

Frame Work: Helping Youth Counter Their Misrepresentations in Media

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Drawing on several ethnographies with youth participants, I identified and critiqued three frames that help to comprise the mainstream media's larger framework of troubled and troubling youth: inner-city youth as "gang bangers"; teen mothers as "children having children" and "welfare bums"; and girls as fashion obsessed and impressionable. I considered the relationship between news coverage of youth and educational programs and curriculum and explored the possibilities and limits of various strategies aimed at producing and circulating diverse youth self-representations in the mainstream and alternative media, including involving youth as co-researchers.

Key words: youth cultural studies, high school, participatory democracy

En puisant dans plusieurs études ethnographiques faisant appel à la participation de jeunes, l'auteure fait l'analyse critique de trois volets qui aident à comprendre le cadre plus vaste utilisé par les médias grand public relativement aux jeunes en difficulté : les jeunes des quartiers défavorisés ou les membres des « gangs de rue », les mères adolescentes décrites comme « des enfants qui ont des enfants » et des bénéficiaires de l'aide sociale ainsi que les jeunes filles vues comme des obsédées de la mode et des personnes impressionnables. L'auteure étudie le lien entre la représentation des jeunes dans les médias et les programmes d'éducation tout en explorant les possibilités et les limites de quelques stratégies visant à favoriser la création et la diffusion de diverses autoreprésentations des jeunes dans les médias grand public et alternatifs, y compris celles associant les jeunes aux processus de définition et d'opérationnalisation des recherches.

Mots clés : études culturelles sur les jeunes, école secondaire, démocratie participative.

For 15 years, my ethnographic research has spotlighted the perspectives and experiences of youth, many of whom have been marginalized by the practices of traditional schooling. In each of my major research studies, I have been struck again and again by the role that mainstream media have played in helping to construct these groups of youth as deviant or problematic within society. The youth groups include early school leavers (so-called “dropouts” and “pushouts”), teen mothers, youth attending alternative or inner-city schools, and, most recently, girl skateboarders.

A common theme emerges among the youth from all the studies. Repeatedly they say they have been misrepresented and placed in a bad light in the media coverage that supposedly reflects their lives. Of course, complaints by any group about being misrepresented in the media, even those with power and privilege in society, are not uncommon. But, because of the age of these youth groups and other aspects of their lives or social locations, they have very little pull with the media or access to the media production process. These studies raise questions for researchers and educators alike: Beyond studying or teaching these youths, should we be helping them to insert their self-representations into the mass media and to create their own media? Do we listen to the youth’s discourses rather than continue to discount their perceptions?

The need for youth self-representations is particularly pressing in this period of standardization and conformity, as evidenced in the increasing use of large-scale provincial, national, and international testing (e.g., Moll, 2003; Stack, this issue). In this article, I have shared the youth research participants’ perceptions about their portrayals in the media; drawn connections between the assumptions and images underlying both media representations of youth and punitive policies of schooling, an institution that is supposed to serve young people and improve their lives; and raised a few possibilities for how we might, directly and indirectly, increase the presence and diversity of youth self-representations in the mainstream and alternative media. I aim to illuminate both the rhetorical and ideological work that media frames do as well as the activist work that youth could be, and in some cases, are already doing to counter these dominant frames.

MEDIA MISREPRESENTATIONS OF YOUTH

A few examples drawn from my research over the years will demonstrate that youth serve as a discursive domain through which a variety of social anxieties or “crises” can be read.¹ Media writers (as well as, of course, social activists, professionals, politicians, and researchers) frame youth in various ways to help their audiences make sense of the phenomena or events. “Frames and frameworks are ‘schemata of interpretation that enable individuals to locate, perceive, identify, and label’ events they have experienced directly or indirectly” (Binder, 1993, p. 754). These frames, composed of arguments, images, and metaphors, are selected and constructed from larger sets of cultural beliefs; they serve “an ideological function when the frames reinforce unequal social relations by those institutionally empowered to do so” (p. 755; cf. Edley, 2001).

