

Cultural and Subcultural Differences in Adolescent Development

There is considerable variation between and within cultures in the form that adolescence takes. Some cultures do not have a phase that is equivalent to what we in the West call 'adolescence', and in others it is more ritualised than ours. A major influence on this is the extent to which a culture is individualist (like ours) or collectivist. Within our own culture, identifiable subcultures can be observed. These are related to societal features such as social class, which appear to limit the opportunities available for identity formation. Historically, the adolescent phase has not always been present in our culture. This may be related to a number of factors, including the prevailing economic conditions.

Ritualised Adolescence – Collectivist Cultures

In many cultures, the transition between childhood and adulthood is very formal and ritualised. For example, a number of traditional societies have 'rites of passage' through which a child must pass in order to become an adult. For example:

Berber (1988) – adolescence amongst Aboriginal Australians. Adolescence is marked by a period of ritual learning in which children are instructed in 'The Law'. The law has a number of features including:

- Rules for morality and the conduct of relationships
- Knowledge necessary to pass through the rite of passage (walkabout)
- Stories about the origin of the world

The end of this phase is marked by a period of separation from the tribe, in which the child must demonstrate that it is able to survive on its own. When it returns to the tribe it is welcomed into adult status and responsibilities.

Adolescence in traditional societies like this varies considerably, but there are features that tend to be found:

- A period of instruction
- A trial, rite of passage or period of separation from the society
- A sign of adult status, such as scars or tattoos

The cultures in which such rituals tend to be found are typically collectivist in their outlook. Personal identity is based on collective responsibility, and roles within the culture tend to be quite fixed and rigid. This is necessary to ensure the survival of the tribe or group, and the adolescent phase serves to prepare the child for the collective responsibilities of adulthood. This is why it tends to be formalised – in order to best serve the group, the person is required to have particular skills, knowledge and social outlook.

In contrast, in an individualist society like ours, adolescence is based around the formation of an individual identity that in future will have to compete with others on some or other basis. Individualist adolescence is self-oriented because that is the nature of individualistic culture. The formation of individual identity as we understand it is not given much importance in a collective society, because this outlook could be damaging to the integrity of their social groups.

Subcultural Differences in Western Culture

In the West, a variety of subcultures (distinct sub-groups within the dominant cultural outlook) can be found. Although rites of passage like those found in collectivist cultures are largely absent, something resembling them can be found within some subcultural groups. For example, rituals of passing into adulthood persist in some religious groups (e.g. Confirmation amongst Roman Catholics, or Bar Mitzvah amongst Jews) but these generally have little real meaning in terms of becoming an adult insofar as the wider society is concerned.

However, different subcultural groups may form their identities in different ways. All of the research (e.g. Erikson, Marcia) we have looked at has assumed that adolescent identity formation depends on choices about political beliefs, career, religion and so on. This is a very middle-class set of priorities, and other routes to identity are possible.

For example, Weis (1990) identified an 'antischool' subculture, where the 'mainstream' values of education as a route to a career (and, hence, adult identity) were rejected. Members of this group were likely to have an 'inverted' set of values (e.g. achievement in education was not valued, causing 'trouble' was). Members of the 'antischool' subculture were more likely to be involved in delinquent activities, and were predominantly working class. It could be suggested that the class system in our society had cut them off from the mainstream 'i.e. middle class' route to identity formation, and they had moved towards a deviant identity because they felt that no other options were available.

Historical Differences in Western Culture

Adolescence as we know it is a relatively recent phenomenon. Historically, the transition between childhood and adulthood was sharp, and occurred much earlier. One reason for this is the prevailing economic conditions at the time. Adolescents are generally economically unproductive, and, in many periods of history, simply could not be afforded as an income was required to contribute to the family. Historically, rites of passage were much more prevalent in our society (e.g. a boy's first razor, or getting the keys to the house at 21). In this view, adolescence is a product of our wealthier society.

Some have even suggested that adolescence is a feature of consumerist society (i.e. one in which people define themselves in terms of the products they buy) – it could be suggested that the 'invention' of the teenager was the result of a process whereby identities are invented through marketing, in order to get people to self-identify as particular 'types of people' and hence to make it easier to sell things to them.