

THE ADOLESCENT AND OUR CULTURE: A SEARCH FOR IDENTITY (A Review of the Literature and Comments)

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Introduction

THE opening paragraph of Edgar Z. Friedenberg's book, "The Vanishing Adolescent," states that,

"Adolescence is not simply a physical process; there is more to it than sexual maturation. It is also—and primarily—a social process, whose fundamental task is clear and stable self-identification."¹

Erik Erikson describes the task of self-identification as the continuous process of the self finding an identity for itself. Beginning in childhood, and continuing throughout life, new aspects of identity are acquired, and old ones are discarded.

It is during adolescence, the no-man's-land between childhood and adulthood, that the process takes on an especially critical significance. It is at this time that fundamental decisions must be made that are often irreversible in later adult life. Erikson says,

"The final assembly of all the converging identity elements at the end of childhood (and the abandonment of the divergent ones) appears to be a formidable task: how can a stage as 'abnormal' as adolescence be trusted to accomplish it?"²

¹ Paul Goodman, *Growing up Absurd*, Random House, New York, 1960, p. 17.

² Erik H. Erikson, "The Problem of Ego Identity," *Psychological Issues*, Monograph 1, International Publishers, New York, 1959, p. 116.

His answer is that we know adolescent behavior is not a symptom of neurotic or psychotic illness, but rather a sign of a normative crisis. The successful resolution of this crisis can lead to achievement of a positive identity for the adolescent.

In this paper I will discuss the problems of adolescents in achieving an identity, and detail some of the cultural factors which work to prevent this. I will examine, and comment upon, the writings of authors who feel our society has failed to provide a clear definition of adulthood. I will also, very briefly, examine our functioning as social workers in relation to this problem.

The Older Adolescent

Post-pubescent adolescence is a task-oriented time of life. The psychological task of a youngster in this age group, is to put back together his psychological parts after the shattering experience of puberty. He must begin to make adjustments which will prepare him to enter the adult world.

Irene Josselyn describes the adolescent dilemma as . . .

"... not just 'Who am I?', but more importantly, 'Who am I to be?'; not just 'Where am I?', but more importantly 'Where am I going?'. Perhaps during early adolescence, 'Who am I?' and 'Where am I?' predominate. During the second half of adolescence 'Who am I to be?' and 'Where am I going?' are

asked more urgently. None is abandoned until in adulthood the individual can say 'I am, and I am here.' ' ' 3

In his search to find who he is and where he fits in, the adolescent must leave behind his childhood patterns of behavior. He vacillates between wanting to strike out alone, or to retreat to the safety and comfort of parental control. It is this central conflict of the adolescent which makes this time of life difficult for the child and his parents.

In finding the answer to the question "Where am I?", the older adolescent is faced with another fundamental task, that of finding his vocational identity. This task is of great significance, because, for the mature human being, the vocational identity should be more than just that which is necessary for survival.

Another task of the adolescent is preparation to assume the role of marital partner. Central to the satisfactory fulfillment of this role is the ability to respect the identity of the spouse and to reach out to make intimate contact. This can happen when the adolescent is comfortable with his own sense of self.

Gerald Pearson and O. Spurgeon English succinctly summarize these tasks: "(the adolescent needs to)

- (1) effect an integration in his personality for mature responsibility,
- (2) decide upon a vocation and do some work in preparation for it,
- (3) effect an emancipation from his parents and family, and
- (4) bring about a satisfactory relationship with the opposite sex and begin to make some solutions for his love-life problems."

The authors then suggest, that if . . .
". . . personality development has progressed

³ Irene Josselyn, "The Older Adolescent," in Eli Ginzberg, ed., *Values and Ideals of American Youth*, Columbia Univ. Press, New York, 1961, p. 28.

fairly well thus far, these four aims should not be too difficult to achieve." 4

It is precisely this belief, that given healthy personality development, maturity will naturally follow, that this paper questions. It is at this point that we must take leave of those scientists whose emphasis is on the psycho-sexual development of the child.

I have described the adolescent going through a period of strain (a normative crisis) while he faces four fundamental tasks. Now we must sharpen our image of his culture and how it influences him in each of the tasks he must perform.

The Culture

The adolescent's first task is to effect an integration of his personality for mature responsibility.