The ideological frames are reproduced in the news media through a mentality and media practice that if a story “bleeds, it leads.” The editorial writers of the *Vancouver Sun* newspaper made this explicit to their readers in an editorial to explain why the news media dwell so much on “bad kids.” Prompting the need for this explanation was a McCreary Centre survey of British Columbia students in grades 7-12, which had shown the percentage of young people engaged in risky behaviours (having sex, not using contraception, smoking cigarettes, doing drugs, drinking and driving) had declined significantly over the past number of years. According to the *Vancouver Sun* (2004):

The news is about conflict and conflict requires that people break the rules, so we hear, perhaps too often, about teenagers being killed in car accidents, through bullying or through drug abuse. The news is also about what’s new, what’s exceptional, and the survey confirms that troubled kids are the exception. (p. A22)

Unwilling to trouble its own “kids”-as-“trouble/d” frame any further, however, the rest of the editorial raised the specter of “our risk-averse teens . . . afraid to take chances”: “No one ever developed a thriving business, or made a groundbreaking scientific discovery, or wrote great music, without going out on a limb and, in some cases, without risking

everything" (p. A22). Stories perpetuating negative images of youth apparently appeal to many adults and sell newspapers (Males, 1999; cf. Schissel, 1997), or at least many journalists believe that crime and sensationalism sell newspapers and act on that belief (Young, 2005).

A growing body of literature, dating to when critical sociologist Stanley Cohen (2002/1972) first launched the concept of moral panic, has documented the role of mass media in helping to incite public concerns about various youth (and other) issues. Recent studies have examined "new" youth crimes such as "wilding" (Welch, Price, & Yankey, 2002) and "schoolyard shootings" (Aitken & Marchant, 2003), "underachieving boys" (Griffin, 2000; Titus, 2004), and "runaways" (Staller, 2003). Most studies that I am aware of have been better at analyzing media representations and rhetorical framing and documenting concern and consensus among media producers than they have been at assessing various audience responses to the news (beyond opinion polls; but see Gilliam & Bales, 2001); illuminating causality (e.g., whether news media coverage reflects public concern or incites it); exploring the consequences of the expansion and diversification of media producers through the Internet at the same time that large corporations are consolidating ownership of traditional (TV, radio, newspapers), mainstream media; or linking moral panics to the working of our political economy and other material conditions (for further discussion, see Cohen, 2002, esp. pp. xxvi-xxxv; McRobbie & Thornton, 2000; Stabile, 2001).

It is beyond the scope of this article to fill these gaps in the literature on moral panics over youth. Rather, I have identified how news reporters and editors have framed issues around youth with whom I have done research in ways that marginalize explanations and information that might contradict the mainstream media's larger framework of troubled and troubling youth. Critical media studies alert us to the heterogeneity of audiences and how the meanings of media texts are "negotiated in relation to viewers' cultural and class background, gender, and the situational contexts of decoding and encoding" (Luke, 1999, p. 623). Here, I briefly highlight some young audience members' responses to media coverage of youth; the "folk devils" (Cohen, 2002) of various moral panics talk back, as it were, to media representations.

Frame 1: Inner-City Youth as "Gang Bangers"

During 1993-1994, a team of graduate students and I did a case study of Vancouver Technical Secondary School, one of 21 schools across Canada comprising the Exemplary Schools Project and one of the few high schools in British Columbia to be officially designated as "inner city." Although the school was selected as exemplary because of its turnaround success in improving exam scores, participation rates, and withdrawal rates as well as its schools-within-a-school approach, my research team and I heard students and teachers alike complain about the mainstream media's continued stereotyping of inner-city youth (nonwhite, working class, and immigrant) and tarnishing of the school's reputation.

