What is “Adolescence”?  

The definition of adolescence is no simple matter. One way to approach the problem is consider what the characteristic features of adolescence are. It is not hard to fill up a chalkboard of examples, stereotypes really, of the thoughts, behaviors, feelings, moods and reactions of “typical” adolescents. Adolescents are self-absorbed, touchy, moody, concerned about appearance, self-conscious, argumentative, hard-to-reach. They are gawky, shy, unsure of themselves, but prone to showing off, class clowning and exhibitionism. They are critical of adults and slaves to peer approval. They demand to be taken seriously, to be consulted, to have a measure of autonomy, but take shocking risks and exercise poor judgment. They are conforming but reject conventionality. They insist on authenticity, value honesty, detest fakes and phonies, all the while experimenting with roles, postures, self-presentation and identity. They desire acceptance and popularity, yearn for intimacy, are confused by sexuality.

But it’s not all angst. Adolescence is also marked by a sense of idealism; by a readiness to take up the good (or bad) cause; by a sense of loyalty and devotion to friendship; by a sense of optimism in the future. They are introspective, creative, open to experience. Possibly at no other times are adolescents as in touch with their inner life, becoming, as a result, avid poets, diarists, song-writers (Josselson, 1980).

These examples tend to define adolescence by its presumed emotional and psychological characteristics. But many readers will also want to add a sociological component, too. Adolescence is a transition period when young people come to learn the social roles appropriate for adulthood. It is a period of status acquisition during which one comes to acquire gradually the trappings of adult status. We do not move from the dependence and immaturity of childhood to the responsibilities and maturity of adulthood all at once, especially in complex technological societies, the argument goes. Instead, a period for learning is set aside so that youth have an opportunity to cultivate the skills required to assume adult roles. This takes a long time, at least in modern industrialized societies, and teenagers will have to undergo many experiences that will prepare them for adulthood.

But, with so many experiences to endure it is hardly clear which one should signal that adulthood is achieved at last. No one experience seals the deal. What contributes to this ambiguity is the fact that in the West there is no ritual, no rite-of-passage that celebrates definitively the achievement of adult status. A rite-of-passage is a ritualistic and ceremonial way that many traditional and pre-industrial societies acknowledge the transition of young people into adulthood. These rites typically occur around puberty (and are sometimes called puberty rites). They are a public signal of the child’s fertility and eligibility for marriage, of his or her ability to take on adult responsibilities and to be a reliable and productive member of the community (Kaepler, 1974). Puberty rites take a variety of forms. They can involve mutilation (piercing, tattoos, scarring), tests of achievement (success in hunting and other proof of being a good provider), tests of endurance (trials by ordeal, pain, fasting), gender segregation or ritualistic exclusion from the group for a period of instruction.

But there is nothing quite comparable to rites-of-passage in industrialized Western societies. There are numerous steps along the way that convey a bit of the status that is longed for: the first date or kiss, religious rituals like confirmation or bar mitzvah, the extension of curfew, landing the first job, passing a drivers test and getting a license, buying the first car, the first sexual intercourse, graduating from high school, registering to vote, moving away to college. But none of these is a rite-of-passage. None of these certify that one is now an adult in the eyes of the community. Of course, one is a legal adult at age 18 in the United States and Canada for most purposes but not the purchase of alcohol; and it is the rare person of this age who is prepared to shed dependency upon parents and to strike out on one’s own.

Indeed, recent research has shown that turning 18 or making certain role transitions, such as getting married, or finishing one’s education, do not connote reaching adult status for most individuals.
Rather, adulthood is thought a matter of accepting responsibility, deciding on one’s own beliefs, establishing a sense of equality with parents, and financial independence (Arnett, 2001, 2003). Adolescence drags on, then, for about a decade --- from the first hint of puberty until well beyond the teenage years. And even by the early twenties adult status is not necessarily in reach for many young people. Some developmental scientists believe that a new stage of development, called youth (Keniston, 1970) or emergent adulthood (Arnett, 2000, 2001) characterizes this part of the lifespan, which means that even after one successfully negotiates the developmental tasks of adolescence, there is still much work to do before adulthood is reached.

So let’s recap: we have argued that adolescence can be defined by reference to its psychological and sociological components. But is it not true that “raging hormones” besiege adolescents? What about the growth spurt and physical changes that is so distinctive of this age? Indeed, there is an obvious biological and physical dimension to adolescence as well.

