Finding Respect in France*
Muslim French Teens Interpreting Transcultural Values

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The March 2004 ban on Muslim headscarves and other “ostensible” signs of religious expression in French schools demonstrated the centrality of Muslim youth, and particularly Muslim girls, to contemporary deliberations about French identity and national community (Bowen, 2007:7). In its description of the law’s intended effects, the Commission on Laïcité (or “Secularism”) claimed to protect supposedly passive Muslim girls from the coercive effects of the headscarf, constructing them as victims of their own religious culture, a stereotype that widely circulates in France and the West generally. Yet girls and boys who simultaneously occupy Muslim and French social identities challenge such stereotypes by actively interpreting these identities in their communicative practices.

In this chapter, I explore how transnational ideologies derived from North African culture are transformed in local expressions of identity among French adolescents of primarily Algerian descent living in a cité (a low-income housing project). My goal here and generally in my research on teenagers of Algerian descent living on the outskirts of Paris is to give voice to girls and boys growing up at the intersection of Arab Muslim and secular French cultures. In my analysis, I examine how the local identity practices of Muslim French teens articulate with North African ideologies of identity, but in contradictory, rather than wholly consistent, ways. For example, teens routinely articulate conservative ideologies pertaining to generation and gender derivative of North African cultural beliefs, but also routinely challenge these ideologies in interactions with their peers.

Many of the communicative practices I observed in my study are transcultural in that they combine multiple cultural and linguistic referents in ways that simultaneously structure and destabilize adolescents’ social identities as both Arab-Muslim and French. Teens of North African descent growing up in French cités navigate between the cultural positioning of their Arabic-speaking immigrant parents and their

French-speaking, French-born peers. One way they negotiate multiple identity positionings is through innovative language practices that translate their transnational experiences into transcultural forms.

Specifically, in speech events that I term “parental name calling,” adolescents irreverently use the first name of a peer’s parent in a public setting and thereby subvert a name taboo—the avoidance of given names in personal address—that is widely prescribed across North Africa and that is practiced by their parents. Parental name calling is a form of transcultural expression because it combines a cultural reference to polite North African forms of address (the avoidance of personal names) with an irreverent undoing of that practice whereby French teens mock each other and their immigrant parents. By choosing the term “name calling” I purposefully evoke the ambivalent duality of (1) a very literal “name-calling” in which adolescents call out each other’s parents’ first names and (2) the more common usage of the term, that is, the practice of teasing and bullying among young people. Rather than use profanities or specific insults, however, adolescents call out the first name of a peer’s parent in a public setting as a deliberate provocation, which in itself is intended to insult or tease.

Apart from the public voicing of a parent’s name, parental name calling is not a formulaic or codified speech event, but rather takes different forms depending upon the speakers and the context at hand. In the simplest form of parental name calling that I observed during roughly two years of fieldwork (conducted from 1999 to 2000 and in 2006), grade school children under the age of ten years shouted the first names of one another’s parents back and forth. Adolescents, however, crafted more elaborate verbal contexts in which to embed the names of their peers’ parents and often did so with a mixture of humor and insult. In certain cases, adolescent girls mockingly referred to one another directly by their mothers’ names. The teasing, playful quality of parental name calling among adolescents also extended to the practice of embedding personal names into innovative linguistic contexts. For instance, in one lengthy performance that I recorded in 2000, two teenaged girls and one boy used a classic 1980s French rock song by Daniel Balavoine, entitled “Le Chanteur” (“The Singer”), to embed one another’s parents’ names. Mimicking the song’s original verse, “I introduce myself, my name is Henri” (“Je me présente, je m’appelle Henri”), adolescents embedded the names of their peers’ mothers into the “Henri” slot, using revised lyrics replete with sexual and scatological innuendo.

Tracing the origins of cultural borrowing among youth is increasingly complex since, as Bucholtz (2002:542) puts it, “many of the resources of present-day bricoleurs are in a certain sense self-appropriations—borrowings and adaptations of one’s own cultural background to create new youth styles,” but at the same time, many of the “traditions” adopted by youth depend upon creative reinterpretations of the past and so involve “a kind of neotraditionalism in which elements of the heritage culture are selectively appropriated and resignified.” With regard to communicative practices among French adolescents of North African descent, both innovative and traditionalizing patterns of cultural production are occurring simultaneously. Adolescents selectively appropriate and adapt a communicative form from their own background (in this case, a name taboo) and transform it into a means to express their social positioning as simultaneously young, Arab, and French.

ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXTS FOR PARENTAL NAME CALLING

This chapter is part of a larger ethnographic project on language practices and social identity among adolescents of primarily Algerian descent in Chemin de l’Ile, a neighborhood located west of Paris in Nanterre. Central to France’s industrial boom in the 1950s and 1960s, Nanterre has had a long history of immigration generally and of Algerian immigration in particular. Male Algerian workers, among them several grandparents of adolescents in this study, were recruited by factories in Nanterre and lived in bidonvilles (“shantytowns”), located about a mile away from Chemin de l’Ile. This neighborhood is
today dominated by clusters of low-income housing projects called cités.

The intertwined histories of North African migration and public housing have produced new French subjects through shared experiences of community in diaspora as well as through experiences of racial and spatial marginalization. Second- and third-generation descendants of North African immigrants today call themselves les rebeus, phonetically altering the sounds in arabe “Arab” in a type of slang called verlan. Just as these new French subjects have created a label for themselves that reflects their French and Arab cultural origins, les rebeus have combined working-class French and North African cultural and linguistic practices to create emergent communicative practices.

In the case of parental name calling, transnational North African norms for respectful address constitute a central linguistic and cultural influence. By engaging in parental name calling, adolescents both foreground and subvert a North African cultural value, that is, the avoidance of personal names. Norms of respect prescribe avoiding speaking the first name of a non-relative, and sometimes of a relative as well, particularly if that person is older than the speaker or not of the same gender. Euphemisms help North African Arabic speakers circumvent given names such as the common expression “How’s the house?” (Kaifa dar?), which a man might use to ask another non-kin male about his wife. These practices point to the ways that respectful forms of address are codified in relation to cultural norms regarding gender, age, and sexual propriety.

Following these rules for politeness, speakers avoid indiscreet reference to non-kin that might offend cultural sensibilities. In parental name calling, however, teens intentionally do the exact opposite, that is, they publicly voice the name of a peer’s parent in order to playfully tease, incite anger, or exercise social control. In this regard, parental name calling constitutes a particularly important way for adolescents to articulate cultural ties to both their immigrant origins and their emergent French adolescent subculture. Through this communicative practice, French adolescents of North African descent construct their peer group both in relation to cultural ideals of le respect and in contrast to those ideals.

In parental name calling, publicly voicing a peer’s parent’s name is often combined with other insults, both ritual and personal. This potential slippage between ritual and personal insult is always present in parental name calling, an ambiguity that allows adolescents to achieve two seemingly contradictory but highly valued interactional goals, often in quick succession. The “target” of parental name calling may interpret the speech event as personal insult, a response that allows the vindication of his or her parent’s “respect” (le respect) through denial, counterattack, and even physical aggression.

The relative unpredictability of form and interpretation of parental name calling means that these speech events are highly dynamic interactions that are situated between ritual and personal insult and between serious and playful conflict. More frequently, however, parental name calling is interpreted in my data as an opportunity to collaboratively engage in ritual insults and solidarity with a peer, resulting in cultural and generational opposition to parents. Nevertheless, the possible ambivalent interactional outcomes for parental name calling demonstrate adolescents’ simultaneous desires to, on the one hand, exhibit what they refer to as le respect for their immigrant parents and, on the other

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1 Verlan refers to French slang that is composed by inverting the syllables or sounds of words; indeed, the term verlan derives from Frenvers, which means “inverted”. Verlan did not originate in cités and is a very old French word game that can be verified as a form of spoken jargon as early as the late 19th century, although evidence of it as a literary device exists as early as the 12th century (Lefkowitz 1991:50-51). Currently, however, its use is popularly depicted as emblematic of young people living in cités.

2 The act of calling out a peer’s parent’s personal name in public constitutes a breach of deference and thus is regularly considered impolite. However, parental name calling can either emerge as a playful, formulaic, and structured performance, thus resembling ritual insult, or as a serious confrontation in which participants answer with “denial, excuse, or mitigation,” thus resembling personal insult (Labov 1972:152).
hand, engage in performances that build social intimacy with their French-born peers.

*Le respect* is a set of behaviors that my teenaged consultants construct as commensurate with proper cultural and religious practices derivative of North African and Muslim beliefs. At the same time, the set of moral discourses that constitute *le respect* in Chemin de l’Ile and in other *cités* is central to the experience of being Muslim and Arab within the diasporic context of France. That is, *le respect* is not just a reproduction of Arab-Muslim values that are imported wholesale from North Africa but a set of moral discourses and practices that emerge in France, particularly in the stigmatized spaces of French *cités*.

