Adolescence

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A review by
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TO review research activity in the field of adolescence is a major undertaking. One of the striking characteristics of the area has been its extraordinary growth over the last decade; some selection is therefore inevitable.

In this article we have chosen to discuss four topics which highlight a new emphasis in the way adolescence is portrayed: identity; gender; the positive or prosocial behaviour of young people; and coping and resilience. We appreciate that not all readers will agree with our choice of topics, but we hope that all will see something of interest in the work we review below.

Before coming to these specific topics, however, there are a couple of contentious issues that need to be addressed. Firstly, social changes over the last decade have had profound effects on young people (Coleman, 1997). Alterations in family structure, in education and in employment have meant that the concept of adolescence as a transition has come in for some serious questioning. This goes to the heart of our understanding of this developmental stage. Secondly, some thought needs to be given to the notion of a model of adolescent development, and whether models are useful (or indeed possible) since this life stage is one of such diverse experience.

Adolescence as a time of transition

Historically, adolescence has been understood as a period of transition between childhood and adulthood. Today, however, writers are more likely to describe this period as one of multiple transitions, involving education, training, employment and unemployment, as well as transitions from one living circumstance to another.

This change in perspective is in many ways connected with the fact that the adolescent period is now much longer than it used to be. At one end, puberty appears to be starting earlier; at the other end, young adults remain out of the labour market, and therefore financially dependent, for longer than has been the case in previous decades.

In the UK, two writers who have highlighted this feature of the move towards adulthood are Coles (1995) and Jones (1995). Coles stresses the importance of identifying both positive and negative outcomes of multiple transi-

tions, and he talks of homelessness, unemployment and social isolation as indicators of failed transitions. Jones has concentrated especially on the transition of leaving home, and has shown that even this event is far from straightforward. She underlines the fact that those who leave may well return for further periods, and that in the 1990s more and more young adults — especially young men — remain in the family home during their twenties.

In a key paper, Graber and Brooks-Gunn (1997) argue for greater recognition of the importance of transitions, but also acknowledge that transitions will have more or less impact depending on the individual's circumstances. As they point out, if transitions occur when other life events are impinging on the young person, this may make those transitions harder to negotiate. Some individuals, too, will have heightened sensitivity to change; others may have limited personal and psychological resources at particular points of their development.

The timing of transitions is critical, and yet few have the opportunity to plan the transitions of their adolescence in the way they would prefer. As Graber and Brooks-Gunn emphasise, it is not only the transition that is important, it is the 'goodness of fit' of that transition with the individual's social circumstances and psychological development that is what really determines adolescent adjustment.

Are models useful?

Over 20 years ago, one of us (Coleman, 1974, 1978) put forward a model of adolescent development which has come to be known as the focal model. In essence, this argued that an issue or difficulty arising from a particular relationship pattern comes into focus at a particular stage and, in time, comes to be replaced with another focal issue. The model is similar to a stage theory, in that it proposes a progression from one focal concern to another, but it does emphasise that no fixed sequence is envisaged.

An important implication is that those young people who have to deal with more than one issue at a time might be considered to be more at risk than those for whom issues are well spaced out. A young person who has to cope with family breakdown, for example, as well as having to adjust to a change of school and to a new peer group, may be particularly vulnerable.

The model has been criticised by a number of commentators (e.g. Coffield *et al.*, 1986; Jackson & Bosma, 1992), partly because it was based on cross-sectional data, and it requires a longitudinal study to provide adequate validation. Furthermore, it pays no attention to contextual factors, nor does it distinguish between the different focal concerns.

Nonetheless, this model continues to receive attention (Hendry *et al.*, 1996; Kloep, 1998), and no other psychological model or theory has been proposed which is more substantive. It may be that adolescence is too complex a developmental stage for any one model to describe the diversity of experience. However, despite shortcomings, models which encourage critical discussion undoubtedly have their place in the literature.

