to forms of disenfranchisement or disqualification. Here, the hermeneutical and phenomenological theme of ruptures in our ordinary, everyday understandings, comes to the fore in a powerful and compelling way. Reference to ordinary understandings of family membership, maturity, competence, of "being a child" and the like, are disrupted by the failure of the mentally retarded person to live up to these understandings. But more than this, the translation of that failure into a technical, institutionally defined problem *disrupts and displaces the whole context of reference to ordinary understandings and the rupturing of that understanding*. Reference to family membership (or to the lack of it), to social identity as defined by that membership, to personal identity, are replaced with anonymous technical notions of competence/incompetence which are defined in relation to their institutional treatment.

Dieter Misgeld's paper, "Self Reflection and Adult-Maturity: Adult and Child in Hermeneutic and Critical Reflection" (in this issue) addresses the notions of development and identity, childhood and adulthood, criticalness and reflectiveness. Misgeld suggests that the scientific determination of stages of development which is typical of theories of cognitive and moral development (such as the work of Piaget⁹ and Kohlberg) places childhood and adulthood at mutually exclusive ends of a continuum in such a way that one (adulthood) becomes the replacement of the other (childhood). Beginning with the notion of "adult maturity," he shows that in the experience of self-reflection, notions of adult and child, of maturity and immaturity, of competence and incompetence, belong together in the achievement of an adult's self-understanding. In the context of our project as a whole, it was maintained that such "belonging together" can become a pedagogically relevant beginning for a critique of those theories which take for granted the mutual exclusiveness of adult and child as the starting point for understanding the development and education of the child, and for understanding the nature of one's "being an adult" who is involved in the education and development of the child.

Both these papers show that theoretical and institutional conceptions of a person's competence to reason, communicate, and interact are frequently influenced by forms of social science research which *abandon any reference to common-sense understanding*. Thus, they frequently treat the distinction between competence and incompetence as one which can be definitively drawn without any reference or attentiveness to the many ways in which we may account for it in everyday life—without any reference or attentiveness to how the drawing of this distinction and the terms of this distinction might be relevant to our understanding of ourselves or others.

Overall, it may be said that our project has focused on the difference between practical, interpretive reasoning, and technical, theoretical reasoning. Focusing on this difference allowed us to show that technical reasoning in the social sciences cannot be given an exclusive mandate for the interpretation of the lived realities of society and culture. We also take the view that social-scientific or psychological research (e.g., on adulthood/childhood, or educational topics) cannot be criticized merely by juxtaposing phenomenological conceptions alongside it, as if phenomenology, hermeneutics, and related disciplines simply offered alternate forms of discourse which leave the social sciences intact and untouched. In our work we maintain that a critical relationship to the human sciences is an essential feature and not a prolegomenon to the proper work of inquiry.

But more than this, we propose that the technical theorizing of the social sciences is *itself* to be accounted for as theorizing taking place in the world of everyday life. These theories and research techniques appear to us to be practically constrained conjectures and forms of discourse just as much as is ordinary discourse and reasoning in general. All theorizing and reflection respond to the intractabilities, dilemmas, and occlusions of human endeavors with which everyone attempts to cope in daily life. But because we live in a culture in which social science research and bureaucratic forms of administration begin to coalesce into one composite whole, we emphasize the unity of all those orientations of inquiry which take a critical view of these developments. It is for this reason that we proceed somewhat eclectically and join critical social theory with hermeneutics and phenomenology with aspects of empirical/interpretive studies of everyday reasoning (ethnomethodology). For we wish to establish as a maxim for the interpretation of these phenomenologically based theories (*and* of the theories of which they are critical) that, in the final analysis, knowledge is always a matter of lived, practical insight; that knowledge, understood in this sense, cannot be separated from questions of responsibility for the conduct of one's life. In the end, *none of us knows more than what we have learned to live with*. What we have learned to use as knowledge relevant to the organiza-

tion of our relations with others and to the acquisition of self-understanding, can then orient further actions.

Social science research and its bureaucratic and administrative/managerial use is becoming a problem in society and culture, because it severs the production and use of knowledge from the development of identity and communication. The aseptic and anonymous rule of method in contemporary research leads to the dissolution of all of the bonds which tie the theorist/researcher to the very understandings which they have in common with all those not themselves participating in the research. The pedagogical consequence of such dissolution is already quite evident. It is not simply that educational institutions begin to focus on the production and use of knowledge and turn away from issues of communication and personal/social identity. Rather, it is that issues of communication and the development of personal/social identity come surreptitiously to be equated with the production and use of knowledge.

Our inquiries attempt to recover these bonds and do justice to contemporary research while also being resolutely critical of it. We would hope that these papers contribute to a discussion about community, social, and personal identity, development, and education which is critical as well as interpretive.

Notes

1. This project was one of four projects funded by SSHRC grant #431-77006. We wish to acknowledge the Council's support and thank Alan Blum, the Director of the entire research grant, for his provocative and stimulating leadership. In our view, we were fortunate for being able to look at the York University work from a distance, yet in the context of a shared organizational effort. The reader should refer to *Phenomenology + Pedagogy*, Vol. 1, No. 3, for the view of A. Blum and P. McHugh. This effort was also shared by James Heap and Ronald Silvers, whom we also thank. They helped us achieve a sense of direction and purpose pointing beyond the organizational frame in question.
2. Here I appeal to Blum and McHugh's earlier position. It predates the collaboration mentioned in the acknowledgement, but was influential in its early phase. See McHugh, Raffel, Foss, and Blum, 1974.
3. In a paper already published in *Phenomenology + Pedagogy* (Vol. 2, No. 3), Jardine has already addressed this issue. See Jardine, 1984.

References

- Jardine, D.W. (1984). The Piagetian picture of the world. *Phenomenology + Pedagogy*, 2(3).
- McHugh, P., Raffel, S., Foss, D., & Blum, A. (1974). *On the beginnings of social inquiry*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.