Dialogue and Power in Parent-Child Communication

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Review Essay:

Michelle A. Miller-Day (2004). Communication among Grandmothers, Mothers, and Adult Daughters: A Qualitative Study of Maternal Relationships. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 254 pages, 0-8058-3979-8 (Hardcover), USD 59.95

Abstract: Michelle MILLER-DAY (2004) provides an in-depth account of the negotiation of power in intergenerational maternal relationships. She provides a useful alternative to socialization and compliance-gaining perspectives on social influence between parents and children, which have limited formulations of children's agency. She proposes that despite their different statuses in the family hierarchy, both mothers and daughters experience a dialectical tension between power and powerlessness in communicative transactions. MILLER-DAY develops a grounded theory of *necessary convergence,* a symbolic process in which daughters—both powerfully and powerlessly—adopt their mothers' interpretations in order to maintain their relationship. This theory of *necessary convergence* can be productively supplemented by theorizations of dialogic multivocality, enabling this work's potentially broad transferability.

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1. Theorizing Power among Grandmothers, Mothers, and Daughters

In *Communication Among Grandmothers, Mothers, and Adult Daughters: A Qualitative Study of Maternal Relationships,* Michelle MILLER-DAY (2004) provides an in-depth account of intergenerational maternal relationships in five families from a Midwestern American town. While this book illuminates several facets of relational communication in grandmother-mother-daughter triads, their negotiation of power is a compelling and persistent theme throughout the analysis. In her discussion of dialectical tensions in maternal relationships, MILLER-DAY identifies a *powerful-powerless dialectic*, a "contradiction that exists when two partners simultaneously control and relinquish control of valuable resources" (MILLER-DAY, 2004, p.76). Furthermore, she develops a grounded theory of mother-daughter interaction termed *necessary convergence,* a symbolic

process in which lower-status women submit to the interpretive frames of higher-status women. This theorization of power in maternal relationships makes a particularly significant contribution to family communication research—and any other field that aims to understand the micropolitical relations that constitute social institutions. [1]

Michelle MILLER-DAY (2004) usefully extends the two primary perspectives on the process of social influence between parents and children. The first, socialization, focuses on the parents' transmission of family and larger-scale cultural norms to the child. In this conceptualization, the child is positioned as passive. The second, compliance-gaining, focuses on children's responses to parents' successful or unsuccessful requests. Here, children are not passive, but neither are they fully active: they are positioned as reactors to parent-initiated directives. The limitations of these perspectives call for another conceptualization of social influence in parent-child relationships that recognizes the agency of the child and relies on a reciprocal model of communication. Michelle MILLER-DAY's grounded theory of maternal relationships provides a useful response to the limitations of these perspectives, accounting for the complex relations of power that mothers and their adult daughters discursively construct. [2]

2. Child as Clay: Communication as Transmission

A significant body of literature has understood social influence in families in terms of parents' socialization practices. This perspective asserts that based on parenting practices, children are more or less likely to internalize family values and norms (HOFFMAN, 1980). Additionally, the family is considered a primary site of socialization into broader interpersonal norms (MACCOBY & MARTIN, 1983). This literature focuses primarily on two ways in which parents' practices socialize their children: (a) modeling, in which children internalize norms by observing their parents' behavior, and (b) discipline, in which children internalize norms by being punished or rewarded for their behavior by parents. [3]

By modeling parents' behaviors, children learn how to interact socially. Through the child's observation and imitation of her or his parents, children's behavioral patterns come to mirror those of their parents (WILSON & MORGAN, 2004). Laura STAFFORD (2004) suggests that children's development of social competencies is largely based on parents' own behavior. Douglas TETI and Margo CANDELARIA (2002) suggest that modeling functional behavior is the primary goal of parenting, claiming that the determination of "competent parenting" should be determined by the socialization desired. [4]