It is the onset of puberty that is the most visible sign that one’s childhood, at least the body one used during childhood, is being left behind. The adolescent quite literally grows a new one (Petersen & Leffert, 1995). The hormonal and physiological changes that accompany puberty, the growth spurt, and the transformation of the child’s body into an adult form are physical changes that push development on many fronts. It forces young adolescents to revisit their self-image; to come to grips with their sexuality; and with a wide range of social-emotional experiences. Pubertal maturation, in turn, provokes reactions in others --- parents give us more privacy, teachers give us more responsibility, peers seek us out as friends or romantic partners –all of which complicates the usual pattern of interaction that was common during the long years of childhood. As a result pubertal maturation comes to define the challenges of adolescence.

Adolescence Across Cultures and History

Most definitions of adolescence, then, will say something about psychological, social and biological characteristics of individuals in the second decade of life. The psychological, social and biological characteristics of adolescence seem well known to us. But are these characteristics necessary features of adolescence? We recognize their usefulness for describing adolescents of our acquaintance, even of our own adolescence. But do these characteristics define adolescents everywhere? Can we imagine a way of growing up that did not include them, and, if so, does it make sense to call that way of growing up “adolescence?” To put it differently: Is there cross-cultural evidence for the existence of adolescence, or is adolescence largely a phenomenon of modern Western societies? Alternatively, has adolescence always existed in history? Or is it characteristic mostly of certain kinds of societies at critical moments of their historical development?

Two Camps. There are two points of view on these questions. One camp asserts that the cross-cultural and historical evidence supports the idea that adolescence is a universal phenomenon. It says that adolescence is a natural part of the human lifespan and is on display wherever one looks today across societies and cultures; and it is evident wherever one looks in history. We will call this the universalist thesis on the question of adolescence.

A second camp asserts that it is an abuse of language to use the term adolescence to describe the status of young people in many societies around the world; and that adolescence has not always existed in history, including American history. Some scholars in this camp argue that adolescence was “discovered” or “invented” around the turn of the twentieth century, and that the major social institutions that support it were well in place by 1920. We will call this argument the inventionist thesis (without implying, of course that there had to be an “inventor”). We review this debate in the next section, and for two reasons. First, taking on this debate gives us a chance to introduce some important figures and theories in the history of adolescent development. Second, when we are finished, we will be armed with a conceptual framework that will guide our approach to understanding adolescence.

Universalist Thesis

Let’s first examine the universalist thesis. It asserts that adolescence is an inescapable part of human development, and for two major reasons. The first is that pubertal maturation is a universal feature of
the lifespan. Children everywhere, at some point, experience puberty. Moreover the biological and physical changes that accompany puberty are so closely tied with the psychosocial characteristics that we attribute to adolescence that it is difficult to conceive of how one could occur without the other. We can no more imagine children developing into adults without first undergoing a period of adolescence than we can children reaching adulthood without undergoing puberty. Hence the universality of adolescence is linked to the universality of puberty.

A “Biogenetic Theory.” G. Stanley Hall (1844-1924) is an important part of this story. Hall is remembered today for many important achievements. He was the first to be awarded a Ph.D. in psychology (1878), having studied under William James at Harvard University. He established the first laboratory in psychology at Johns Hopkins University in 1883. He founded the American Psychological Association (1892). He launched the first psychology journal, the American Journal of Psychology (1887), and the first journal devoted to the study of children, Pedagogical Seminary (1891), which is published today under the title Journal of Genetic Psychology. He was the first president of Clark University, where he hosted a visit of Sigmund Freud (and Carl Jung) to America. It was at Clark University in 1909 where Freud introduced psychoanalysis to the New World. Freud’s remarks are published as Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis, a thin book that is probably the most popular and accessible account of his influential theory. But it was Hall’s 1904 publication of a two-volume study of adolescence that concerns us here. This study was so influential at the time that a number of scholars have argued that if adolescence was “discovered” or “invented” it was largely because of the popularity and influence of Hall’s treatise (Keniston, 1970; Kett, 1974; Proefrock, 1981).

But Hall was no inventionist. His “biogenetic” theory placed adolescence in the grand sweep of human evolutionary history, which suggests that adolescence is no more optional than is the fact of species evolution. To frame his theory Hall borrowed two notions that are now discredited. The first was Lamarck’s (1744-1829) theory of evolution that held that characteristics acquired during the lifetime of an organism could be passed along to its offspring. The second was Ernst Haeckel’s (1834-1919) law of recapitulation (or “biogenetic law”) that asserted a direct link between the development of individuals (“ontogeny”) and the evolution of species (“phylogeny”). Each organism, in its own individual development, retraces the history of its evolutionary ancestors. This law is summarized by the expression ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny.

