Explaining Adolescents' Self-Discovery in Groups
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A Dynamic Systems Theory of Self-Discovery in Groups

Epistemological Stance
Evidence from third-person studies of intentional systems, folk psychologies, and micro-level, sub-personal psychologies reveal different ways in which individuals use their social knowledge when choosing a course of action. Across the lifespan, individuals show different levels of awareness of their beliefs, desires, and actions as these dictate their opportunities in life. This work is not grounded in the assumption that there is a unified, ideal way to function but rather that individuals choose the most expedient routes available to them.

Disciplinary Stance
Regular group interactions offer adolescents the opportunity to engage in self-discovery, and schools offer a wide range of voluntary and involuntary group settings in which to learn. Developmental psychologists have isolated aspects of how schools facilitate self-discovery, yet individual studies offer a somewhat skewed representation of how adolescents interact with one another and learn from their interactions. At this point in our research history, it seems possible to build and defend a strong theory of how adolescents use group interactions in school to learn more about themselves.

Methodological Stance
Large-scale studies and a third-person theoretical framework reveal an intentional system that can be isolated for investigation. Studies of adolescents’ folk psychologies illustrate individual differences in how adolescents understand their beliefs, desires, and actions. Studies of sub-personal functioning are only emerging, but strengthen our understanding about what adolescents can and cannot do. Integrating all three types of evidence offers stronger explanations for how adolescents learn about themselves by interacting with groups, moving the field toward a more holistic understanding of how adolescents learn to participate as citizens.

Philosophical Stance
Grounded in Dennett’s (1987) representation of the intentional stance as involving evidence from third-person studies of intentional systems, folk psychologies, and micro-level, sub-personal psychologies, this theory of self-discovery in groups shows how individuals’ intentions drive their behavior.

Theoretical Stance
The idea that development is a dynamic system, guided by both internal and external forces, is the starting point for this theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Thelen & Smith, 1998). Intentions are formed and refined through three primary dimensions:

- Group interactions as they emerge while forming, maintaining, evaluating, and avoiding groups cultivate social and ethical dilemmas.
- Individuals make discoveries about their own willingness to include and exclude others, motivational needs, and moral functioning as they formulate beliefs about how to live.
- Individuals combine these insights and experiences to identify features of their behavioral signature as well as their skills and abilities.

Embracing the fluidity of this system, explanatory mechanisms include those characteristics that adolescents name and manipulate alongside characteristics that remain elusive to them. Adolescents experience risks as well as benefits from their group interactions. These differ depending on whether they participate in voluntary or involuntary groups. There are also notable age-related differences in how adolescents extract information from their interactions.

References