On the other hand, the literature on discipline relies on the delineation of particular parental behaviors and strategies. While there are several typologies of parental disciplinary strategies (e.g., DOPKE & MILNER, 2000; KOCHANSKA & ASKAN, 1995), these are largely based on Martin HOFFMAN's (1980) three-part typology of disciplinary strategies: (a) power assertion, when parents use or threaten coercive force, (b) love withdrawal, when parents use direct, but non-coercive expressions of disapproval, and (c) induction, where the parent provides

a rational appeal to appropriate behavior. Induction is similar to Brant BURLESON, Jesse DELIA, and Jim APPLEGATE'S (1995) concept of reflection-enhancing discipline, where parents help children take the perspective of others to encourage the desired behavior. [5]

In all of these figurations, the parent is positioned as an agent who acts directly or indirectly upon a passive child. Laura STAFFORD and Cherie BAYER (1993) criticize this "child-as-clay" model that does not acknowledge the agentive participation of children in processes of family influence. The concept of socialization necessarily implies differential agentive positions. It may seem intuitively obvious that a parent would, even should, have more power than a partially socialized child. The parent has achieved full status as a subject, while the child is still learning how to act—and how to *be*—with others. This argument is predicated on the assumption that agency stems from one's status as a sovereign subject. [6]

That assumption is not unproblematic. Judith BUTLER (1997) explains that subject status is not given a priori, but rather linguistically constituted. That is, the body's social existence becomes possible through interpellation within the terms of language. She does not deny the possibility of the subject, but argues that it is a product of language. According to Judith BUTLER, the subject is constituted within the realm of speakability and cut off from the unspeakable. This foreclosure becomes the condition of possibility for agency: "If the subject is produced in speech through a set of foreclosures, then this founding and formative limitation sets the scene for the agency of the subject" (p.139). In other words, this submission to language creates the possibility for agency through language. In this scheme, subjects are only subjects *in speech.* Therefore, parents' linguistic performance, not their status as sovereign subjects, is the basis for their agency. This same agency, stemming from the performative act, is available to children regardless of their degree of interpellation or "developmental stage." In other words, moving from individual agents to performative agency allows us to conceive of the child not as clay, but as an active co-participant in processes of family influence. [7]

3. Child as Elastic: Communication as Action-Reaction

Coming from a compliance-gaining perspective, Steven WILSON, Kenzie CAMERON, and Ellen WHIPPLE (1997) likewise note that children are active participants in processes of influence. Typically, this body of literature conceptualizes children's participation in family influence processes in terms of compliance or resistance (WILSON & MORGAN, 2004), that is, "whether the child obeyed immediately after a parental request or after a short delay" (CHAMBERLAIN & PATTERSON, 1996, p.206). While this perspective departs from the passive "child-as-clay" model, it positions children as *re*active, not active in their own right. In other words, children are positioned as participants, but not co-participants in family influence processes. For many years, scholars (e.g., BELL, 1968; THOMAS & CHESS, 1977) have supported a perspective that accounts for the role of the child in family influence, arguing that the

characteristics of the child are equally as important as the parents' traits in determining parenting behavior. While these authors account for interaction effects between child and parent characteristics, it is still rooted in family members' subjectivities and provides only simplistic accounts of their communication. [8]

Realizing that the categories of compliance and non-compliance were too blunt an instrument for understanding children's communicative practices, several family communication researchers have attempted to provide more complex accounts of compliance and non-compliance behaviors. For example, researchers make a distinction between committed and situational compliance (KOCHANSKA & ASKAN, 1995). That is, whether the child complies based on the internalized values of the parent (committed compliance) or whether the child complies only behaviorally without internal commitment to family norms (situational compliance). Similarly, researchers (MCLAUGHLIN, CODY, & ROBEY, 1980) make the category of non-compliance more complex by identifying several resistance strategies: (a) non-negotiation, where children refuse to comply without engaging parents in interaction about their non-compliance, (b) identity management, where children construct particular images for themselves and their parents to avoid compliance, (c) justification, where children account for their noncompliance based on the anticipated results of compliance, and (d) negotiation, where children collaborate with parents to generate acceptable alternatives. [9]