Jules Henry describes our culture as one that is based upon a pecuniary philosophy, whose high priests are located in Madison Avenue advertising agencies. The key to their success has been their ability to overcome our years of training in impulse control (fundamental to early maturation), by shifting the emphasis to impulse release. The result has been a society that is dominated by a new dictum, "Thou shalt consume." 5

There is a quality of "technical drive-ness" to our money-oriented society, which is necessary to help keep it running. What would happen, for example, if our industries abandoned the use of "dynamic obsolescence" to maintain a steady market. Where would our economy be if you could buy a car and use it for five, or even ten years? The pace keeps increasing as our economy spirals upward, pushed on by our hunger to

⁴ O. Spurgeon English and Gerald H. J. Pearson, *Emotional Problems of Living*, Norton, New York, 1955, p. 341.

⁵ Jules Henry, *Culture Against Man*, Random House, New York, 1963, p. 74.

consume products we very often do not need.

The high priests have found the way to create more desire and help us un-hinge our impulse controls. They have offered us an opportunity to buy a self-image, instead of finding our own. Our basic doubts and insecurities are exploited as we seek to find in the latest 1964 models the self-esteem we lack. The high priests of our society have discovered "product therapy."

Just what is this pecuniary philosophic concept of man in our culture? Henry says that it describes man as,

"Insatiably desiring, infinitely plastic, totally passive, and always a bit sleepy; unpredictable labile and disloyal (to products); basically woolly-minded and non-obsessive about traditional truth; relaxed and understanding with respect to the canons of traditional philosophy, indifferent to its values, and easily moved to buy whatever at the moment seems to help his underlying personal inadequacies."⁶

Paul Goodman agrees substantially with this pecuniary concept of our society, and feels that it is maintained by an alliance of business, labor, government and Madison Avenue. He says,

"... it is desperately hard these days for an average child to grow up to be a man, for our present organized system of society does not want men. They are not safe. They do not suit."⁷

It would appear that not only does our culture work against the development of mature responsibility, it depends upon the adolescent's failure.

Another of the tasks is to decide upon a vocation and to do some work in preparation for it.

The pecuniary society cannot help but affect the career choice of the adolescent. If one accepts that a sizeable portion of our economy is geared to producing products we don't need, refinements which are unnecessary and

replacements for products which should never have worn out, then the corollary must be that many of the jobs in our society are useless tasks.

The reader, Goodman points out, must be objecting to this argument because people don't think this way about their jobs. The concern is not for usefulness and honor in a job, but rather good pay, prestige and good (or at least tolerable) working conditions. Goodman agrees with these objections as to the fact, but goes on to say . . .

"... the question is what it means to grow up into such a fact as: 'During my productive years I will spend eight hours a day doing what is no good.'"⁸

Our economy is such that we must form our men to fit predetermined organizational roles, to become cogs in the operation of this pecuniary society. If you are propelled by drives, there is a place for you, if you will mold yourself to fit it. But as Henry points out,

"... if you are moved mostly by values, you really have to search, and if you find a job in which you can live by values, the pay and prestige are usually low."⁹

Since we have been conditioned to drive towards success and to fear failure, we soon learn that we must subordinate ourselves to the end. Individuality, creativity and our feelings are held in check so that they can be delivered on the proper cue from whatever authority judges us. In our practice we see how adolescents quickly discover that equally important as what you know in high school is what you know about the teacher. The rationale for accepting this system is that one must get good grades to be accepted by the right college. The right college is necessary for the right job. Once on the job, the young man discovers that the cycle has

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 14.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 77.

not ended, and that, once again, he must be subordinated to the end of advancement. Only now, he has a good deal of practice in sacrificing himself to success and finds it much easier to do so.

He is caught up in what Goodman calls "the rat race," which is taking place in a "closed room" representing our modern society. The people in the room are divided into two groups, those competing in the center (with the success, wealth and other accoutrements of belonging), and those who stand watching in the corners (such as the beatniks and the bums).

If the young man stops running, or refuses to even start, he will have to join the others who have excluded themselves or have been excluded from the race. He feels that he is faced with only these two choices, because our society offers him very few career opportunities with which he can leave the closed room altogether.

The third task is the one in which the adolescent effects an emancipation from his parents and family.

