

Theories of adolescence



Adolescence is the developmental stage between childhood and adulthood; “The period of development from the onset of puberty to the attainment of adulthood. This begins with the appearance of secondary sexual characteristics, usually between the ages of 11 and 13 years of age (Colman 2006). It represents the period of time during which a person experiences a variety of biological changes and involves a dramatic transitions in the physical, social, sexual, and intellectual spheres. This essay will review the theories of adolescences and the extent to which they characterise adolescences as a time of storm and stress as suggested by Hall (1904). Firstly, the changing notion of adolescence through history and its cultural context will be discussed, followed by the biological, psychosocial and cognitive approaches to adolescence.

Adolescence as a period of stress and storm can be traced back as far as writings of Plato and Aristotle. Plato (1953) described adolescent boys as constantly arguing and very easily excited. Aristotle (1941) described adolescents as “ lacking in sexual self-restraint, fickle in their desires, passionate and impulsive”. However, during the middle ages, adolescence was mostly ignored as a life stage and children were viewed as small adults. “ Childhood and adolescence were regarded as two sides of the same coin” (Dubasa et al, 2003). The first person to determine a difference between the two was Rousseau. Rousseau described it adolescence as “ A change in humour, frequent anger, a mind in constant agitation, makes the child almost unmanageable. His feverishness turns him into a lion. He disregards his guide; he no longer wishes to be governed.” (Rousseau, 1911)

Psychologists of that time agreed with Rousseau's ideas and in 1904, influenced by the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin, G. Stanley Hall defined adolescence as a period of "storm and stress, a time of universal and of inevitable upheaval". To Hall, adolescence represented a period when early human beings went from being beast-like to being civilized. To Hall, the end of the adolescent stage marked a new birth, in which higher, more completely human traits were born. Culturally, in the 18th century, the period of adolescence was first seen in middle- and upper-class children as education went on longer and children stayed home for an increasing portion of their lives. By the 20th century, after World War II, adolescence became a general phenomenon (Dubasa et al, 2003). According to Koop et al (2003) despite the historically changing view of adolescence and social context in which they developed, these stereotypes of adolescences certainly remain parallel to those of today and act as the foundation of our present-day representations of adolescence.

The biological approach argues that the agitation in adolescence is universal and is not effected by time and social context. Puberty is often considered to initiate adolescence (Petersen & Taylor, 1980). During puberty, the young person achieves their adult size and appearance alongside all the underlying physiological processes (Tanner, 1962). Current evidence indicates that biological changes make some contribution in respect to mood disruptions. Susman et al (1987) found that high levels of various adrenal and gonadal androgens were linked with sad affect, irritable rebelliousness and mild delinquent behaviour in boys. Additional evidence suggests that hormonal changes during puberty contribute to emotional volatility (Buchanan et al.,

1992) and also the negative moods (Brooks-Gunn et al, 1994) seen in early adolescence. These studies however, are limited as they focus on only early adolescence and may be subject to reporter bias. They are based on the retrospective memory of mood and behaviour as recalled by the mothers of the adolescent. Puberty is also thought to mark the completion of brain development; the development of neural pathways and the process of myelination of nerve fibres integrating the two hemispheres (Yakolev & Lecours, 1967). Recent evidence however argues that changes continue to occur in the brain over the whole life span (Petersen, 1985).

However, research has shown that the biological changes of puberty alone do not make adolescent storm and stress either universal or inevitable. This can be demonstrated by the fact that not all cultures experience adolescent storm and stress to the same degree and some cultures do not experience it at all. Margaret Mead's study (1928) found that adolescence in Samoa was a blissful, utopian transition. These findings have been confirmed by numerous other studies looking at adolescence worldwide, reporting that most traditional cultures experience less storm and stress among their adolescents, compared with the West (Schlegel and Barry, 1991). Thus the chaotic experience of adolescents is not biologically determined but rather reflects the role of the cultural context in promoting these types of changes. However, the validity of Mead's work has been questioned based on similar observations of the Samoan people by Freeman (1983).

According to Piaget (1950), the changes to the brain and its functioning during adolescence, the final stage of cognitive development, is thought to take place during adolescence. Piaget described this development in terms

of sequential changes in how children think. Cognitive development during adolescence, known as the formal operational stage, involves a movement from concrete to abstract thinking and a decrease in egocentric thought. Egocentric thought during this period leads to some particular behaviour such as imaginary audience; the feeling of constant scrutiny, the personal fable; regarding one's thoughts and feelings as unique, self-consciousness and feelings of invulnerability; which can lead to risk-taking behaviour. This egocentric thinking of early adolescence is diminished by sixteen due to shared experience with their peers. Once adolescents start to exercise their new reasoning skills, they begin to argue for the sake of it, jump to conclusions, and be overdramatic thinking of only themselves. These behaviours can lead to the view that adolescence is a period of storm and stress. Research indicates that Piaget simplifies the developmental process by overestimating the invariance of the order of stages. It has been argued that Piaget exaggerates the universalism of the stages and lacks ecological validity as all his research was based on children from well-educated, high socio-economic backgrounds.