Despite the typological complexity of non-compliance reactions, this perspective still does not account for the complexity that exists in the interstice between compliance and non-compliance. Still, this body of research dichotomizes compliance and resistance, ignoring the ways in which children's behavior can be both compliant and resistant *in the same instance*. The dichotomy between compliance and resistance relies on the understanding of the child's agency as necessarily over and against that of the parent. Here, either the child or the parent is an agent—not both. If the child complies, s/he is a vehicle for the parent's agency. If the child resists, s/he exercises her or his own agency. However, it is not so simple a matter as whether children act in their own name or in the name of their parents. [10]

Take, for example, a parent's directive to a young child not to touch a hot stovetop, or a parent's directive to an adolescent child not to engage in premarital sex. When parents seek the compliance of their children, it is often in the best interest of children to comply. In cases such as this, the compliant child acts for the parent *and* for himself or herself. Parents here exercise what Michel FOUCAULT (2000) calls "pastoral power" (p.334): the exercise of power through the others' self-governance in the name of their own health, well-being, and se-curity. In this case, parents exercise power over children by teaching children to behave in their own best interests. While the child's obedience in this case is not an act of resistance, neither is it purely submission to parental domination. [11]

Just as a child's obedience cannot be understood as pure domination, a child's non-compliance with parental directives cannot be taken as a pure act of freedom. Take, for example, a child's non-compliance with curfew rules. This may be achieved through any of the non-compliant strategies identified in the literature: (a) sneaking into the house late (non-negotiation), (b) arguing that all other parents allow later curfews (identity management), (c) explaining a need for a school study group (justification), or (d) promising to check in more regularly when out late (negotiation). Although in each case the child does not comply with the parents' directive, the parents *still exercise power* over the child, in that they "structure [her or his] possible field of action" (FOUCAULT, 2000, p.341). The directive of the parent does not make staying out late impossible for the child, but it certainly makes it more difficult. Even when apparently resisting parental requests, children act within the field of possibilities that those requests create. Thus, the dichotomy between compliance and resistance cannot adequately account for the relationship of influence between parents and children. As Michel FOUCAULT (2000) argues, "the power relationship and freedom's refusal to submit cannot be separated" (p.342). [12]

4. Child as Agent: Communication as Transaction

Both the socialization and compliance-gaining literatures rest on problematically simplistic conceptualizations of agency. The socialization literature posits a model of agentive parents influencing passive children, based on the assumption that agency stems from status as a sovereign subject—a status that parents have attained, but children have not. The limitations of the compliance-gaining literature are twofold: (a) children are cast as reactive, not fully active, and (b) the binary of compliance and non-compliance obscures the performative complexity of family influence practices. Both of these limitations are based on a problematic assumption of the child's agency as against, rather than intertwined with, the parents agency. In *Communication Among Grandmothers, Mothers, and Adult Daughters: A Qualitative Study of Maternal Relationships,* Michelle MILLER-DAY provides alternative conceptions of agency and communication to account for relations of power in parent-child relationships. [13]

It is important to note that the socialization and compliance-gaining perspectives were primarily researched with young children, while MILLER-DAY studies parents' relationships with adult daughters. As Michelle MILLER-DAY herself points out, "Role functions of maternal relationships are much more distinct when a daughter is a child; the relationship revolves around basic physical care and socialization of the child" (p.78). Socialization and compliance-gaining are important aspects of parents' relationships with young children, and MILLER-DAY's findings cannot be generalized to any parent-child relationship, as she herself recognizes (p.37). Still, MILLER-DAY's formulations of *the child's agency* and *the transactional exercise of power* can usefully inform current perspectives on social influence in parent-child communication. [14]