For example, despite their interpretation of *le respect* as a Muslim-Arab value, teens exclusively expressed this notion in French, not Arabic, even though they used other Arabic loan words when speaking French with their peers.

Generally, *le respect* refers to behavioral expectations that apply to both adolescent girls and boys, though again in ways contingent upon local gender ideologies. For adolescents of both genders, maintaining *le respect* dictates refraining from illicit behaviors such as dating, smoking, drinking alcohol, and using drugs, particularly within view of older relatives and adults of one’s parents’ or grandparents’ generation. In Chemin de l’Ile, *le respect* involves a higher level of social constraint for girls, since they are expected by their parents and peers to attain respect by presenting a public image that they are sexually unavailable and inactive.

In contrast to the social power of granting respect to another, ideological discourses circulated in Chemin de l’Ile construct girls’ and women’s power as the ability to attain the respect of others, a power that is largely tied to the way that they control their own reputations by limiting time spent with non-kin men. Some strategies that girls and young women used to gain respect in Chemin de l’Ile included limiting time in outdoor public spaces within the neighborhood and avoiding or appearing to avoid dating. For example, one young woman of eighteen explained to me that she had decided to attend high school in another *cité* several neighborhoods away because that afforded her more social freedom and an increased ability to control her reputation. By limiting access to observations of her behavior in her own *cité*, she was largely able to prevent the circulation of damaging rumors about her. Moreover, her parents were pleased to have her attend the other high school because it was academically superior to the local school.

Similarly, adolescents in Chemin de l’Ile practice strategic measures in relation to dating. Although the majority of adolescents that I encountered were starting to date between the ages of fourteen to sixteen, information about whom they were dating was highly controlled, especially in relation to parents. Thus adolescents reinterpret the behavioral code *le respect* in ambivalent ways. By covertly dating, they undermine the intention of *le respect*, that is, to prevent premarital romantic relationships, and yet refrain from overtly contradicting their parents’ wishes. Adolescents thereby engage in a combination of resistance and accommodation to their parents’ morality and both reproduce and subvert normative notions of *le respect*. Adolescents’ complicated relationship to *le respect* is evidence of the ways that they are crafting their own emergent French teen-aged morality, which simultaneously converges with and diverges from that of their parents.

One forum in which adolescents articulate their complex relationship to *le respect* is in performances of parental name calling. For instance, in the example below, Mabrouka evokes *le respect* as a set of behavioral expectations for Djamila’s mother, Zahra. At the same time, through her use of familiar reference for Djamila’s mother and in her description of Zahra’s supposedly disrespectful behavior, Mabrouka herself flouts cultural expectations for the respect of her elders. Thus, even as she is prescribing respectful behavior for Djamila’s mother, Mabrouka is subverting these behavioral norms herself. The contradictions inherent in Mabrouka’s performance demonstrate that parental name calling is a way in which these adolescents may discursively reproduce conservative cultural norms at the same time that they challenge these ideas in practice.
LE RESPECT AND LE FOULARD

One evening I was sitting in a playground with several girls near a group of apartments when another girl, Djamila, age fifteen, walked up to chat. Upon seeing her approach, Mabrouka (age fourteen) immediately reported to Djamila that her mother had burned something in her kitchen and the smoke had traveled all the way to the playground. Mabrouka then rendered a bodily pantomime of Djamila's mother, who had supposedly used a foulard (headscarf), to shake the smoke out of her kitchen. While she leaned forward and waved her arms up and down, Mabrouka added a verbal caption for the unflattering image she had created for Djamila's mother, whose first name was Zahra: “Zahra avec son foulard en train de le secouer” (“Zahra with her headscarf, shaking it out”).

Djamila said nothing but was visibly upset by Mabrouka’s account. Mabrouka apparently interpreted her look as an accusation of wrongdoing, for she responded: “Ne t’inquiètes pas” (“Don’t worry”). Rather than accept Mabrouka’s mitigation of the seriousness of her teasing, Djamila said to the rest of us, “Mabrouka always does this kind of thing to me, so that I’ll worry and everything” (“Elle me fait toujours ce genre de truc, Mabrouka, pour que je m’inquiète et tout”). With no resolution or further commentary, the girls’ discussion about the event ended there in cold silence.

In spite of the lack of interpretation embedded within the interaction itself, ethnographic knowledge provides some clues as to why Djamila would think Mabrouka’s story was cause for “worry.” Mabrouka’s performance of Djamila’s mother was a means to depict her as behaving in socially inappropriately ways and hence to call her respectability into question. In addition to Zahra’s unseemly encroachment into public space by hanging out the window and spreading smoke throughout the neighborhood, her supposed use of a foulard is particularly troubling to notions of le respect. A foulard (hijab in Arabic) is a personal item of women’s clothing that among many Muslims symbolizes women’s modesty before God (Abu-Lughod, 1986:108). It is quite surprising then, that Zahra would use a headscarf to shake away smoke, rather than a kitchen towel (torchon).