In an incident that had occurred two years earlier, a Van Tech student was stabbed on the school grounds by a group of other youth. Although the popular perception was that this incident was related to immigrant gangs, in reality it had evolved from a small student getting picked on by other youth in a restaurant. A larger student stood up and told the other students to leave the smaller student alone. A few days later, this larger student was slashed with knives by the youth who were in the restaurant, ostensibly because he had embarrassed them in front of their girlfriends, and this retaliation was an effort to save face. This incident set off a chain of inflammatory broadcasts and articles in the local media linking Van Tech with the supposed rise in teen violence.

According to a teacher, the stabbing incident was a "horrific, one-of-a-kind event that hardly typifies what life at Van Tech is like." A grade-12 student perceived a social class bias (and I would add racial bias) at work in the mainstream media's portrayal of Van Tech students as "gang bangers":

Nobody talks about the drug problem in the [upper-income] West End, yet the moment a couple of grade 9 kids have a scrap at Van Tech, the cameramen and media rush over and talk about the gang problems at our school. East Van has always had a bad reputation, as far back as I can remember, that comes from I think the "higher class" West End. (Kelly, 1995, p. 12)

Not all Van Tech students felt victimized, however, by the negative media coverage. A member of the boys' basketball team, for example, noted: "The tough image gives us the chance to think of ourselves as stronger and tougher than the opposition. This, of course, might not be true."

Frame 2: Teen Mothers as "Children Having Children" and "Welfare Bums"

In *Pregnant with Meaning* (Kelly, 2000), an ethnographic study of teen mothers and the politics of inclusive schooling, I analyzed print media representations of teen mothers and discerned two dominant frames. The "wrong-girl" frame of the bureaucratic experts suggested that girls from flawed backgrounds (poor and abusive) were making tragic mistakes and wrong choices. The "wrong-family" frame of the social and economic conservatives propounded the idea that unmarried teen mothers on social assistance were immoral, promiscuous, and a drain on taxpayers.

The 50 young women whom I got to know during my multi-year studies of both City and Town Schools in the mid-1990s challenged these stereotypes directly and indirectly. Anna, age 17 and on the honour roll at Town School, noted that talk shows (like "Oprah") "never show someone like me who's actually doing their school and wants to do something with their life. They show the teen moms who have ten kids." Were they to attempt to counter the stigmatizing representations of teen mothers (and single mothers generally) that were circulating in the media, the teen mothers I got to know felt that, by virtue of their age, those in power would not take them seriously. Anna, for example, told me that as a researcher, I was ideally located to go on television "as a spokesperson . . . and say, 'I've talked to all these girls,' and have the actual facts instead of just us going [affecting a repentant tone], 'We didn't *mean* to get pregnant'" (Kelly, 2000, p. 206).

During my fieldwork at City School, Mina (age 18) was featured in a news article in which the teen-mother-as-victim-of-sexual-abuse theme was prominent and a pull-quote by the teacher in Mina's Teen-Age Parents Program read, "The fastest way from slut to angelhood is becoming a madonna." The reporter, citing academic work by Debra Boyer, posited that young women who have been sexually abused may

later engage in behavior that others see as promiscuous; then, in a subconscious effort to move out of the bad girl category, they become pregnant and mothers. Mina (who came from a stable, working-class home and claimed she had a good relationship with her parents) objected to how the reporter implied that she was “looking for something other than a boyfriend” (i.e., a “father figure”) and that “I was abused and looking for a dad who wasn’t abusive, and I mean it wasn’t that way” (Kelly, 2000, p. 208).

Frame 3: Girls as Fashion Obsessed and Impressionable

Mass media pundits would have us believe that girls today are fashion obsessed and acting sexy at too young an age (crop tops, thongs, low-rider jeans). By contrast, the 20 girls who comprised the skater sample in the “Girl Power” study (Kelly, Pomerantz, & Currie, 2005) said that, by and large, they liked the casual, comfortable (baggy) look of skater clothes. Many were quick to contrast skater style with what they disliked: “revealing,” brand-name attire that they associated with a certain type of popular “boy-hunting” girl. As Zoey (age 15) explained, “A lot of the skater clothes aren’t slutty, so that’s really cool. . . . That really tight stuff—those can get really annoying after awhile, and you can’t do anything on a board in it.” According to Grover (age 15), “bun girls” (her group’s name for girls who displayed an emphasized femininity) wear “tank tops four seasons a year. . . . They base a lot upon their looks and what they think the guys will like.” “They’re not really their own person,” added Onyx (age 14, almost 15).