Identity in context

Owing to space limitations, we can only provide a very brief outline of current research in each of the areas to be reviewed. In the case of identity, it may be worth recalling that much of the work in this area since the 1950s has been influenced by Erik Erikson and James Marcia, researchers who based their work largely on studies of white American college youth (Kroger, 1996).

It is only recently that a new theme has begun to surface — that of an interplay between the social context and the individual's developing sense of identity. Phinney and Goosens (1996) are representatives of such a movement. In their view, far too little attention has been paid to the cultural, ethnic and geographical contexts in which identity is formed.

This new approach involves using a variety of methods and being willing to explore new means of defining and operationalising identity. The 'identity capital model', proposed and developed by Cote (1996*a*, *b*), forms a significant element in the overall picture. Cote argues that in the late 20th century, the social structures and supports (such as the extended family) needed to establish an adult identity are missing. As a result, individuals have to depend largely on their own resources in making life course transitions.

It is here that the idea of identity capital is critical, since it is argued that we need to pay attention to the capital, or resources that an individual has, to understand how an adult identity is established. Cote and others are thinking here of identity capital as combining social and technical skills, effective behavioural repertoires, and links with social and occupational networks.

Such work ties in well with another important trend — an increasing focus on identity development among ethnically diverse populations. Thus, for example, Mirza (1992) and Robinson (1997) write about the identity development of young black women, Tizard and Phoenix (1993) about the worlds of mixed-race young people, and Back (1997) about the development of masculinity in a multi-cultural society.

Identity will continue to be seen as a central element in any concept of adolescence. Indeed, as this life stage becomes longer and more fragmented, and as entry into adulthood becomes more problematic, notions of identity and identity formation may receive even more attention. New approaches are encouraging, in that they reflect a more flexible use of differing methodologies and a willingness to tackle issues such as geography, ethnicity and gender. It is to gender that we now turn.

Gender

Gender has become more central to adolescent research over recent years. This is partly due to some pioneering writing, and partly to social change and the need to address the differing experiences of young men and young women.

In Britain, Sue Lees (1986, 1993) may be taken as one example of someone who has made a major contribution to the debate about gender and adolescence. Lees has highlighted the stereotyping involved in cross-gender relationships during the teenage years. She describes how sexually derogatory terms — such as 'slag', 'easy' and 'tight' — are used to describe girls, whilst the sexuality of boys is on the whole a subject for admiration. In this way, inequality and the imbalance of power between the genders are maintained during adolescence.

Lees' work is closely related to that of others, such as Holland *et al.* (1992) and Wight (1994), who explore — through a concern with adolescent sexuality in the era of AIDS — the negotiation of intimate relationships and how such relationships are constrained by gender roles.

Gender is also seen as a key variable in adolescent adjustment to new education and work opportunities. Much has been made of the fact that young women perform better than young men in GCSE and A-level examinations in the UK (Coleman, 1997). Many commentators have argued that the changing labour market, especially the growth of the service sector and the increase in part-time working, has been advantageous to young women (Hickman, 1997).

Linked with these changes is a growing concern with the position of young men. The steep decline of manufacturing industry and the loss of traditional apprenticeships have removed from the job market a range of opportunities that would previously have been available to relatively unqualified young men. Their position has now become even more vulnerable, and it is no wonder that there is a high level of anxiety about the choices and identities open to them as they move into adulthood.

Altruism and pro-social behaviour

One of the reasons for picking this particular aspect of current research is that it reflects a move on the part of social scientists to counteract a predominantly negative stereotype of young people.

Early research into adolescent altruism involved predominantly experimental and laboratory studies (e.g. Lowe & Richey, 1973; for a good discussion and review, see Chase-Lansdale *et al.*, 1995). More recently, studies have extended to include campaigning and political activity.

There has been an increasing number of studies involving real-life situations, in part a reaction to fears about political apathy and alienation among young people. A parallel occurrence has been the heightened interest in citizenship by the present government, and their aim to expand citizenship education in the school curriculum.