To effect this emancipation, the adolescent must feel a sense of confidence in himself and a belief that he can function as an independent identity.

Friedenberg describes the development of this independent identity as flowing from a "clarification of experience" in which the adolescent gains insight into his individuality by contrasting himself with others who are very different. He sees the American high school as the primary institution within which this process should be taking place. Instead, he feels that . . .

“. . . the high school has been getting worse for years, for society has. It has always devoted itself to the interest of uniformity more than to individuality; but the uniformities used to be more external than they are now . . . the school today—is less a stew pot than a blender. What comes out when it is functioning effectively is not merely uniform, but bland and

creamy; by its very nature inimical to clarity, yet retaining in a form difficult to detect, all the hostile or toxic ingredients present in the original mixture.”¹⁰

Our high schools, which are agents of our culture designated to act as perpetuators, not innovators, work at grinding the sharp edges of the adolescent's identity so that he will more readily fit into his societal place.

This is not to say that our schools are unresponsive to change. We have seen a movement in our society towards the liberalizing and democratizing of the relation between the adult and the adolescent, which is reflected in our schools. Unfortunately, many educators who have not succeeded in creating an identity for themselves, are threatened when they come into close proximity with adolescents in the throes of this struggle. Unable to exert control through the use of strict disciplinary methods, the harried educators often turn to manipulation.

One example of this is the average high school student government. All of the concepts of democratic process are present, except the freedom to make mistakes. The average student government faculty advisor will manipulate the group to reach the answer he feels is best. As a last resort, he will use his veto power, a constant reminder to the youngsters of the school's limited belief in their competence. The alternative of clearly defining areas in which the student group can act in complete freedom, as opposed to those in which the school must retain jurisdiction because of its special competence, is not considered.

The adolescent is hindered in his task of ending his dependence upon his parents and family by the inhibition of the emergence of a clear identity, and by his gradual acceptance of society's low eval-

¹⁰ Edgar Z. Friedenberg, *The Vanishing Adolescent*, Dell, New York, 1962, p. 79.

uation of his capacities for independent judgment.

The final and perhaps most painful task for the adolescent is to bring about a satisfactory relationship with the opposite sex, in preparation for marriage.

To understand the nature of this specific task, we must look at the adolescent's general problems in interpersonal relations. Henry defines these problems through the use of the concept of a "personal community." In primitive and certain Asian cultures, the child is born into a personal community which he tends to maintain all of his life. In these cultures, social appeal becomes relatively unimportant. Henry points out that in American culture . . .

" . . . where no traditional arrangements guarantee an indissoluble personal community, every child must be a social engineer, able to use his "appeal" and his skill at social maneuvering to construct a personal community for himself. This is the child's task from the day he leaves the established security of his mother's orbit, and he works hard at it as he tries, through making himself appealing, to bring new friends into his personal community."¹¹

It is not hard to see how the adolescent becomes a product and not a person. His concern is not what he is, but how is he seen. With his personal community threatened by the unstable nature of his environment (job changes for Dad, a new house, etc.) it is important that he accumulate a supply of friends for a rainy day. Popularity, even if it must be obtained through conformity, becomes an insurance policy against being left out.

The insecurities of these relations tend to affect the adolescent's ability to give of himself and to make a personal commitment. Friends have come and gone so quickly, the adolescent learns to withhold his real affections for fear of wasting them on short-lived relationships and for fear of exposing his true self.

Add to this the time pressure applied by our technically-driven society. Our middle-class youngsters are almost assured of a well-paying job as soon as they graduate from college. Why not get married while going to college, since parental support will only be for a short time? As the marriage age moves down, it shortens the time left for the adolescent to experiment. Young girls begin to feel the pressure of getting their young man before someone else does. The importance of popularity is now raised to a paramount position.

It should be no surprise that so many of our marriages, which were conceived in haste, based upon a superficial evaluation of the partner's "image," and which are lacking in real personal commitment between the partners, will end in the divorce court. What is surprising is that so many more do not.

Evaluation

I have tried to provide a view of the development of the adolescent. My particular emphasis upon the cultural pressures faced by the teen-ager is not meant to imply the lack of significance of family or other units. It is an attempt to complete the picture of the adolescent's psycho-social development, and the general thesis in this paper is that most adolescents face great difficulty in developing a stable self-identification, and that most of them never achieve one.