When the *Vancouver Sun* (Richmond, 2004) recently published an article about girls at Van Tech subtitled “Tight, Belly-Baring Clothes Make the Grade,” a student there was quick to write the editor to protest that “not everybody dresses like that” (Jung, 2004, p. A13). This student went on to note: “A good number of students express themselves through the way they dress. If everybody dresses the same, they lose their individuality.” This was a theme expressed by many girls in the “Girl Power” study, skaters and non-skaters alike. Vanessa (age 13, going on 14) said she liked “some of the ways that people look and how they dress in [popular] magazines. But . . . I don’t really copy any of that exactly, ‘cause that just wouldn’t be me.”²

Of course, youth are as vulnerable as adults to the marketing strategies of the publishing and broadcast industries, which appeal to media-savvy consumers' sense of individuality. Douglas Rushkoff (2001), for example, has documented how corporations hire those familiar with youth culture to hunt for the styles of "cool" youth and turn these styles into products to be sold to "mainstream" young people (cf. McRobbie & Thornton, 2000, p. 187).

SCORING IDEOLOGICAL POINTS IN THE CONTESTED ARENA OF SCHOOLING

Mass media's representations of youth—particularly those marginalized by virtue of their poverty or immigrant status, race, gender, ability, or sexuality—are frequently distorted and negative.³ Drawing from survey and focus-group interview research conducted in the United States, Gilliam and Bales (2001) have shown that the dominant content on television news presents a negative picture of youth, altering adult perceptions. In fact, this negative view becomes so ingrained in the minds of adult audiences that they overlook or discount data highlighting positive trends among teenagers and explain away their own positive experiences with young people as aberrations.

The stigmatized media images serve diverse ideological interests, although rarely the interests of youth themselves.⁴ Stereotypes of youth as violent or members of criminal gangs justify policies that treat schools as prisons and staff as prison guards, where students now encounter surveillance cameras, electronic access devices, bar-coded ID tags, and (in the United States) metal detectors and scanner wands (Schmidt, 2004b). Students, particularly those categorized as racial minorities (e.g., Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978; Males, 1999), are treated as potential criminals and automatically suspected of concealing weapons or drugs. In the United States, African American and Latino students are more likely to be disciplined at school than White students (e.g., Noguera, 1995, p. 201), and in a Canadian study, Ruck and Wortley (2002) found that "racial/ethnic minority" students were much more likely than White students to perceive school disciplinary practices as discriminatory.

Stereotypes of teen mothers as “children having children” (when nearly two thirds of births to teenagers are to women aged 18 or 19 years old, that is legal adults, entitled to vote as citizens) cast them as needing lots of help from adults (Kelly, 2000, p. 32). Defining teen mothers “immature” inevitably shapes the programs and policies established to address their needs; thus, supervision, monitoring, and surveillance become the resulting watchwords of such programs. One can see how this frame, working in tandem with the “welfare bum” frame, helped to pave the way for a 1999 policy in Ontario mandating that teen mothers enroll in school or lose their welfare benefits (Southam Newspapers, 1999).