Mabrouka’s choice of wording is particularly notable since Djamila’s mother did not, in fact, wear a headscarf, a point that Mabrouka may have been trying to highlight, since her own mother did. In this performance of parental name calling, Mabrouka draws upon religious symbolism to depict Djamila’s mother as acting in gender-inappropriate ways.

In addition to religious symbolism, Mabrouka’s performance of Djamila’s mother seems to draw upon symbolism common to French anti-immigrant rhetoric, a trope common to everyday interactions among these teens. The accusation that Zahra allowed her burned cooking to infiltrate public space recalls the infamous 1991 speech by the then-mayor of Paris Jacques Chirac that the “French worker” (read “ethnically French male citizen”) living in cités found it difficult to cope with “the sound and the smell” of his immigrant neighbors (Le Monde 1991). Such highly negative depictions of supposedly typical immigrant behavior circulate in public discourses in Chemin de l’Ile and elsewhere in France. This exchange demonstrates how children of immigrants appropriate these discourses for their own in-group purposes as French teens. In so doing, they create unflattering depictions of one another’s parents that draw upon ideals of respect from transnational Algerian cultural models as well as upon bourgeois French notions of “appropriate” public behavior.

3 For example, the French adolescents of primarily Algerian descent in my study routinely referred to recently arrived North African immigrants derisively as les clandestins, after les clandestines or “illegals” regardless of their immigration status. In these ways, French adolescents of North African background distinguish themselves from immigrants and build cultural and social references of their own.

4 However, in a demonstration of the power of discourse and its ambivalence, this particular highly negative slogan was subsequently reassigned a pro-immigrant political meaning when the multiethnic music group Zebda produced a CD of the same name: Le bruit et l’odeur (“The noise and the smell”).

5 At the time that the above-mentioned music recording was made, school children across France participated in a national education project to teach students “civility” and the behaviors of “good neighbors”, undoubtedly a response to the perception that “new” French citizens were not learning and adopting unwritten codes of politesse (“politeness”).
CONCLUSION

In performances of parental name calling, adolescents express ambivalent stances toward le respect. By using the first name of a peer’s parent in public and in an irreverent manner, adolescents subvert norms for respectful behavior toward adults based upon a name taboo. Thus, adolescents foreground the cultural code of behavior they call le respect even as they transform this code through its reinterpretation in interactional practice. The ambivalent expressions of le respect in parental name calling demonstrate how these French teens reinterpret North African ideologies of generation and gender through transcultural identity practices.

The instances of parental name calling addressed in this chapter demonstrate the centrality that kin constructions can play in adolescents’ performances of personal and group identity. Performances of parental name calling indicate that French adolescents of Algerian descent experience and express peer identity as highly relational to their parents’ generation. In these heteroglossic performances, teens position each other as daughters and sons, thereby elaborating personal adolescent identities in relation to parents and older kin. Specifically, in parental name calling, personal names and other information about parents and kin are used to evoke these absent persons as foils for the present adolescent self, and these absent adults serve, in turn, as foils for the peer group.

Moreover, in the context of adolescent identity in this immigrant community, evoking a peer’s familial origins is comparable to evoking a peer’s cultural origins. As I have demonstrated, in these performances of parental name calling, adolescents’ collaborative construction of symbolic mothers and fathers create a complicated indexical web that entangles self and other, child and parent, peer and adult, as well as French-born citizen and North African immigrant. In these multiple ways, the elaboration of their French adolescent peer group and their shared transcultural identity are achieved simultaneously in interaction and are mutually informing. Specifically, the practice of parental name calling exemplifies the ambivalent positioning of these adolescents to the neo-traditionalist value of le respect. In these performances adolescents negotiate their own emergent youthful code of “respectful” behavior that both reinforces and transgresses cultural norms regarding gender and generation.

Due to the highly central role that Muslim adolescents currently play in popular imaginings of French nationhood, youth who simultaneously embody and enact Muslim and French social identities are frequently subject to the representations and interpretations of outside commentators. This chapter has demonstrated that careful attention to interactional practices can help us understand how such adolescents, living in immigrant communities, represent and interpret their own social situation within peer discourse as they negotiate both cultural continuity and change.

REFERENCES