Michelle MILLER-DAY explains that her research is "situated in a *transactive* view of communication" (p.xii): communication as a mutual and dynamic process. This

transactive process is evident in the scripted patterns of speech between mothers and adult daughters. MILLER-DAY identifies three different scripts, or "guides to action that structure our everyday interaction" (p.185). First, she demonstrates that when higher-status (older) women issued commands or directive hints, lower-status (younger) women deferred to them. Second, when lower-status women issued directives in the form of hints or queries, higher-status women responded with demands of their own to reassert their status. Third, when a woman of any status issued descriptive directives, the other responded with an acknowledgment of the first's status in the family hierarchy. [15]

In each case, the negotiation of meaning is mutual and dynamic: participants rely on each others' responses to negotiate meaning. Meanings are not unilateral or static because, in these examples, responses determine the force of the initial utterances. Michelle MILLER-DAY explains that "agency is in the authorship" (pp.3 and 222), and that mothers and daughters share agency as they co-author these scripts. Even though these scripts conserve family hierarchy, they position daughters as agents with the power to signify or resignify their mother's status through response. As MILLER-DAY succinctly puts it: "Dominance requires submission" (p.208). Yet, for MILLER-DAY, a daughter's submission to or resignification of her mother's status does not simply amount to compliance or resistance, as in the parent-child compliance-gaining literature reviewed above. [16]

Drawing from Leslie BAXTER and Barbara MONTGOMERY'S (1998) relationship dialectics theory, Michelle MILLER-DAY explains the negotiation of influence between grandmothers, mothers, and adult daughters as a "contradictory pull between powerful and powerless" (p.139). MILLER-DAY shows that mothers often base their self-worth on their daughters' accomplishments. Mothers "manipulate and control [their daughters] 'for their own good,' for the positive appraisal reflected back to their own selves" (p.219). Reflexively, daughters often base their self-worth on their mothers' approval and, "the lower-status woman's attention typically [becomes] focused on pleasing her partner in order to feel good about herself" (p.209). [17]

Here, mothers and daughters are both implicated in the manipulation of power resources like support, inclusion, and regard. Mothers who refuse to support, include, and regard their daughters not only reject their daughters, but also, by implication, reject themselves. Ironically, by exercising power over their daughters, mothers reduce their own power. Conversely, daughters who act in their own best interests communicate support, inclusion, and regard to their mothers. Again ironically, daughters can exercise power by submitting to the conditions of their mothers' approval. Therefore, mothers' and daughters' exercise of power does not render one woman powerful and the other powerless. Michelle MILLER-DAY demonstrates that powerfulness and powerlessness simultaneously coexist within the same communicative acts. [18]

Based on these relations of power that emerged from her informants' talk, Michelle MILLER-DAY developed a theory of *necessary convergence of meaning:* "During certain communication transactions, adult daughters and

granddaughters would defer to the higher-status women in the family, overaccommodate the higher-status woman's interpretation of events, and ultimately converge toward her interpretive frame for relational maintenance purposes" (p.201). Necessary convergence is a three-fold process. First, the *equilibrium* in the coordination of relational meaning is disrupted; in lay terms, mothers and daughters have a difference of opinion. Second, the daughter affords greater importance to her mother's interpretation, enacting a *weighted proportion of meaningfulness.* Third, the daughter perceives that her mother will not accept her unless she adopts her mother's perspective, providing *motivation* for her to change. In short, daughters often adopt their mothers' interpretations in order to maintain their relationship. [19]

5. New Directions for Parents and Children: Multivocal Communication

Michelle MILLER-DAY's analysis of power in maternal relationships makes a significant contribution by theorizing the agency of children in transactive communication with parents. Its resonance with recent theorizations of multi-vocality (e.g., BAXTER, in press) suggests that this locally grounded theory has broad implications. This theory anticipates Leslie BAXTER and Carma BYLUND's (2004) call for a multivocal, dialogic approach to family influence, in which parents' and children's voices exist in the play of conversation and utterance. As the necessary convergence of meaning suggests, mothers' and daughters' voices are not always clearly distinguishable. It is difficult to isolate a voice as a single unit because it always exists in combination with other voices: "one and the same word often figures both as the speech of the author and the speech of another— and at the same time" (BAKHTIN, 1981, p.308). Still, it is tempting to rely on the sources of speech to distinguish one voice from another. [20]