Stereotypes of girls as impressionable and fashion obsessed (and, by extension, boys as collections of uncontrollable hormones) justify everything from single-sex classes and schools within the public school system (e.g., *Vancouver Sun*, 2003) to dress codes (e.g., Alphonso, 2004). Constituted as both vulnerable to the lustful attentions of boys and men and not fully aware of their sexual power, girls are then said to require protection through various institutional means. I interviewed a principal in British Columbia, for example, shortly after he garnered media attention for banning girls from wearing sports bras to school. He explained that, through music videos

Girls learn that what they are is sexual, and they know that if they wear the sports bra, they’ll get more attention. So I don’t know if the school system can allow young women to simply sell themselves as provocateurs and not have them understand that. If you talk to the boys, they love these girls who are coming to class without bras and really short shorts, so that when they sit down, the guys can check them out. (personal communication, September 23, 1993)

Ironically, adults seek to protect youth from being negatively influenced by the media (e.g., through the content-blocking V-chip device for TVs) yet fail to notice how media imagery and rhetoric influence how they view youth and the policies they then enact to control them.

Young people do not participate equally in the making of culture in the everyday world or in public spheres, which contributes to their subordination. With few youth-generated self-representations to counter dominant images of children as violent and irresponsible—as brainless

consumers of fashion but not as thinking, contributing citizens—coercive measures aimed at youth are easier to enact. Thus, high school seniors in one California school district are required to sign up for postsecondary education before they can participate in their high school graduation ceremony (Brown, 2002). Students deemed to be making inadequate academic progress or to have left school without graduating are not allowed to obtain or hold a driver's permit or license in North Carolina—the so-called “Lose Control/Lose Your License” legislation. Similar legislation, which connects to images of violent or criminal youth, exists in the states of Florida and Kentucky and has been proposed in Ontario (Greenberg, 2005).

YOUTH SELF-REPRESENTATIONS

Youth self-representations are integral to their effective participation in democracy, including self-representations that would critically question the meaning and value of that participation in conventional terms (Harris, 2001). In the next section, I explore how educational researchers, policymakers, and teachers might support youth in their efforts at self-definition and resistance to misrepresentation by powerful others. But before I discuss strategies for producing and circulating youth self-representations, a few cautions are in order. Speaking directly to mainstream news reporters, particularly as individuals, is likely to result in painful distortions of young people's intended messages. Molly, a 17-year-old mother, spoke for a number of her peers when she complained to me of the selective editing done by a local columnist.

That [newspaper] lady totally twisted what we said because she wanted it to sound worse. I wrote her a letter and said, “If you weren't going to write what we said, why did you waste your time and our time? You might as well just have sat home, made up the story yourself—not even bother us if you weren't going to use the facts.” (Kelly, 2000, p. 67)

Even educational researchers equipped with well-rehearsed and well-documented arguments may find that the corporate-dominated, mainstream media filter out or distort their attempts to publicize alternative discourses. I spent considerable time with an education reporter for the *Vancouver Sun*, for example, when she was preparing a

front-page, back-to-school feature story entitled “High School Dropouts” (see Steffenhagen, 2001). During our interview, she cited the 1999-2000 statistics for British Columbia that only 39 per cent of Aboriginal students completed high school within six years compared to 75 per cent of all students. I put forward various explanations for this, including the devastating legacy of residential schooling, persistent poverty, Eurocentric curricula, and lack of access to a critical history of First Nations peoples to provide a form of protection against the destructive stereotypes that many First Nations youth must endure in school. I described a local program that I had studied, Tumanos, which introduced urban Aboriginal youth to First Nations art, literature, history, sport, and spiritual ceremonies and had met with some success (see Kelly, 1995, pp. 64-68). Thus, when I read the resulting article, which described the low Aboriginal completion rates as a “real shocker,” I myself was shocked to see that nothing I had said about this topic had made its way into the article. I was quoted on other aspects of the “dropout” issue.

Although another university professor, a researcher with the right-wing Fraser Institute, the president of the B.C. School Trustees Association, the head of a nonprofit “rescue program,” and numerous early school leavers were interviewed, no Aboriginal scholars, experts, spokespeople, teachers, or students were quoted. The reporter mentioned that the B.C. Human Rights Commission had “announced its intention to conduct an inquiry into why aboriginal students aren’t generally successful in the public school system” (Steffenhagen, 2001 p. A9), but ignored the release just a few months earlier of the Commission’s review of the literature on “barriers to equal education for Aboriginal learners” (see British Columbia Human Rights Commission, 2001, p. 1).

