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Luke I. Leppanen

Northern Michigan University, luleppan@nmu.edu

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The Changing Perspective on Adolescence

Adolescence is a relatively new concept in science. For much of human history, children who had reached adolescence were often viewed as smaller adults, and were expected to join the workforce and have many of the same responsibilities as adults. It was not considered a stage of human development until G. Stanley Hall coined the term in 1904 in one of his most well-known works, *Adolescence* (Hall, 1904). Since this publication, people have shifted their opinions on what is to be expected of children once they reach the onset of puberty, and psychologists have adopted adolescence into their human development theories. There are three main historical shifts concerning adolescence that will be addressed in this paper. First, how adolescents were treated before the 20th century and how Hall and the development of child psychology led to adolescence being viewed differently. Second, how different psychological theories view adolescence, and how they have changed from the early 20th century to now. Finally, how emerging adulthood has gained support as another developmental phase, and how it was once considered to be a part of adolescence. This shift in the perception of adolescence is analyzed, and how the current view has impacted development. Lastly, the major mental health problems among adolescents today will be examined, and what some of the solutions to these are.

How Expectations on Teenagers Have Changed Over the Last Century

It is strange to think that the age that people were considered an adult was not always eighteen. Before G. Stanley Hall and other child psychologists such as Jean Piaget, John Bowlby, and Erik Erikson began to emerge, people expected teenagers to fulfill adult responsibilities (Kett, 2003). Rather than referring to teenagers as going through the stage of adolescence,

literature in the mid-nineteenth century, for example *Mother's Book* by Lydia M. Child, referred to them as youth (Demos & Demos, 1969). Literature from the time also expressed the importance of youth as a transition period, as they were discovering that youth are more liable to be “seduced” away from family values and down a bad path, due to youth being more open and impressionable. This literature mainly focused on problems of authority, fearing that the authority of parents was waning. In order for their children to become successful adults, parents believed that they needed to exert more control over them (Demos & Demos, 1969). Books from the early nineteenth century identified a growing chasm between children and their parents, but largely ignored the physiological changes that teenagers were going through. The sexual struggle that many teenagers undergo started to receive more attention in the second half of the nineteenth century (Demos & Demos, 1969). Many psychologists have inquired into why there was suddenly a dramatic rise in interest surrounding children who reach adolescence during the nineteenth century. Demos and Demos identify one shift in American society that is undoubtedly a factor in this increased interest; the transition of the United States from an agricultural to industrial society. When America was still largely an agricultural society, family relationships were the main form of social interaction. Most families lived on farms, and because of this, parents viewed their children more as potential farmers, rather than growing and developing children (Demos & Demos, 1969). As America became more industrial, children found additional opportunities available to them, rather than just taking over their parents' farm. They also had a chance to form significant social relationships with their peers due to the rising prominence of education. Because of this, children and their parents began to take on increasingly different roles, and it became much easier to identify the difference between them. Urbanizing cities were seen by older generations as a threat to their children properly growing

into adults. This time period can also be identified as when generations became important, as the disparity between adults and children became significant for the first time in American history, and perhaps the history of the world. Naturally, many people felt threatened by the way that the family structure was changing, and felt especially threatened by the shifting roles of teenagers, which is why many adults began to focus on what teenagers were experiencing during that time in their life (Demos & Demos, 1969). Psychologists began to notice a few characteristics that were common in many children once they reached puberty, such as conflict with parents and authority figures, mood disruptions, and risky behavior. Hall (1904) incorporated these elements into his phrase Storm and Stress, which referred to a period of turmoil that many teenagers go through (Kett, 2003). One of the main ideas that Hall explored concerning adolescence was recapitulation (Hall, 1904). This theory states that every stage that a human passes through on their way to developing into an adult represents the adult form of past evolutionary stages. Hall stated that adolescence was specifically significant because it was the last evolutionary stage that humans have moved past, and that is why adolescents encountered so many contradictory crises during this time (Hall, 1904). This theory was soon debunked, however, not much later in the 20th century. G. Stanley Hall is mainly considered outdated today, but some aspects of his theory are still used and valuable. His ideas of adolescence as its own developmental stage, and viewing it as a time of storm and stress are still influencing psychologists today.

