

The Western invention of Adolescence

Lecture 13

Western Medical definition -

Adolescence =

The period in development between the onset of puberty and adulthood. It usually begins between 11 and 13 years of age with the appearance of secondary sex characteristics and spans the teenage years, terminating at 18 to 20 years of age with the completion of the development of the adult form.

During this period, the individual undergoes extensive physical, psychologic, emotional, and personality changes.

The most controversial of human life stages:

- unique biological, psychological and social demands - everywhere
- HOW this transition is negotiated and HOW EASY or DIFFICULT - culture dependent

2 Issues are problematic:

- universally recognized stage/period/concept ?
- What are the associated behavioral and psychological characteristics? Universal? - always “storm and stress”?

Western psychologists and sociologists believe:

- Adolescence is a universal stage
- The “crises” that are associated with adolescence in the West also universal

long period of adolescence
characteristic of West (now even
longer)

adolescence



earlier

(precocious puberty)

later

(schooling)

We will look at:

- 1. Biological/psychological **changes** that occur at puberty (universal)
- 2. Western psychological **ideas** about events at adolescence.
- 3. How other cultures **interpret** this period of life.
- 4. The impact of access to **resources/socio-economic conditions** on adolescence

- 4. **function** of initiation rites during adolescence
- 5. **Current** research on adolescence.

Physiology

- At puberty certain very important physiological/hormonal changes
- boys
- girls
- tasks - know bio; don't know culture difs
- + hormones = enhance sexual dimorphism

WHEN?

- earlier - “Precocious puberty” - 1860 (16.5); today (12.5)
- boys 2 years later than girls

Problems with this early maturity-

- too young for sex
- too young deal with menstruation

Precocious Puberty - boys

- New study American Academy of Pediatrics (2012)- 4,131 boys 6 - 16
- Boys now begin puberty 6 mon - 2 years earlier than previously thought (but don't necessarily end earlier)
- Why? diet, less physical activity, environmental factors, weight (?) "the little bitty skinny boys" develop later

- Boys - onset of puberty = enlarged testes and production of sperm “Yikes, we don’t want to ask about that!”
- genetic differences = AA boys 9, Hispanic & White 10
- Girls - early development = poor self-esteem, eating disorders, depression
- Boys - ? but more friends, called on more in class, teachers view more positively, better at sports

Western views of adolescence:

- Anna Freud - radical restructuring
- Erikson - identity formation - separation, independence, & autonomy

History – Invention of adolescence in the West:

Pre-industrial West:

- Lack of terms
- Few institutions marked the passage
- Various criteria for adulthood.

conceptual origins of a period of adolescence - 19th century.

- David Bakan's theories representative - response to social changes ("second childhood" to full fill aims of new urban - industrial society)
- G. Stanley Hall *Adolescence* - identified as period of upheaval and separation

Cultural differences

Adolescence in a **cross-cultural** perspective:

- not necessarily recognize adolescence as a separate stage
- not necessarily see it as a time of separation

Margret Mead

- Perhaps most famous anthropologist and work
- Pioneering work in adolescence and gender
- Reflexivity

- Tested Stanley Hall's adolescent stress hypothesis
- = the characteristic rebelliousness, turmoil, and mood swings of adolescence are part of the innate biological script, a fixed stage in the human maturation process
- “Are the disturbances which vex our adolescence due to the nature of adolescence itself or to the civilization?”

Study:

- 6 months
- interpreter
- 68 young women 9 -20 yrs

Found:

- Casual sex
- soa = a confidant and ambassador for Samoan boys to help get girl to meet them for sex
- sleep crawler = a Samoan boy who impersonates an expected lover and sneaks into a dark house in the hopes of having sex

Reactions:

- SHOCK

Conclusions:

- the passage from childhood to adulthood (adolescence) in Samoa is a smooth transition and not marked by the emotional or psychological distress, anxiety or confusion seen in the U.S.
- THUS - “storm & stress” NOT biological/
NOT a universal
- Importance of culture



**MARGARET
MIEAD
AND
SAMOA**

The Making and Unmaking
of an Anthropological Myth

DEREK FREEMAN

1983

- Challenged Mead's major findings
- 4 years of field work and LATER interviews with Mead's surviving informants.

Taupou System:

- = institutionalized virginity for young women of high rank
- Mead - only women of high rank
- Freeman - all women emulate

“recreational lying”

- Claimed Mead's informants denied having engaged in casual sex as young women, and said that they had lied to Mead
- part of Samoan culture

Freeman's Samoa:

- aggressive
- violent
- sexually inhibited

Mead

v.s.

Freeman

- academic agendas
- Cultural determinism (Mead) vs more nature (Freeman)

Cultural determinism:

- Freeman - unmasking of the "cultural determinism" of Meads work
- “restoring the balance of nature/nurture”

Mead

- female @ 25
- adolescent women
- rural
- 1925

Freeman

- male @ 45
- male chiefs
- less rural
- 1940 (& 1966)

Mead

- 6 months
- did not return
- American Samoa
- commoners
- limited language

Freeman

4 years
returned twice
Western Samoa
high ranked
good language

The Criticisms:

- He waited until she could not respond
- Informants now old and converted to Christianity
- Samoan culture had changed
- old man studying adolescent girls
- confused ideal with real
- his own academic agenda

What others say:

- *Whiting & Child*
- *Lowell D. Holmes QUEST FOR THE REAL SAMOA (1979)*
- American Anthropological Association

Conclusions:

- Most side with Mead
- Admit cultural determinism agenda
- take her with a grain of salt
- recognize her GREAT contributions to anthropology

Assignment:

- Venkatesh, Chapters 6 & 7