Even when reporters are open to marginalized discourses, the alternative messages may get lost because they have little control over the spin that editors put on an article. A beat reporter for the *Province* (the tabloid newspaper in Vancouver) explained to me that an article gets sensationalized based on

where it is in the paper, how big the headline is, what the headline says, what the picture is, how big the picture is, how it's laid out on the page, how long the story is—and those are things the reporters don't have any control over. Not an ounce. (L. Grindlay, personal communication, August 30, 1993)

Another consideration is the nature of the mainstream media's audience vis-à-vis youth, particularly from oppressed groups. bell hooks (1989) explains:

If the identified audience, those spoken to, is determined solely by ruling groups who control production and distribution, then it is easy for the marginal voice striving for a hearing to allow what is said to be overdetermined by the needs of that majority group who appears to be listening, to be tuned in. It becomes easy to speak about what that group wants to hear, to describe and define experience in a language compatible with existing images and ways of knowing, constructed within social frameworks that reinforce domination. (pp. 14-15)

One can hear Fran (age 18), for instance, struggling with how to speak publicly about why having a baby as a teenager was for her so positive: "What I tell people, I'm not saying it's a good idea to have a baby young. I'm not saying that. But it's right for me now." Almost as soon as she expressed her view to me in an informal interview, Fran silenced herself. Rather than develop her counter-story that becoming a young mother might, under certain circumstances, make sense, she instead elected to underscore the applicability of conventional wisdom to others. Clearly, she did not perceive her story as "compatible with the socially organized ideology" (Anderson, 1989, p. 261, referencing Bakhtin; for more on the idea of counter-story, see Harris, Carney, & Fine, 2001).

Certainly, when youth, particularly marginalized youth, write letters to the editor (or, more rarely, full opinion-editorials or op-eds) and publish them in mainstream newspapers, they have more control over their message. Because they speak from the margin, however, a defensive tone is almost inevitable. Because they speak as individuals without institutional affiliation or backing, they presumably speak with less power and authority. One participant in the *Pregnant with Meaning* study quoted above, Anna, wrote a letter to the *Midland Daily News* contrasting "middle-class families" with two incomes to "single parents"

who are “the sole support of their families” and whose “children lack any extras” (Anna, 1997, pp. 8-9). Defending herself and other single mothers on social assistance against the “welfare bum” stereotype, Anna articulated a “twist on the dominant discourse by repositioning social assistance as a short-term, quasi-bursary for low-income, single mothers” (Kelly, 2003, p. 137). (As a relevant aside, according to the Young Parents Program administrator, Anna eventually graduated from high school, was receiving straight A’s in her second year of sciences at university, and was still pursuing her goal of medical school [field notes, April 6, 1998].)

STRATEGIES FOR PRODUCING AND CIRCULATING YOUTH SELF-REPRESENTATIONS

Strategy: Adults can support youth participation in zines (self-published, do-it-yourself alternatives to commercial magazines), websites, and other alternative media sources.⁵ Already, these “media forms have been embraced by youth seeking like-minded others beyond the local community” (Bucholtz, 2002, p. 542; cf. Guzzetti, Campbell, Duke, & Irving, 2003; Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004; Harris, 2003; McRobbie & Thornton, 2000; Sacino, 2003-2004; Schilt, 2003). A pioneer in this area is YO! (Youth Outlook), a project of Pacific News Service (itself an alternative American print and electronic media news service) started in 1991 and designed to serve youth ages 15 to 21. Many of the youth who work at this bimonthly newspaper come from “disadvantaged families; some are living on their own because of problems at home” (Pacific News Service, 2004).

