

From Childhood to Adulthood: A Site for Examining the Idea of Developmental Stages

In common parlance, adolescence is so routinely treated as a clearly marked period of development that it is rarely remembered that when Hall (1904) launched the modern study of adolescence a century ago, he referred to an age period in the life cycle that spanned the ages from 14 to 25 years. At the present time, although it is common to encounter claims of a new period of life that spans all or part of the years that Hall identified as adolescence, there is widespread disagreement on whether those years mark a distinct period of development or a more or less protracted transition to adulthood, which has itself been subjected to extensive changes in definition and periodization in terms of chronological age (Johnson-Hanks, 2002).

For many decades, scholarly interest in the time period identified by Hall as adolescence (a term which came into English from French and Latin, referring to “a youth between childhood and manhood” [sic] *Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Electronic Edition, 1989) has focused only on the earlier years in Hall’s proposed age period, roughly from 13 to 18, so that “teenager” and “adolescent” became virtually synonymous terms. In 1970, Keniston claimed that new socioeconomic circumstances, at least for the educated elite in advanced industrialized countries, justified the addition of a “new” stage of development, “youth” (ages 18 to 25), between adolescence as it was then understood and adulthood (Keniston, 1970). A decade later the period now accepted as adolescence was further subdivided into early and late “sub-stages” with the inauguration of *The Journal of Early Adolescence* which focused on the age roughly from 12 to 14 on the grounds that its developmental processes were distinct from those of later adolescence. Later still, the period that Keniston identified as youth has been re-named “emerging adulthood,” defined by Arnett (1998, p. 312) as “a period of development bridging adolescence and young adulthood, during which young people are no longer adolescents but have not yet attained full adult status.” This specification is quite similar to the way that adolescence had been treated as a period bridging childhood and adulthood in earlier eras. Arnett attributed the emergence of this stage to political, economic, and social changes occurring primarily in societies which have undergone a change from industrial- to information-based economies, and characterized it as “the age of instability, the self-focused age, the age of feeling in between, the age of possibilities” (Arnett, 2007, p. 208).

During this same period, adulthood, which had traditionally been treated as qualitatively different from both old age and childhood, itself began to be re-defined. Social commentators began to talk about a “Third Age” of adulthood, the years from 50 to 74 years:

Old age is what you make of it. Science has underscored this message by, for example, announcing that grey cells also reproduce themselves in old age, but only if the brain is kept fit. The threat of senility can be countered. Important muscles can, within one or two years, be trained to reach the capacity of those of middle-aged people. In sum, a high quality of life during one’s “third age” is not only a gift. It is also one’s duty—a duty that consists of exercise, healthy foods, education, and enriching social networks. Those who have neither money nor the motivation to work on themselves, fail. (Greenberg & Muehlbach, 2006, p. 195)

These changing conceptions of “the transition to adulthood” highlight in particularly clear form the interplay of biological and cultural-historical factors in the constitution and interpretation of “stages” of ontogenetic development, because all the proposed stages display cultural and historical variation in the way they are manifested and organized in different societies at different times.

Stages or transitions? Single or multiple? The stage-versus-transition discussion is important not only because cultural factors are clearly involved in its specification but also because it speaks to the basic question of the existence of, and sources of, discontinuity in development. As ordinarily used by psychologists, the terms transition and stage are not synonymous. A *stage* is a more or less stable, patterned, and enduring system of interactions between the organism and the environment; a *transition* is a period of flux, when the “ensemble of the whole” that makes up one stage has disintegrated and a new stage is not firmly in place. According to this set of ideas, can adolescence, youth, emerging adulthood, adulthood and so on be considered stages, even in societies that give them a name and treat them as distinct? Or are they best considered, despite popular understanding, heterogeneous, contingent transitions, whose “stage-like-ness” is itself a cultural construction?

The cultural contingency of adolescence as part of the life cycle. Adolescence is an advantageous point at which to investigate such questions because what is indisputable is that some time near to, or following the end of a decade of life (the exact onset time depends greatly on nutritional and other factors), a cascade of biochemical events begins that will alter the size, the shape, and the functioning of the human body. The most visible manifestations of these changes are a marked growth spurt and development of the potential for individuals to engage in biological reproduction (Bogin, 2009; Gordon & Laufer, 2005). These biological changes have profound social implications for the simple reason that reproduction cannot be accomplished by a single human being (replaying, in inverted form, the social dependency of infancy). As their reproductive organs reach maturity, boys and girls begin to engage in new forms of social behavior because they begin to find engaging in sexual activity attractive. According to many psychologists, some combination of these biological changes in brain and changes in socio-cultural circumstances also give rise to new cognitive capacities (Nasir, 2005; Tamnes et al., 2009).