A good example of exploring adolescent altruism and prosocial behaviour is described in Roker *et al.* (1998). The authors studied 1150 young people in three very different social settings — a rural school in the North East, an inner city school in the Midlands, and a school from an affluent area of the South East.

Results showed a high level of altruistic and campaigning activities, such as going on demonstrations or helping younger pupils in school. Much of this behaviour was unknown to parents and teachers. Being involved in these activities had a positive impact on young people's skills, attitudes and self-esteem.

While more young women were engaged in such activity, there was a significant group of young men who were involved. The authors call for more longitudinal research to explore the roles of gender, ethnicity, culture and location in initiating and maintaining such altruistic actions.

Coping and resilience

Our reason for choosing this topic is that, as with altruism, it reflects a concern with the adaptive and positive features of adolescence rather than the negative ones.

Many writers have contributed over the last decade or so. A key publication was that of Garmezy and Rutter (1983): it set the agenda in this field, and has remained influential as a resource from

which much research has originated.

Research by Seiffge-Krenke and Shulman, much of it described in Seiffge-Krenke (1995), drew distinctions between active coping, internal coping and withdrawal. Active coping is described as going to meet the problem, often seeking advice from others; internal coping involves planning how to deal with a problem using your own resources; and withdrawal includes denial or making attempts to forget through drink or drugs.

The authors looked at factors such as gender, family climate, age and friendships as determinants of coping patterns. Thus, for example, it was shown that age 15 is a key turning point in the use of coping strategies, with young people after this being more likely to take the perspective of significant others and to turn to those with problems similar to their own.

Ideas about coping are, of course, closely linked with notions of resilience. Haggerty *et al*. (1994) describe large-scale studies of factors affecting resilience in populations considered to be at risk: for example, young people growing up in families with multiple problems, or those whose parents have psychiatric disorders.

Looking at those who do well when the odds are stacked against them can help to delineate essential elements of coping. Such studies show that temperament, personality and the presence of one significant adult are critical factors which underlie resilience.

Frydenberg (1997) pleads for more attention to be paid to promoting coping skills among young people. She argues that we now know a considerable amount about coping in adolescence. It is time to turn that knowledge into action in schools, in families and in community settings.

A new phase

In reviewing only four areas of work, all of which reflect a changing emphasis in the way adolescence is perceived, it is inevitable that important trends and publications have been omitted. Thus, to take one example, we have excluded current research on problem behaviour and psychosocial disorders, a topic admirably summarised by Rutter and Smith (1995). We took the view that enough is currently being written about this area, so we have preferred to highlight a rather different approach to adolescent development. A number of other areas of work, such as teenage parenthood (Dennison & Coleman, 1998), communication in adolescence (Catan *et al.,* 1996) and adolescent health (Foxcroft, 1997) have not found a place in this short review.

We believe that the study of adolescence is entering a new phase. A growing emphasis on the positive aspects of behaviour, and a focus on adaptive mechanisms (e.g. active coping), reflect a more balanced research agenda, as does the discussion about the role of gender,

and new approaches to the study of identity. Research in these areas can and should inform both education and mental health services.

It is encouraging also to see that knowledge of adolescent development is being used in applied settings, in particular within specialist training. Both McPherson *et al*. (1997), in their work with trainee general practitioners, and Lyon (1996), in her work with prison officers, have made use of research findings to create innovative training schemes. These schemes enable professionals to understand the particular developmental needs of young people, and thereby to work more effectively with them. Adolescence researchers are increasingly addressing fundamental issues and values in their work, including: Who is the research for? Who sets the agenda for adolescence research? What is its role in challenging stereotypes and social disadvantage? How does the limited funding available affect the areas within which researchers work? To what extent should young people themselves be involved in setting the agenda or in doing the research? These questions are central to the field at present. We look forward to discussing and debating these crucial issues further.

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