How Adolescence Fits into Psychological Theories of Development

Shortly after Hall identified adolescence as its own developmental stage, it started gaining support from other academics, and was eventually widely adopted as a real stage of development. Since this shift in the 1930s, child labor laws have been passed protecting adolescents from unfair working conditions, and different psychological theories have taken

different perspectives on the importance and impact of adolescence. Evolutionary theory states that the main focus of adolescence is a person understanding what to do with their new reproduction capacities (Newman & Newman, 2018). It takes a biological approach to adolescence, and has been criticized by many psychologists because it fails to take social factors into account. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory focuses on the environment that a person grows up in, and how it can impact adolescents (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). He states that there are five environmental systems, the individual environment, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. All five environments can impact an adolescent's development, and an adolescent can impact their environment as well. However, it is harder to change some environments than others, as an adolescent may be able to change their individual environment, but not the environment of the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Psychoanalytic theory views the genital stage as coinciding with adolescence, where Freud explained the stress that is experienced during the teenage years as a result of the sexual threat to the family, and as a result of this threat teenagers try to distance themselves from their families. (Freud, 1949). This theory has the genital stage starting at puberty, and is completed when a person fully transitions into adulthood. It considers the sexual drives that an adolescent will be experiencing, and Freud ties these drives in with the Oedipus and Electra complexes (Freud, 1949). Another theory that features adolescence is Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory. In this theory, the fifth stage of development, which looks at identity vs. role confusion, is normally the one associated with peak puberty and adolescence (Erikson, 1950). However, stage four, industry and inferiority, as well as stage six, intimacy vs isolation, can both be associated with adolescence as well. Erikson stated that the main goal of an adolescent is to develop a sense of identity (Erikson, 1950). Jean Piaget is another psychologist who looks at adolescence in his theory of cognitive development.

A child would enter adolescence during the formal operational stage of cognitive development, which is estimated to last from ages 12 to 19 (Lightfoot et al., 2018). During this stage, teenagers acquire the ability to think methodically about logical problems. Adolescents also began to display a keen interest in abstract ideas, and about the way that they themselves think. One of the main skills that adolescents gain is hypothetical-deductive reasoning, which is reasoning that involves judging an argument on its logic, whether or not the argument is actually true (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958). Teenagers are able to think more and more like adults, yet their brain is still not fully developed. There is normally a steady increase in hypothetical-deductive reasoning the older that a person gets. Additionally, Piaget observed that adolescents began to focus on how others judge them and how they judge others when forming their personal identity, which fits in with Erikson's psychosocial crisis of identity vs. role confusion. These are just a few of the psychological theories that each offer a unique look on adolescence. All of these theories consider adolescence a necessary and important stage of development, and one that people need to go through in order to become a healthy adult.

Recent Theories Concerning Adolescence

In recent years, many psychologists have separated the end of adolescence into another developmental stage called "emerging adulthood" (Gilmore, 2019). This term was first coined by Jeffrey Arnett in 2000, and he stated that this stage is unique to cultures that allow young people an extended period of independence to discover their role in society. Because of this, emerging adulthood would be almost exclusively found in industrial and postindustrial societies (Arnett, 2000). This stage has been estimated to last from ages 18-25, and has been described as a transitioning period from teenage years to adulthood, as people experience more independence and responsibilities. Arnett looked at works by Erikson and Kenneth Keniston to support his

idea. In Erikson's psychosocial theory, he identifies a period of prolonged adolescence in industrialized societies where an individual suspends their personal responsibilities that is similar to emerging adulthood, which Erikson refers to as psychosocial moratorium (Erikson, 1968). In Keniston's theory of youth, he suggests that the late teens and early twenties was a separate stage of development, becoming the first person to suggest this (Keniston, 1971). However, Arnett suggests that this theory did not gain support due to his confusing use of the word youth, which has been used to describe childhood in the past, especially before the twentieth century. There are a few reasons why Arnett suggested that this period should be separated into a different stage. First, the average age has steadily increased for people to get married and to have their first child for both men and women in the United States (Arnett, 2000). People in their late teens and early twenties often do not view themselves as adults yet, and state that they still must accept more responsibility for themselves, make more independent decisions, and become financially independent before they fully transition into adulthood. Second, this occurs because the demographics of this age period are so diverse (Arnett, 2000). The most common feature of the living situation is the instability of it, as it is impossible to predict where someone is living, and who they are living with, just by looking at age in this stage. Arnett referred to emerging adulthood as the roleless role, due to this high demographic unpredictability. Third, because identity exploration is still a huge factor during emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Similar to adolescence, people continue to explore relationships, work, and different worldviews. Unlike adolescence though, people pursue these factors not only to explore, but to help transition into adulthood. Risk behaviors such as unprotected sex, driving while intoxicated, and substance abuse also occur at their highest rates during this time period. Arnett states that a major motivation would be sensation seeking, as people are no longer monitored as closely by their