Youth new to the program meet with writers and editors from the Pacific News Service to develop story ideas based on their own life experiences. With a core group of teen staff writers and a larger group of freelance writers, youth meet weekly to determine the paper’s content, make assignments and get updates on stories in progress. Writers are paid for their stories, and program participation includes lunches and workshops with working print and radio journalists, Freedom Forum representatives and peers in local high schools. (Pacific News Service, 2004)

Other examples include WireTap (a project of AlterNet.org and the Independent Media Institute), which describes itself as “the independent information source by and for socially conscious youth”.

We showcase investigative news articles, personal essays and opinions, artwork and activism resources that challenge stereotypes, inspire creativity, foster dialogue and give young people a voice in the media. The WireTap Web portal provides a new generation of writers, artists and activists a space to network, organize and mobilize. (WireTap, 2004)

Through organizations like YO! and WireTap, youth cultivate media production skills and attempt to get youth self-representations into the alternative and wider media⁶. Youth also need opportunities and organizational backing to help and encourage them to talk directly to the mass media. It is fairly common for lobbyists representing various marginalized groups to attempt to intervene with counter analysis and alternative sets of facts when the mass media (or politicians and others using the media) attempt to negatively stereotype a group. But youth groups, by virtue of age and lack of resources, are less equipped to do lobbying.

An exception to this is the Canadian Federation of Students, although it serves older and perhaps more privileged youth. Founded in 1981 and funded through student tuition fees, the CFS “currently unites more than 450,000 college and university students across Canada through a cooperative alliance of over 70 students’ unions” (Canadian Federation of Students, 2004). CFS has both newswire and communications staff members who write press releases and organize lobbying. It has been relatively successful in getting sympathetic media coverage (e.g., Konieczna, 2004; Newman, 2004; Schmidt, 2004a) in its fight against tuition fee increases and for increased federal funding for post-secondary education.

Strategy: A direct way that educational researchers can be a part of preparing youth to participate in producing alternative media and lobbying mainstream media is to involve youth as co-researchers (Cook-Sather, 2002; Kelly, 1993; SooHoo, 1993). Researchers begin from the perspective of youth as knowers, guided by a methodology, such as participatory research, that encourages reducing the hierarchy between

researchers and researched as well as taking their problems as a starting point for reflective action.

In working with youth, whether in school or other settings, adult researchers should not simply cede their authority to students. In a participatory research project I did with young people attending a “last chance” high school, I found that “Student researchers sometimes used racial, gender, and social class differences to gain power and display undemocratic behavior within the group” (Kelly, 1993, p. 8). I concluded, in a vein similar to Carmen Luke writing about media studies teachers, that adult researchers “need not abrogate their pedagogical authority to take a stand on what constitutes racist, sexist, homophobia, or just plain offensive texts” (Luke, 1999, p. 625). Adult researchers can and should, through their leadership and guided by social justice or anti-oppression principles, create moments where their authority is shared with students by temporarily placing young people in research roles and then reflecting with them on what they learned. Cook-Sather (2002) describes some recent examples of projects that included “middle or high school students as primary authors writing with the support of teachers or researchers with whom they worked” (p. 7).

Strategy: Adults can nurture what I have called (following Fraser, 1997) “subaltern counterpublics” (Kelly, 2003, p. 125) or what Michelle Fine and colleagues have referred to as “safe spaces” (Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2003, pp. 193-195; cf. Weis & Centrie, 2002). Occasionally, school-sponsored programs and extracurricular activities create a relatively safe and private discursive arena, linked to networks outside the school, where members of subordinated groups can explore who they are and what they want to become and prepare to voice their needs, concerns, and issues in wider public realms. Groups initiated and run at least partially by youth have been invited, or have sometimes intervened, into schools, with the result that they sustain counterpublics. One example from Vancouver is Check Your Head: The Youth Global Education Network (n.d.), which was founded by and for youth and organized workshops for youth in schools and elsewhere on such topics as media awareness and sweatshops. Another is The Coalition for Positive Sexuality, which was formed in part by high-school students in the United States (Coalition for Positive Sexuality, 2004; Murdy, Mendel,

& Freeman, 1994). The Coalition for Positive Sexuality distributes its *Just Say Yes* pamphlet directly to teenagers with the aim “to transgress the homophobia, misogyny, and erotophobia that these institutions [of the classrooms and the school board] perpetuate. Nobody asked *our* permission to keep teenagers so ignorant in the midst of a health crisis” (Murdy, Mendel, & Freeman, 1994, p. 45, emphasis in original).