One illustration of this principle was Haeckel’s claim that the human fetus develops gill slits because at that stage the fetus is, in fact, a tiny fish, repeating the sequence of evolution of our predecessor species. Another example is Hall’s claim that children who wander about hiking and camping are reliving the nomadic phase of human history; or that children who climb trees are reliving the time when our racial ancestors lived in trees; or that growth spurts in human physical development, say, at adolescence, correspond with periods of rapid evolution. These examples sound fantastic today, but Stephen Jay Gould (1977) reminds us that the notion of recapitulation was one of the most important ideas in science during the latter half of the nineteenth-century, and that even today versions of recapitulation (although not Haeckel’s version or Hall’s) can be found in biology and other domains (including developmental psychology, as we will see).

So Hall borrowed from Lamarck the notion that newly acquired characteristics can be passed along to offspring, and from Haeckel the idea that individual development is a recapitulation of evolutionary history. But how, does this help us understand adolescence? Hall argued that adolescence accords with a stage of human evolution when the species was in transition from a phase of savage barbarity to a more civilized phase. Adolescence is a transition period associated with turmoil, stress and conflict because it repeats this transitional phase in human evolution when life was traumatic, convulsed and turbulent. The storm-and-stress of evolutionary history, as humanity struggled to rise to its civilized state, is revisited as the storm-and-stress of adolescence, as youngsters struggle to rise to a state of maturity.

Indeed, for Hall, every person is born twice, once as an individual, and then again as a civilized person, as a member of a civilized race, and this second birth ideally takes place during adolescence as a result of the civilizing influence of education and socialization. It is during adolescence
when the preprogrammed force of evolutionary pressure begins to wane in its influence on individual development, making the adolescent particularly vulnerable to environmental influence (Grinder, 1969). At this point it is crucial for the adolescent to acquire “characters” through proper education, so that these might be passed along in heredity to advance the development of the human race. This latter point reflects, of course, Hall’s faith in Lamarckianism — the notion that acquired characteristics could be passed along to successive generations through heredity.

None of this is taken seriously today. The important point for our purpose is to note that Hall’s biogenetic theory makes adolescence a necessary feature of the human experience insofar as it is a recapitulation of an ancestral phase of our evolutionary history. Interestingly, Hall’s use of recapitulation, and his claim that adolescence is a normal period of storm-and-stress, also finds a place in psychoanalytic theories of adolescence which also support the universalist thesis. Let’s see how.

**Psychoanalytic Theory.** Psychoanalysis is a set of theories and practices associated with Sigmund Freud. Freudian views about psychosexual development contributed not only to the notion that adolescence is a universal phenomenon, but also to the consensus emerging in the early 20th-century that adolescence is a particularly trying time for youngsters and parents alike. Adolescents are normally expected to be moody, emotionally unstable, sexually assertive, deviant, alienated, egotistical. Adolescents are gripped by an identity crisis. They reject adult values; they are in protracted conflict with parents; they are rebellious, vulnerable, at risk, scornful of adult authority, stormy, unpredictable, and not very nice to be around. Generations of parents have come to dread the eventual adolescence of their children, and nothing elicits more pity for a teacher than to say that one teaches middle school children!

No one has shaped this dark vision of adolescence more surely than has Sigmund Freud’s daughter, Anna. Anna Freud argued that the adolescence dramatically changes the personality of the child. The “peaceful growth” of the child is now violently interrupted by the onset of adolescence, so much so that the teen seems like a different person (A. Freud, 1974). Moreover, she argued that one really has cause to worry about the mental health of teens. In her view adolescence is a “developmental disturbance” that is hard to distinguish from neurosis and psychopathology (A. Freud, 1977). The adolescent will display a range of emotional upsets that would be considered abnormal if they occurred in adulthood. She wrote:

I take it that it is normal for an adolescent to behave for a considerable length of time in an inconsistent and unpredictable manner; to fight his impulses and to accept them; to ward them off successfully and to be overrun by them; to love his parents and to hate them; to revolt against them and to be dependent on them; to be deeply ashamed to acknowledge his mother before others and unexpectedly, to desire heart-to-heart talks with her; to thrive on imitation of and identification with others while searching unceasingly for his own identity; to be more idealistic, artistic, generous and unselfish than he will ever be again; but also the opposite: self-centered, egotistic, calculating. Such fluctuations between extreme opposites would be deemed highly abnormal at any other time of life” (A. Freud, 1974, p. 291, our emphasis).