H. H. Remmers and D. H. Radler provide a report on the years of research conducted by Purdue University under scientific controls. The authors felt one of the most important findings was:

"Over a fairly wide range of subject matter, teenagers are constantly more sensitive to the feelings and opinions of adults and of other teenagers than they are to any 'voice from within.'" ¹²

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 147.

¹² H. H. Remmers and D. H. Radler, *The*

Some of the other results of the report which were highlighted were:

"Twenty-six percent admit, 'My life is pretty well planned for me'.

Another twenty-six percent say 'More than anything, I want to be accepted as a member of the group that is most popular at school'.

Twenty-nine percent sometimes do something 'Just to make people like me'.

Thirty-eight percent feel that there is nothing worse than being considered an 'odd ball' by other people.

Fifty percent feel greatly upset if the group doesn't approve of them.

Only forty-five percent say, 'I think things out for myself and act on my own decisions'." 13

The study points out that while there may be differences in orientation to parents or peers, the American teen-ager is by and large other-directed.

"Not only does he seek the advice and opinions of adults and/or adolescents; he also feels a strong desire to be accepted and a strong fear of disapproval." 14

If one accepts as the fundamental task of adolescence development of a solid identity, as described early in this paper, this report offers some support to the claim of failure on a large scale.

The Role of the Social Worker

It is difficult for the adolescent to achieve identity. It is just as difficult for us, as social workers, to be of help to him in accomplishing this task. What are some of the problems we face?

The most significant is that we are all products of the culture that has been described. We carry within us, in spite of all the pronouncements of other values, the seeds planted by our culture. If we are to help these adolescents find themselves, we must experience that

American Teenager, Bobbs Merrill, New York, 1957, p. 225.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

discovery first. The most important tool we have in our work is ourselves. If within us exists the mirror image of those aspects of our culture which tend to cause confusion for our adolescents, then we become a part of the pressures they must overcome.

One can understand the objections to this argument, pointing out that we have all chosen to work as social workers, a relatively low-status, low-paying profession, which is value-oriented. There is some validity to this. Much of it, however, becomes ineffective when we examine the agencies we work in. Are our centers, our settlement houses and our Y's more than just agents of our culture? When one looks at the policy-setting boards of our agencies, one usually finds those people who have been most successful in our society. Are they most interested in preserving our culture or changing our culture?

We must examine our program, our house councils and our youth groups. How closely do they resemble the high school student government described earlier? We have to examine the issues we guide our teens into contact with, and see if they are chosen because they are real and current, or because they are not controversial. Are we, our executives and our boards secure enough to allow adolescents to make mistakes?

We have to ask ourselves whether we are too concerned with helping adolescents meet our culture's expectations of them. Have we also become "blenders" of our youth? Have we become captives of our jargon, concentrating on aiding our teens to play their proper roles? Have we helped them to see that...

"... one discovers, fights for, appoints oneself to one's identity. Identity is defined by its task, mission, product; role depends on the interpersonal expectations of others." 15

¹⁵ Goodman, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

Conclusion

During the days of the second-generation of Jews in America, young Jewish intellectuals were the leaders in organized student movements of protest. David Boroff described the change.

“As the doors of American society swing open, hospitably to talented Jews, the impulse to castigate and criticize becomes attenuated. It is possible that if some of the disharmonies in American life become exacerbated, Jewish teenage intellectuals will again display the insurgency and critical fervor that once characterized them. But it is more likely, that, as Jews increasingly become part of the “Establishment”, intellectual teenagers will merely see themselves as apprentices rather than critics.”¹⁶

¹⁶ David Boroff, “Jewish Teen-Age Culture,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, 338, p. 90.

We are now living in a time of change and turmoil, and the disharmonies of American life are becoming exacerbated. The Negro revolution, for example, has been quickly followed by the growth of the right wing counter-movement. Forces within our society which can cause its ultimate destruction are organized and growing. Their very existence and strength are an indication of our cultural inadequacies.

There has never been a time when we had greater need for real men and real women; adults who will stand for justice, human dignity and democracy, even if they must stand alone and with an unpopular cause. While the threat to our society is great at this time, so is our opportunity to bring about change.