



JOHN COLEMAN – A WINNER OF THE 2000 AWARD FOR DISTINGUISHED CONTRIBUTION

Why I study...

adolescence

ADOLESCENCE is without doubt the Cinderella subject within developmental psychology. It gets less attention than other topics in the textbooks, in the curriculum and on the research agenda. So why would someone want to spend their life studying this rather unpopular stage of the life cycle? Colleagues might suggest that the choice has something to do with my own experience of the teenage years. Perhaps I am trying to understand my own 'storm and stress'. Or am I simply someone who never grew up!

My own memories of adolescence are not unhappy ones, and I suspect that the reasons I study it are more to do with formative experiences in my early twenties than with any unresolved teenage trauma. Two things happened which influenced the direction of my career. In the first place, since I was at university in North America for my undergraduate work, I had the luxury of four-month summer vacations. In my first summer I spent two months on the Lower East Side in New York, working with Latino youths, attempting to keep them off the streets and out of trouble. I also spent a further two months on a farm in Ontario working with emotionally disturbed teenagers. That summer was the first time that I experienced work that I enjoyed.

The second influential event occurred during the course of my PhD at University College London. My supervisor had agreed to take me on as a postgraduate student on condition that I would study the topic of aggression. She had four other students who were also looking at various aspects of aggression. This was fine with me, so long as I could do something on children or young people. I came up with a proposal to study aggressive behaviour in the playground among 10-year-olds. My supervisor was dismissive. 'That's not good enough,' she said. 'Not much of a contribution to the literature in that!'

For some weeks I wandered unhappily around north London, convinced I would never make the grade in the research world. Finally I had an inspiration. Why not study aggression in two age groups rather than

one? By including 10- and 13-year-olds I would not only broaden the scope of the study, but I would also be able to look at that critical developmental phase – the

'social change means that things never stand still'

beginning of adolescence. My supervisor grudgingly accepted the idea, and so began a lifetime of interest in this topic.

Since that time I have worked with young people in a variety of settings, and in many different roles. I have carried out a range of research projects, in schools, in the community, in prisons and in children's homes. I have worked as a clinical psychologist in adolescent units, and as the director of a residential therapeutic community for emotionally damaged teenagers. For the last 11 years I have been the Director of the Trust for the Study of

Adolescence, an independent applied research centre based in Brighton.

Many of the beliefs that motivate me now are no different from those that first inspired me in my early twenties. In particular I believe that teenagers have enormous strengths, as well as being wonderful companions. Sadly adults too often see them as a threat rather than as a positive resource, thereby undermining many a good relationship. I also think that there is still a huge job to be done in demystifying adolescence for parents, teachers and others who spend their working lives with this age group. It is here that good research has such a valuable role to play. Teenage behaviour may appear puzzling and contradictory, but without too much effort it can be shown to make sense. This I see as a key task for social scientists, who have a responsibility to make empirical knowledge both accessible and available to the public.

Having spent so much of my life studying this stage of development, have I now

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Harry Enfield and Kathy Burke's portrayal of teenagers rings true with many parents. But what lies behind the parodied behaviour?

exhausted the possibilities of research on adolescence? Hardly. One of the most interesting features of this, or indeed any other developmental topic, is that social change means that things never stand still. The study of the teenage years has changed beyond all recognition since I started working as a psychologist. Today both the beginning and the end of adolescence are shifting with every decade that passes. The possibility that puberty may be occurring earlier and earlier raises social and educational questions that pose a major challenge for researchers. Can we envisage 9- or 10-year-old girls mature enough to start their sexual careers? Furthermore, with so many young people remaining in education and out of work until their early twenties, this too has raised fascinating research issues to do with the nature of autonomy and independence in late adolescence. When can it be said that someone is truly grown up?

If my enthusiasm is ever in danger of

waning, something always comes along to rekindle it. In recent years two factors have been important. In the first place, government agencies have been showing a much greater interest in young people than was the case in the 1970s and 1980s. This has had the effect of increasing the availability of research funding, but has also begun to create a larger community of professionals focusing on adolescence. Secondly, I have always seen the parents of teenagers as a group deserving of more support than they actually receive. While I have been interested in this area, few others have shared my concerns. In the last few years, however, there has been a palpable change of attitude, with policy makers and social care organisations accepting that more research and practical help needs to be directed to these parents.

In conclusion, in my view it is difficult to understand why so few psychologists study adolescence. After all, very many of life's challenges occur during these years. From

child to adult, the adolescent period represents one of the greatest psychological transitions we experience. Raising untold theoretical questions, it is a stage that offers ideal opportunities for original research. What makes it all worthwhile, however, is that working with adolescents is so very enjoyable.

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WEBLINKS

Trust for the Study of Adolescence:

www.tsa.uk.com

National Children's Bureau:

www.ncb.org.uk/research.htm

'State of the art: Adolescence' (Dec 98):

www.bps.org.uk/publications/thepsychologist.cfm