Strategy: Finally, educational researchers who are sought out by the news media to offer their views would do well to be wary of merely being edited to fit the youth-stigmatizing themes too often favored by mainstream media. I would suggest that it is not enough for us to “sound bite” the abstracts of our latest research projects and consider our work done. We should also challenge the shapers of public understanding about the very framing of their stories. Ask the reporter or editor if they are truly interested in an alternative point of view and whether they have seriously sought out the voices of their subjects. Have they taken seriously even those youth who might provide a counter-intuitively affirming explanation of the youths’ values, thinking, and behavior?

Of course, there are limits to this last strategy. Although there may be room to modify the media’s framing of youth, reporters and editors still exist within a corporate media structure that largely dictates news values (e.g., that overall, market-led capitalism is the best system and that those who fail within it are “others” to be blamed and controlled). Progressive educators and researchers may succeed in helping to change one portrayal, but other portrayals will always need challenging. We will continually be confronted with what sociologist Howard Becker (1966-67) called the “hierarchy of credibility,” in which “credibility and the right to be heard are differentially distributed through the ranks of the [hierarchical] system” (p. 241).

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NOTES

¹ The social crisis, or at least the rhetoric of crisis, or “moral panics” (Cohen, 2002) over youth have tended to divide along gender lines, with the media

spotlighting young (often racial minority and working-class) men's violence and young (often racial minority and working-class) women's "out-of-control" sexuality.

² Of course, the claims to individuality through dress are not without tensions and contradictions. Skater girls in the "Girl Power" study, for example, emphasized their unique personal style while adhering to particular group norms; they disavowed fashion even as skateboarding itself was becoming more expensive and trendy (Kelly, Pomerantz, & Currie, 2005). Youth displaying distinctive sub-cultural styles deliberately conform in their dress to express their nonconformity with the mainstream.

³ I am not claiming that the mainstream media never presents positive images of youth. Indeed, in my analysis of print media coverage of teen mothers in Canada, I noted that because "the media like endings that affirm personal triumph, a few of the stories fall into a category I call the 'Saga of the Teenage Supermother'" (Kelly, 2000, p. 85). People like to root for the underdog, the inner-city youth who becomes valedictorian despite the odds. Yet this type of storytelling plays down structural constraints and the benefits of institutional support, sending instead a signal that all young people, given enough individual determination, talent, and character, can succeed equally well.

⁴ Liberals are likely to interpret teen mothers and early school leavers, for example, as symptoms of poverty and other systemic ills that must be addressed, while conservatives are prone to see them as resulting from a breakdown of traditional lines of authority. People across a range of ideological positions cite youth violence to marshal support for various reforms, some at direct odds with each other.

⁵ Producing zines is fun, and part of the fun for youth no doubt stems from writing and creating images that are done largely outside of adult monitoring and censorship. Thus, my suggestion that adults can support youth participation in zines is made advisedly.

⁶ Sacino (2003-2004, p. 59) notes the involvement of young people in directing the editorial content of *Teen People*, a magazine based in the United States which reaches 1.6 million teenagers, and *Kidsday*, a section of *Newsday* in New York. It appears to be increasingly common for mainstream media to devote space to youth voices. Yet when such efforts are driven by advertising and overseen by adults beholden to the corporation's bottom line, it seems likely that youth readers will be addressed more as present and future consumers rather than citizens. Commodified images of youth will hardly complicate, let alone reframe, the representations that now dominate mainstream media.

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