The evidence from phylogeny and cultural history. Arguments for the universality of adolescence are sometimes made on the basis of studies of the fossil record in the hominid line, and sometimes on the basis of similarities to non-human primates, often chimpanzees (Bogin, 2009; Leigh, 2004). On the basis of an examination of the fossil record available in the prior edition of this book, Bogin concluded that the emergence of a distinctive stage of life between childhood and adulthood occurred with the evolution of *Homo sapiens* from *Homo erectus*, approximately 125,000 years ago. Bogin argued (, 1999, p. 216) that “adolescence became a part of human life history because it conferred significant reproductive advantages to our species, in part by allowing the adolescent to learn and practice adult economic, social, and sexual behavior before reproducing.” Bogin (2009) now argues that there is no event corresponding to the adolescent growth spurt among chimpanzees, so that adolescence is a peculiarly human part of the life cycle. Others argue that changes associated with sexual maturation and altered social behavior (decreased association of males with their mothers and increased association with older males, decreased play of both sexes with juveniles, and increased aggressive behaviors) point toward the presence of adolescence among chimpanzees (King, Weiss, & Sisco, 2008; Ross, Bloomsmith, Bettinger & Wagner, 2009), so the issue is probably best considered uncertain.

Schlegel and Barry (1991), focusing on variation across human societies, side with those who believe in the presence of adolescence among non-human primates as a starting point for their claim of adolescence as a universal stage of development among humans. They go on to provide data from a sample of 186 societies included in the Human Area Files to substantiate claims that a socially marked period of adolescence is a human universal. Consistent with this line of reasoning, Bloch and Niederhoffer (1958) suggested that one of the universal features shared by both the notion of a “transition to adulthood” and “adolescence” is a struggle for adult status. In all societies, the old eventually give way to the young. It is not easy for those in power to give it up, so it is natural to expect that, to some degree, the granting of adult status, and with it adult power, will involve a struggle. A good candidate for a second universal feature of the transition from childhood to adulthood is that it arouses tension because children, who have long identified strongly with members of their own gender while avoiding contact with the opposite gender, must now become attached to a member of the opposite gender. But if such evidence is sufficient to indicate a period of transition in which individuals from different generations must re-adjust their relations with each other, it does not indicate the presence of a distinct stage, as this term is generally used.

Sometimes the argument for the universality of adolescence as a stage of development is based on historical evidence, such as Aristotle’s characterization of the young as prone to sexuality, lack of self restraint, and insolence (cited in Kiell, 1964, pp. 18-19). Combining such historical evidence with similar accounts from various non-industrialized societies around the world today, Schlegel (2008) asserted that the experience of adolescence is universal. However, the data supporting the universality of adolescence as a unified stage are by no means unequivocal.

First, reverting to the primate literature, it is striking that marked shifts in social behavior are reported more frequently for *males* than females. The same appears true when we turn to Aristotle’s description of adolescents and similar descriptions from other ancient societies (Kiell, 1964): The people being talked about

were most often males. Moreover, they were urban males of the moneyed classes who had to undergo a period of extended training, often including formal schooling, which created a delay between puberty and full adult status. Generally speaking, women and most members of the lower classes did not undergo such specialized training, and there is a corresponding lack of evidence that they were included in the category of adolescents. Among the upper classes in Athens, for example, girls were often married and sent to live in their mother-in-law's house before they had gone through puberty, and did not undergo institutionalized formal training to be considered adults.

Moreover, although some of the evidence from other cultures may support the idea that adult status universally brings with it new responsibilities, anxieties, and uncertainty, there is equally strong evidence that adolescence, as the term is used in modern industrialized societies, exists only under particular cultural circumstances, that when it exists it is more a transition accomplished by a variety of means at a variety of ages than a stage, and that it is not necessarily accompanied by the kind of conflict and anxiety said to exist in modern, industrialized societies (Johnson-Hanks, 2002; Whiting, Burbank, & Ratner, 1986). When we consider the actual organization of life in ancient Greece, Europe in the middle ages, and in contemporary non-industrialized societies, in terms of the role of culture in development, we are reminded that the process of biological reproduction by itself is insufficient for the continuation of our species. As indicated by Schlegel and others who argue for the universality of adolescence among humans, any biological factors must be complemented by the process of cultural reproduction (education, broadly conceived), which ensures that the designs for living evolved by the group will be inherited by the next generation. Accordingly, in our view, adolescence will exist as a distinctive period of life only under specific cultural or historical circumstances. For example, among the Inuit of the Canadian Arctic in the early 20th century, special terms were used to refer to boys and girls when they entered puberty, but these terms did not coincide with Western notions of adolescence (Condon, 1987). Young women were considered fully grown (adult) at menarche, a change in status marked by the fact that they were likely to be married and ready to start bearing children within a few years. Young men were not considered fully grown until they were able to build a snow house and hunt large game unassisted. This feat might occur shortly after the onset of puberty, but it was more likely for boys to achieve adult status somewhat later because they had to prove first that they could support themselves and their families. In view of the different life circumstances of these people, it is not surprising that they developed no special concept corresponding to adolescence that applied to boys and girls alike; such a concept did not correspond to their reality.