parents, yet do not have all the responsibilities of adulthood to worry about either (Arnett, 2000). Arnett also points out that adolescence was considered ages 14-24 by G. Stanley Hall and his contemporaries, but has shifted to ages 10-18 due to puberty occurring sooner and high school becoming a societal norm and significant transition period. Emerging adulthood may be the best way to describe ages 18-24 now that American society has shifted to a post industrial state. However, many psychologists consider ages 18-24 as late adolescence or young adulthood, and that this is just a continuation of an adolescent determining their sense of self. Arnett states that emerging adulthood is not the same as young adulthood or late adolescence, as most people do not view themselves as adults or adolescents at this point. He argues that teens better fit the term adolescent, and people in their thirties better fit the term young adulthood, as they have settled into their careers and roles (Arnett, 2000). The main component that separates emerging adulthood from other stages of development is its heterogeneity, or diversity, as people from the same age group are doing a wide variety of different things. Because of Arnett's argument, some psychologists have argued that emerging adulthood should be added as a stage to many theories because of the increased amount of time that is spent in college, as well as the increased amount of time that it takes for people to become financially independent (Gilmore, 2019). It is an idea that is gaining significant support, and shows how ideas about adolescence and development have changed over the last century.

Is Adolescence A Good or Bad Thing?

There is a strong argument to suggest that the view and length of adolescence has changed over the years. One question that must be asked in response to this change is if modern adolescence is a good or a bad thing. This question would include whether or not adolescents have been happier in response to this shift than they were in the past, and if this shift has been

beneficial to society. On the other side of things, an important question to ask is if there have been detrimental effects due to the shifting view of adolescence. Unfortunately, there are not any clear answers to these questions, in large part due to the lack of qualitative measurements on how happy youths were before the 20th century. Traditionally in the United States, and for most of the world as well, childhood was not connected to happiness (Stearns, 2014). This does not necessarily mean that children were less happy in the past than they are now, just that it was not expected. It also was not considered a responsibility of the parent to ensure that their children were happy (Stearns, 2014). Due to this lack of focus on the happiness of children, it makes sense that no studies would have been done measuring this emotion in children. It was not until the early 20th century, after Hall published *Adolescence*, that child-rearing literature began to focus on happiness. In fact, people in general did not focus on their happiness, or at least the presentation of happiness, until the Enlightenment (Stearns, 2014). While this might seem to suggest that people have become happier in recent times, it really only proves that values have changed.

In the past, the increased focus on education during adolescence created role confusion for some, while many others probably enjoyed and appreciated the increase in opportunities. Nobody today would argue that it was a mistake to increase the role of education in the lives of adolescents though. As a result, it seems now that a more important question to ask is what factors contribute to adolescent happiness today, and do they benefit society as a whole. Many things that appear to make adolescents happy, such as their risk-taking behavior and sensation seeking, are harmful to society, and that is why parents do their best to discourage this kind of behavior. It seems that an important contributor to adolescent happiness is the perception of social support, which is also important for life success (Gayman et al., 2010). In addition to this,

positive early family experiences are particularly important in perceived social support. Negative early family experiences are just as important in the perception of lacking social support (Gayman et al., 2010). It is evident that positive early experiences are beneficial for society as a whole, and parents should be encouraged to increase these positive experiences in any way that they can.