Freud's theory of psychosexual development also portrays adolescence as being fraught with internal struggle. According to Freud, during the last stage of psychosexual development, the "genital" phase; the child is inundated with instinctual impulses which disrupt the balance between the ego and id. The ego is pulled between the impulses of the id and the restrictions imposed by the superego. This conflict makes adolescence a time of tremendous stress and turmoil. Unfortunately the work of Freud is heavily criticised; his work is based on a small number of case studies and is

therefore regarded as unreliable and cannot be generalised to the whole population. This theory may have been applicable at the time it was developed but is not applicable today. Additionally, Freud's theory has no empirical support as the constructs of the id, ego and superego are subjective and cannot be measured.

Based on Freud's psychosexual concept of development, Erikson's psychosocial theory (1968) takes a much wider view of the factors that impact development. Erikson proposed that achieving a sense of personal identity is more important than reaching sexual maturity, he emphasised social and cultural components of an adolescent's developmental experiences. Erikson described identity as a sense of self-continuity. Like Freud, Erikson viewed adolescence as a time of storm and stress and that the turmoil resulted from an identity crisis; a period during which the adolescent is troubled by his lack of identity. Erikson's ideas have been criticised as they were based on his observations of young people undergoing therapy, therefore not being truly representative of adolescents. Research evidence suggests that the vast majority of adolescents do not experience significant psychological difficulties. Offer (1969) concluded that Erikson's concept of identity crisis could not be general since most adolescents never experienced such a crisis; this is supported by Douvan and Adelson (1966). In their survey of over three thousand American adolescents, mainly aged 14-16 years old, they found only a small percentage of adolescents experience signs of restlessness, conflict, or instability. It is uncertain however, if similar results would be found in other cultures.

Marcia's theory of identity achievement (1980) contradicted the notion of adolescence as a time of crisis. Marcia claims that adolescent identity formation has two major parts: a crisis and a commitment. The trauma in adolescence results from having to make difficult decisions about one's identity and moving through the four different identity statuses: identity diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium and finally identity achievement. Milman (1979) provides some supporting evidence for Marcia's theory. He found that a majority of 12-15 year old children were in the identity diffusion stage in comparison to the identity achievement stage, however, he also found that a large portion of young adults have still not achieved the highest level of identity by their mid-20's, suggesting that identity formation may occur later than suggested by Marcia. There is also evidence that suggests this search for identity continues throughout the whole of the lifespan, with alternating periods of stability and instability and movement back and forth between stages (Marcia, 1980) this suggests that adulthood can involve just as much turmoil as adolescence.

Supporting Marcia, the Strain Theory (Agnew, 1997; Steffensmeier and Allan, 2000), suggests that adolescence is not the period of " storm and stress" as described in earlier theories of development. It claims that adolescents develop an increasing desire for adult privileges, such as autonomy, status and money. Adolescents are usually denied such privileges by adults and are often treated with disrespect. They are therefore more likely to see these stressors as unfair and are more likely to experience objective stressors than children and adults. Contemporary studies have established that conflict with parents increases in early adolescence, compared with younger childhood,

and typically remains high for a couple of years before declining in late adolescence (Laursen et al, 1998). Cross-cultural research (Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Offer, 1969) has shown that most adolescents get along well with their parents and even adopt their parents views (Adelson, 1979). Moreover, Kandel and Lesser (1972) found that adolescents shared more views with their parents than with their peers. Conversely, it has been suggested (Steinberg, 1990) that conflict between adolescents and their parents may actually be beneficial to the development of the adolescent, as it promotes the development of individuality and autonomy. High conflict may make adolescence a difficult time for adolescents and their parents even if the conflict ultimately has benefits.

“ If adolescents have to adjust to so much potentially stressful changes, and at the same time pass through this stage of life with relative stability, as the empirical view indicates, how do they do it?” (Coleman and Hendry, 1999).

The Focal theory (Coleman and Hendry, 1999) suggests that adolescents manage their issues by dealing with only one at a time. Adolescents spread the process of adapting over a number of years, attempting to resolve only one issue at a time so the resulting stresses are rarely concentrated all at one time. There is no evidence to suggest that young children or old age pensioners deal with issues in the same way. This theory also suggests that adolescents play an active role and explains why some adolescents cope whilst others fail to adapt despite having the same number of crises. Unlike the traditional theories of adolescence, the Focal theory has the advantage of being based on empirical evidence. Despite this, coping with one issue at a time does not necessarily indicate stability (Coleman, 1978). There is a

need for more evidence, particularly from longitudinal studies, to test Coleman's claim.

The claim that adolescence is indeed a time of storm and stress is based on many theories of adolescent development. Each theory puts forward a unique explanation for the basis of turmoil in adolescence, whether it is sexual, cognitive, or resulting from social challenges such as those based on studies of adolescents in treatment, which represents a small population of youth. Conversely, larger-scale studies of development in adolescence that have focused on the 'normal' adolescent population have concluded that turmoil is relatively uncommon (Douvan and Adelson, 1966; Offer and Offer, 1975). Montemayor (1983) concludes that although some conflict in adolescence is likely to be a normal part of the transformations that occur, it also seems clear that there is little support for more extreme storm and stress notions. Adolescents are simply moving forward to be like the group they are going to become: adults. There are a relatively few areas, such as crime, eating disorders and suicide do adolescents undertake behaviour more often than other age groups. However adolescents are still generally believed to be disruptive or out of control.

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