In other words, it may seem useful to identify different voices with different subjects. For example, it may seem that the speech acts of a parent constitute a parental voice, while the speech acts of children constitute a child voice. There is not, though, a one-to-one relationship between speaker and voice. For example, a daughter may adopt her mother's voice, as Michelle MILLER-DAY found in the intergenerational transmission of necessary convergence. Untethering voices from subjects allows for a conception of the child as an agentive co-participant in processes of family influence. A single voice may be distributed across a number of speakers. Erving GOFFMAN (1979) distinguishes (a) animators, who enact a behavior, (b) authors, who script the behavior, and (c) principals, who maintain responsibility for behavior. This dispersal of voice serves to displace accountability for failure (KEENAN, 1971). For example, if a daughter fails to meet a mother's expectations, she may argue that although she was the *animator* of disappointing behavior, the mother *authored* the noncompliant behavior herself. Mothers may be less likely to disapprove of their daughters if they recognize their complicity in creating their (the mothers') behavior. Here, daughters can strategically deploy necessary convergence with their mothers as a self-protective measure. [21]

Distributing voice across multiple agents gives agency to people without the status to speak. For example, daughters may be able to influence mothers by soliciting grandmothers to speak on their behalf. Dissolving the link between voice and subjects can also enable interactors to appropriate the force of larger discursive formations that "transcends that of individual persons" (KEANE, 1991, p.312). For example, MILLER-DAY found that grandmothers, mothers, and daughters often make sense of their relationship realities in relation to ideal maternal relationships from "media and interpersonal rhetoric" (p.136). Distributing voice can proliferate and thus consolidate the linguistic power of family members and their speech by relying on operating discourse formations. While the splitting of the speaking subject into a number of loci negates the conception of the sovereign *agent*, this disappearance of the sovereign agent through the distribution of voice production is a vehicle for *agency*. In other words, by giving up personal agent-status, family members can seize more power by deploying multiple voices. Attention to the multivocality—multiple voices—in discourse allows for an understanding of lower-status family members' power and agency in processes of family influence. As suggested by the necessary convergence of meaning, daughters may enter the web of powerfulness and powerlessness by appropriating the voices of their mothers. [22]

However, this appropriation cannot be a simple copy; daughters' discourses cannot cleanly converge with their mothers'. Discourses are transformed through their appropriation. The Derridian notion of iterability (1972) suggests that each repetition of a discourse is radically different from its previous instantiations due to its new context. It is through context that utterances come to both depend on past discourse formations and transform those discourses when enacted. Judith BUTLER (1997) explains that "a performative 'works' to the extent that it *draws on and covers over* the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilized" (p.51). It follows that in order for daughter to claim agency, they must appropriate the voices of their mothers, working within and against prevailing family discourses. [23]

Even earnest attempts to converge with their mother's interpretations cannot replicate the interpretations to which they conform. Judith BUTLER (1997) asserts, "The utterance is uncontrollable, appropriable, and able to signify otherwise and in excess of its animating intentions" (p.98). Even though a daughter may adopt her mother's discourse, as in necessary convergence, that discourse will mean something different when spoken by the daughter. Michelle MILLER-DAY primarily discusses the negative consequences of this necessary gap between mothers' expectations and daughters' performances: daughters attempt to regain self-control through risky behaviors like eating disorders, drug abuse, and even suicide. Yet at the same time, this irreducible gap between mothers and daughters may be the very mechanism of daughters' agency, enabling them to exceed the sometimes coercive, often loving "velvet chains" (MILLER-DAY, 2004, p.3) of maternal relationships. [24]

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