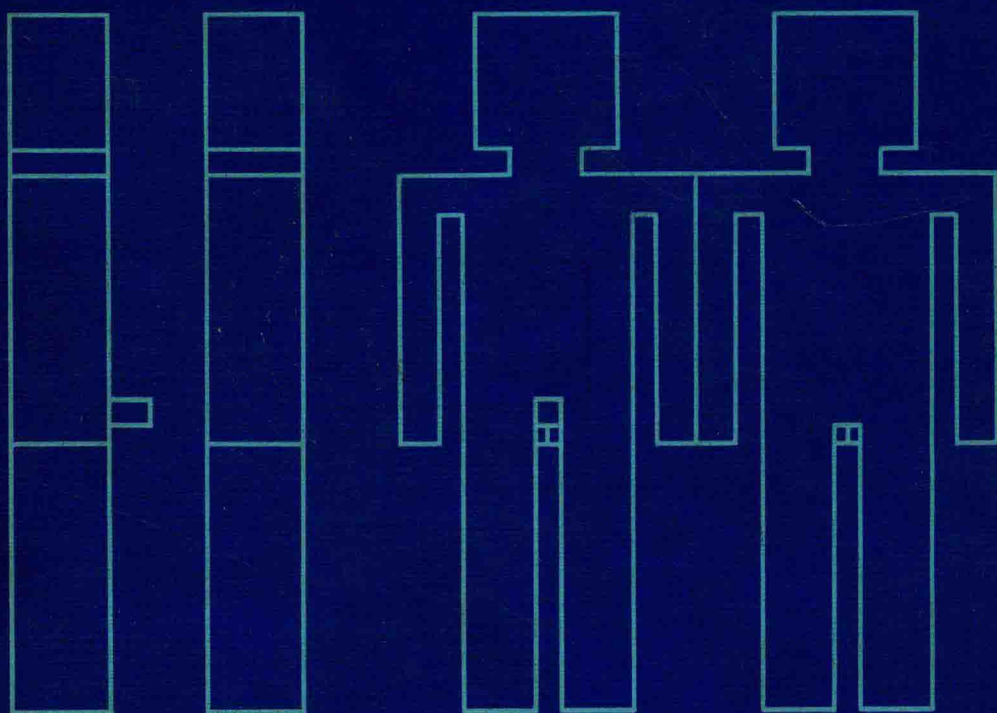


W. Everaerd, C.B. Hindley, A. Bot,
and J.J. van der Werff ten Bosch (editors)

DEVELOPMENT IN ADOLESCENCE

PSYCHOLOGICAL, SOCIAL AND BIOLOGICAL ASPECTS



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DEVELOPMENT IN ADOLESCENCE

Psychological, Social and Biological Aspects

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Psychological, Social and Biological Aspects

PREFACE

Depending on the definition of this concept that is adopted, adolescence is the narrow threshold or a vast no-man's land that separates adulthood from childhood. In one -physicalist- view, adolescence begins when secondary sex characters become noticeable and ends when they are fully developed. In another -sociological- view, adolescence ends when social independence has been gained. It may easily take many years more to span the interval between those two events.

In this collection of papers by specialists from various disciplines, physical, psychological and social aspects of adolescence are considered.

The book originates from a postgraduate course for medical practitioners, who deal with adolescents, but the range of the papers is such that we hope it may be of value to a much wider readership, including educators and all who are concerned with adolescents. The course was entitled: 'Adolescence: psychological, social and biological aspects', and was held in Leiden in November 1981. It was the fourth in a series of Boerhaave Courses instigated by the Dutch Growth Foundation of which a published record has now become available. Previous titles are 'Somatic growth of the child' (1966), 'De samenstelling van het menselijk lichaam' (1968) (=Human body composition), and 'Normal and abnormal development of brain and behaviour' (1971).

The detailed programme of the course was planned by Dr. F.J. Bekker, Prof. Dr. J.L. van den Brande, Prof. Dr. W. Everaerd, Prof. A.Th. Schweizer and Prof. Dr. J.J. van der Werff ten Bosch.

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1. A HISTORICAL AND TRANSCULTURAL VIEW OF ADOLESCENCE

LEA DASBERG

If history can be of any use to the field of education it is so by destroying some illusions. First of all the illusion that human life can once and for all be divided into neatly limited periods, like infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age. Secondly that all these periods can be exactly defined and determined within unchangeable time-limits: being the same for the Egyptians of the Old Empire as for the Dutch people of the postindustrial era; for today's inhabitants of a city like New York as for the members of an isolated African tribe; or the same for the working class as for the bourgeoisie. Such unchangeable lines of demarcation do not exist. The time-limits of infancy or of adolescence change from one historical period to another, from one culture to another and from one social class to another. In the third place the word 'transcultural' should not arouse expectations that I will refer to Eskimoes and Maoris. I am a historian, not an anthropologist. Culture for me means lifestyle, and transcultural means differences of lifestyles, not so much between ethnic groups as between historical eras and social classes within the western world.