It would also be unfair to say that extending adolescence has solely been positive or negative for society. In surveys completed between 1976 and 2017, adolescents indicate a significant drop in the rates of alcohol use and sexual activity (Twenge & Park, 2017). This indicates that adolescents are less likely to do adult things, which also include having jobs and driving. One thing that can at least partially explain these changes is the increasing use of social media (Twenge & Park, 2017). This would suggest that adolescents are doing more of their socializing online, and do not need to do these adult things as much anymore. Another explanation for the decrease in adult activities is the increase in affluence in the United States (Twenge & Park, 2017). The study shows that adolescents who came from higher income families had a slower course of development. Affluence has increased overall in America despite income inequality increasing as well (Peters, 2013). This economic trend correlates with the decrease in adult activities, and it is probable that both of these things have contributed to this decrease, as well as other things. There seems to be both positive and negative effects from this change. A positive effect is that teenagers are getting a few more years of innocence from these responsibilities than they did in the past, while a negative effect is that they are not getting as much work experience and independence that will be beneficial later in their life (Twenge & Park, 2017). So as is the case with most macro questions about society, there is no definitive answer yet on whether or not emerging adulthood is a good thing. It seems to be a change that is

in direct response to the postindustrial society of the United States, which has longer lifespans, greater wealth, improved technology, and requires more education for many jobs.

Mental Health Problems Among Modern Adolescents

Regardless of whether modern adolescence has had a positive or negative effect on current teenagers, a major focus on adolescence needs to be on what the major mental health problems are among that group. A systematic review revealed that 10-20% of adolescents in America have some kind of mental health problem (Schulte-Körne, 2016). One of the most common mental health problems among adolescents is Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), with a prevalence of 1-6% (Schulte-Körne, 2016). This disorder consists of a pattern of inattention and hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with daily functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). It can cause significant problems in school for adolescents because of the difficulty that they have concentrating on their work for an extended period of time. Another common mental health problem amid adolescents are depressive disorders. The worldwide prevalence is 4-5% for adolescents, and girls are diagnosed with this twice as much as boys (Schulte-Körne, 2016). These disorders also have negative effects on concentration and can have a major impact of sleep, and can lead to suicide in the most severe form of depression. The final mental health problem that was found to be notable among adolescents was specific learning disorders in reading, writing, and mathematics, which has a prevalence of 4-6% (Schulte-Körne, 2016). Specific learning disorders are characterized by difficulty learning and applying academic skills for at least 6 months in any of those areas of study, and the person's skills must be below what is expected of them (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Specific learning disorders are also correlated with higher rates of depressive and anxiety disorders developing (Schulte-Körne, 2016). Certified psychologists have been very successful

in helping children and adolescents overcome these disorders, but they are not always readily available. An alternative solution to limiting the impacts of these disorders is advanced training of teachers on mental health problems, and how to identify them in students (Schulte-Körne, 2016). This could allow for some disorders to be identified at an early age, which is a good measure to limit the effects of these disorders. Another study suggested that school-based interventions show that cognitive behavioral therapy and targeted group-based interventions are effective at reducing depressive symptoms and anxiety in adolescents (Das et al., 2016). The study, which looked at 38 systematic reviews of mental health interventions for adolescents, also found that school-based suicide prevention programs surprisingly have little effect on suicide-related behaviors (Das et al., 2016). However, this does not suggest that these programs are useless, as awareness about suicide prevention always increases after these programs are implemented. Lastly, the researchers found that physical activity is effective at improving self-esteem and decreasing depressive symptoms in adolescents (Das et al., 2016). While the number of diagnosed mental disorders among adolescents continues to grow, psychologists continue to identify new solutions to combat these disorders, which is an encouraging sign.

Conclusion

This paper has presented how the idea of adolescence has changed through history. The concept of adolescence initially was not considered a stage of development, then in the early 20th century was generally accepted by scientists and the public alike as a real stage of development, and now has become a concept that covers numerous ideas and has another stage of development rising from it called emerging adulthood, although there is still some debate on whether this should be considered a separate stage. There is no clear answer if this change regarding adolescence has been positive or negative, but focusing on what mental health problems are most

common among adolescents today might be more useful in helping them. This is important because it gives people a better understanding of the difficulties that teenagers are facing as they are transitioning into adulthood, and gives psychologists, parents, and teachers a better understanding on helping teenagers overcome these problems. The way that adolescence has changed since the early 20th century has both positive and negative aspects, and has changed as a direct result of American society changing. Adolescence is still a new stage in human development, but that does not make it an unimportant one.

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