Even closer to the present is the example of the Aka of the rainforests of the Central African Republic and the Northern Congo. The Aka live in bands of 25-35 and engage in hunting which is carried out by entire families. As reported by Benz (2001), teenagers spend most of their days in the presence of their parents. They are extremely close to their siblings and peers, living in what Benz refers to as an intense intimacy, closeness, and bonds of tenderness and affection. Aka girls build their own houses when they are 9 to 10 years old, often at the first signs of puberty but well before they are likely to bear children, whereas the boys move into what Benz refers to as a "bachelor's pad." They may begin to engage in sexual activity at this time, but when and who they marry is a matter for them to decide, sometimes earlier, sometimes later. They may or may not take their parents' advice on a suitable husband, as they choose. The result of these arrangements, in which male and female cooperate in both hunting and child care, is, according to Benz, a pattern that combines characteristics that appear antithetical when viewed from a North American perspective. There is clearly a period of transition between childhood and adulthood, but it results not in conflict between autonomy and closeness to one's parents, or in alienation between generations, but in additional autonomy within the family unit combined with closeness to peers and minimal levels of conflict. In this society it appears that adolescence is more a process of transition than a stage marked off from those that proceed and follow it.

Societies in which technology and an extended period of formal education are absent may still produce conditions in which adolescence exists as a stage, either for males or for females. Such an example is provided by the Ache, a forest dwelling, hunter gatherer group in the forests of Paraguay (Hull & Hurtado, 1996). Until they came in contact with modern cultural institutions, the Ache lived in small groups and moved so frequently

that they did not set up permanent settlements in the forest. At the age of 9 or 10, before reaching menarche, roughly 85% of Ache females had experienced sexual intercourse with at least one adult male, and many married before puberty. Nevertheless, Hill and Hurtado report that even at such a young age “their behavior would be aggressively flirtatious but sexually coy to the point of causing frustration anxiety among most of their suitors.... The major activity of girls at this time is walking around in small groups laughing and giggling and carrying on in any manner that will attract attention” (p. 225). Boys, who went through puberty later than girls, exhibited behaviors reminiscent of Western teenage boys: “In particular, males of this age appear extremely insecure and often engage in obnoxious or high-risk behavior in order to gain attention” (Hill & Hurtado, p. 226).

Our conclusion is that, although the biological changes associated with the ability to reproduce are universal, there is enormous variability in the extent to which the transition to adulthood can be considered a stage in the accepted sense of that term. Among human beings, the capacities for biological and cultural reproduction are intertwined in ways that continue to defy simple generalizations.

Adolescent/youth in periods of rapid social change. A related issue of particular contemporary concern is the impact of rapid social change on the specification of developmental periods, particular under conditions of extensive inter-cultural contact marked by economic and political inequality. Chandler and his colleagues (Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003; Chandler & Proulx, 2006) documented the cause for such concerns in their study of suicide among 15- to 24-year-old First Nation young people in British Columbia, Canada. For the period from 1987-1992 the suicide rate among First Nation adolescents/youth was 5 times greater than that for all other ethnic groups combined. Chandler and his colleagues argued that First Nations young people are especially at risk for suicide due to a number of repressive policies pursued by the government, which has deprived them of their land, their fishing rights, their language, their right to self governance, and control over their own cultural institutions. Combined with poor educational facilities and job discrimination, these conditions could, indeed, produce a sense of hopelessness at a time of life when, according to the normative characterization of adolescence and emerging adulthood in most textbooks, it should be a period of adult identity formation. Chandler and his colleagues hypothesized that the exceedingly high suicide rates among this population were the result, in part, of a failure to solve the problem of self-continuity (the understanding of oneself as the same person through time despite obvious changes in size, appearance, and knowledge). They used comic book renditions of classical stories in which people went through marked changes during their lifetime, such as Scrouge in Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, and asked their participants to talk about their own sense of self-continuity. They found that European-origin adolescents were likely to explain self-continuity over time as the result of some essential feature such as their finger print or DNA. By contrast, First Nations adolescents provided narratives of how various events in their life produced a sequences of changes in them without negating the fact that they were the same person. These First Nations youths’ narratives of self-continuity, Chandler and his colleagues argued, are particularly vulnerable to conditions of cultural destruction because the narrative tradition on which such self-construals were based was itself destroyed, leaving adolescents without the resources to form a sense of self-continuity. This study is not alone in providing evidence that cultural discontinuities in a period of rapid social change endanger successful passage from childhood to adulthood, implicating cultural modes of thought in the process of adolescent/youth development (see also J. Cole & Durham, 2006).