At one moment in time adolescents can consist of: boys and girls in school or boys and girls working in a factory; boys and girls writing poems in a diary, or fighting for a guerilla group; boys and girls experiencing the initial rites of their tribe into manhood and womanhood, as well as boys and girls undergoing a lonely and guilt-ridden experience of masturbation. At the same time, even within the same culture and in the same social class, there are adolescents still wondering what cohabitation is like, while others have already experienced abortion.

These contrasts do not imply that adolescence does not exist. It does, but explicitly in western society. One definition at least is possible: adolescence is the stage of life between childhood and adulthood. So what is childhood and what is adulthood? I would define childhood as existing as long as a person is taken care of within protective surroundings. There are some exceptions: soldiers in the army, monks and nuns in convents, old people in homes, and delinquents in prison. I would define adulthood as starting from the moment a person definitively leaves the protective environment and has to take care of himself. In other words: a person reaches adulthood from the moment he bears social responsibility.

Besides social responsibility we also know juridical and political responsibility, but we will not take that into account because juridical responsibility commonly follows some years after a person has assumed social responsibility, and because the general right to vote is a very recent phenomenon. Before its acceptance by democratic parliaments even the oldest and wisest men were politically children.

So a child lives within a protective environment that is responsible for him. An adult has left this protection and is responsible for himself. An adolescent stands on the threshold of these two situations.

Another common illusion is that adolescence is a universal phenomenon. It is, however, a cultural phenomenon typical of modern western societies like ours. Anthropological studies like Margaret Mead's COMING OF AGE IN SAMOA (1) showed that in that culture adolescence is almost non-existent. There is only a quantitative difference between childhood and adulthood, not a qualitative one. So there is no place for a threshold implied by the term 'adolescence'. From a very young age the child takes part in such adult activities as fishing, hunting, woodcutting, defence against wild animals, human enemies and the natural elements. Thus the child does not have to leave a protective environment nor explore an absolutely different kind of life after the age of 12 or 14, and quite abruptly transfer

responsibility from his parents' shoulders on to his own. The transition from childhood to adulthood in such cultures is nearly invisible.

In cultures where adolescence came into existence it is limited to particular social classes. In our society it started as a phenomenon of the middle-class and aristocracy. For children of artisans and craftsmen in pre-industrial times, and after the Industrial Revolution for proletarian and peasants' children, adolescence did not exist for centuries.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, in western society, boys and girls of the 12 to 16 years age group who belonged to these lower social classes were normally full-time labourers. The artisan boy was taught to help in his father's workshop from his 6th or 7th year on, and at the age of 11 or 12 was sent away from home to undergo his apprenticeship under the guidance of a master. He then bore responsibility for the quality of the workshop's products. As an apprentice he wandered from one master to the next till he was recognized as a master himself. During these wandering years the lad was about 14 to 18 years old. Although he slept and ate in the household of his masters he had himself to organize his next destination, his travelling, his clothes and his earnings. He bore his own social responsibility. He did not show any resemblance to our present teenager or adolescent (2).

As far as a girl of that time and social class was concerned the position was similar. She also started working with her mother from the age of 6 to 7 years. Household work in those days easily took 14 hours a day. It was not uncommon for the mother to give birth once a year, so that daughters between 10 and 15 years old had to take over the full responsibility of cooking, washing, mending the clothes, educating the younger children, feeding the babies, doing the shoppings, milking the cow, bargaining with the merchants, and so on. The possibility of losing her mother in childbirth and of being burdened with the full responsibilities of the household was far from theoretical. Like the boy of those times the girl did not have much in common with the teenager or adolescent girl of our days. There was

virtually no visible threshold between her girlhood and her own marital life and motherhood (3).

Middle class boys and girls in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries sometimes left their own lessons at school, or from a private tutor, at the age of 15 to immediately become a private tutor themselves for other children under other people's roofs. A Dutch example is Justus van Effen. Thus in their life too there was no transitional period between childhood and adulthood (4).

So adolescence is not only a cultural phenomenon, and a phenomenon of social class, but also a phenomenon created by history.

However, there is one aspect of adolescence that is inevitably common to all cultures, all social classes and all historical eras, namely, adolescence as a biological phenomenon. The bourgeois child and the proletarian child, the western and the oriental child, the medieval and the child of today, are all, at a certain moment in their development, confronted with the physical changes of puberty resulting in sexual maturity.

But we have to be careful not to confuse adolescence only with this process of growing towards sexual maturity. We have to put the question what kind of consequences this sexual maturity brings forward for the boy or girl in question, if any at all! We can think of lots of consequences. The consequence for prince William II of Orange and the girl Mary Stuart in the 17th century was their marrying at the ages of 13 and 11 years, and not only as a formality for dynastic purposes. Directly after the wedding ceremony, the meal and the festivities, the royal and noble guests accompanied bride and bridegroom to their marital bed to be present for their first intercourse, and to give directions and advice (5). The consequences for Neeltje Doff, a working class girl from the slums of 19th century Amsterdam, were that her parents forced her to sell her nearly mature body as a prostitute as soon as possible, in order to feed her starving little brothers and sisters (6,7). The consequences for a girl of the same age in the same city, but living in one of the

splendid merchants' mansions at one of the 'grachten', were that her mother or her nanny, moved to tears, told her that now she was a big girl and that later on she would learn to understand what that meant. When this girl herself became a mother of a daughter of 14, she tried to help her by giving her a booklet about the bees and the flowers, because she remembered how awfully frightened she was at the sight of the first menstrual blood without having any explanation (8).

Only in the last of these three stories was there evidence of an adolescence as we understand it, a life period between childhood and adulthood, involving shock and curiosity, pride and shame, longings, and fear concerning the fulfilment of these longings, and both alienation from and a new consciousness of, one's own existence. In the life of the noble couple and of the proletarian prostitute there was no time between childhood and adulthood for such a period of curious and fearful exploration into the world of adults.

Returning to our 17th century lad wandering as an apprentice from one town to the other, we did not call him an adolescent because he was already responsible for his own living. However, though socially living an adult life, was he perhaps sexually an adolescent in our modern sense? In a poem of Karel van Mander (1548-1606) this poet-painter advises these boys -and he himself had been a boy like them- in the following way: to become a capable artisan, he says, you have to work hard and to learn a lot. But sometimes Cupid and Bacchus and their son Hymen will distract your attention so that you will do bad work and your master will be angry. You are not allowed to marry until you have become a master yourself. But that does not mean that you cannot start to explore, and take a little snack from time to time. Complete abstinence will cause you headaches and bad moods. Marry when you are 25, but you must have already discovered the secrets of marriage by then. For girls it is different. Although for them too there should not be a long interval between reaching maturity and experiencing sexual intercourse, they should have their experiences within the bonds

of marriage. So the ideal couple for a wedding is a man of 25 and a girl of 17 (9,10,11).

In this picture of his time which Karel van Mander sketches for us, a kind of adolescence had come into existence, as far as boys were concerned, but only in part. A socially independent young man had to postpone a regular sex life and marriage until he could be economically responsible for a whole family.

From another source we know about third grade pupils of Latin school at the end of the Middle Ages, boys of about 11 years old, being publicly punished before all the pupils and the staff of their school for having visited lupanaria (brothels) (12). Here we have an early example of adolescence as we have known it since Victorian times, a position of absolute social dependence on parents and teachers, closely supervised, but already conscious of new passions and feelings and searching for a release from them, in a society that requires the postponement of such experiences until social independence is reached.

Kant (1725-1804) saw the moment youngsters acquired the ability to be parents themselves as the end of education and of youth, and consequently as the end of guarding and protecting them. He thought an age of about 16 was appropriate (13). His contemporary Rousseau did not agree at all. For him there had to be an interposed period of exploration of the adult world which should take place between the 20th and 25th years (14). But even this had to be in the charge of an adult guide, who would not allow these explorations to extend beyond the borders of the mind! For years and years a boy and a girl in love with each other had to explore each other's minds by reading books together, by visiting each other under a chaperone's eye, and had to examine the purity and truth of their love by leaving each other for long periods of travelling the world to become mature and wise enough for ... yes, for sexual intercourse, but immediately within the bonds of marriage!

The higher the social class of the child, the longer its adolescence lasted, socially, economically and biologically,

because the growing wealth, especially after the Industrial Revolution, equipped more and more parents with the means to give their children a prolonged education under expensive and careful guidance. The youngsters were banished to the nursery with their nanny or private tutor, in order not to hear the adult conversation in the salon. They were kept away from the mother in childbirth and even from the cat giving birth to its kittens. From before the awakening of maturity, boys and girls were segregated in separate boys' and girls' schools. Books with information about human biological and physical processes were locked away from them. Instead they were stuffed with false information about childbirth by the intervention of the stork or the cabbage. Girls were taught to sleep with their hands outside the sheets, without understanding why. Boys were forced into anti-masturbation belts (8, pp. 207-211). Rousseau's propaganda for a child's own exploration of the world; its own observations of nature itself rather than learning from books; his emphasis on the need for sensory experiences of cold and warmth, wet and dry, colour and scent, excluded the exploration and observation of one's own body, one's own genitals, one's own secretions, let alone that of others! He and his fellow educators blocked these areas of exploration by clothes, sheets, and above all by taboos. If a child's nature was stronger than the prohibitions and it sought and found satisfaction underneath the bedclothes, his lust was overpowered and overshadowed by guilt. Perhaps the adolescent could still find his body secretly, but he did not dare to love it. Even if he obtained some knowledge of sexuality, his feelings and experiences remained virginal. Rousseau's theory that the lad should not have his first sexual intercourse before the age of 25 became daily reality in the upper classes. And when he finally entered this realm he was scared to death. It might take another five years for his sexual activities to reveal something of lust and joy, if it ever happened.

Imagine these healthy teenagers from the upper classes in the time between 1750 and 1940, how, crying bitter tears into their