Another account of Anna Freud’s view of the inconsistencies of adolescence can be found in Table 1.1.
Table 1.0 Anna Freud’s Description of Adolescence

| “Adolescents are excessively egoistic, regarding themselves as the center of the universe and the sole object of interest, and yet at no time in later life are they capable of so much self-sacrifice and devotion. They form the most passionate love-relations, only to break them off as abruptly as they began them. On the other hand they throw themselves enthusiastically into the life of the community and, on the other, they have an overpowering longing for solitude. They oscillate between blind submission to some self-chosen leader and defiant rebellion against any and every authority. They are selfish and materially-minded and at the same time full of lofty idealism. They are ascetic but will suddenly plunge into instinctual indulgence of the most primitive character. At times their behavior is rough and inconsiderate, yet they themselves are extremely touchy. Their moods veer between light-hearted optimism and the blackest pessimism”. |

This is quite a compelling image of adolescence. It is a normal period of symptom formation that would be pathological if it occurred in later life, but for adolescents, psychopathological symptoms are part of the normal expectable routine. No wonder parents dread adolescence!

Interestingly, Anna Freud (1974) argued that if your adolescent did not show emotional upset, if your adolescent did not show various behavioral or psychological symptoms, was not emotionally unstable, was not in turmoil, and was not convulsed with rebellion, loneliness and confusion, and all the rest, that was the problem! This was because, for Anna Freud, and other psychoanalysts, adolescent turmoil is the norm. It is perfectly normal for teenagers to be convulsed with the angst of adolescence. Adolescence is all about turmoil and emotional instability, and if your teen was not in turmoil, seemed perfectly adjusted, seemed happy, contented, and emotionally healthy, this was a sure sign of immaturity, this was as sure sign that your child was refusing to grow up. This was a sure sign that your teen was refusing to put aside childish things and to look through the glass darkly (to paraphrase Saint Paul). Here, then, is the psychoanalytic version of G. Stanley Hall’s “storm-and-stress” view of adolescence.

As it turns out, psychoanalysis was similar to Hall’s theory in another way: It also carves out a role for recapitulation in its account of adolescent turmoil. The psychoanalytic theory of adolescence suggests that the Oedipus complex of the toddler period is revived with the onset of puberty. After its resolution during the toddler period our memory of having wrestled with Oedipal feelings is obscured by the work of defense mechanisms such as repression. Thereafter, during the long years of childhood, our sexual energy (“libido”) enters a latent period. It is kept “out of mind” or is diverted in a way that allows the child to focus on skill-building activities – and for this reason childhood is called “latency” in Freudian theory.

But libido is not repressed for long. The sexual and aggressive instincts come roaring back at adolescence. The hormonal changes that accompany puberty cause a surge in libido that overwhelms the defense mechanisms that shielded us from the oedipal memories of early childhood. As a result oedipal issues, first confronted in the toddler period, must be confronted anew and definitively resolved during this “genital” phase of adolescent psychosexual development. The first oedipal crisis experienced as a toddler is recapitulated as a second crisis experienced as an adolescent.

It is not important to drill-down into many specifics here. The main point is to underscore the fact that psychoanalytic theory asserts a universal basis for adolescence on the necessity of the Oedipus complex in human personality development. Adolescents everywhere experience a similar crisis, no matter the society or culture, no matter the historical era in which they live, just because adolescents are motivated by sexual and aggressive drives that are instinctual and because adolescents must relive and conquer an Oedipus complex that is resuscitated with the onset of puberty.

Of course one does not have to support Hall’s biogenetic theory or endorse Freud’s theory to believe that adolescent turmoil is a universal
feature of growing up. In fact supporters of the universalist thesis typically draw attention to evidence that young people everywhere and throughout recorded history report similar experiences of turmoil and crisis, as these are revealed in diaries, letters and autobiographies (Kiell, 1964). Evidence that adolescence was a long period of dependency, uncertainty, tension and ambiguity, as youth struggled with sex and identity, was recognized in the sermons of eighteenth-century New England clergy (Hiner, 1975). Some historians argue further that inner conflict about sex, conflict with adult values, the experience of transition, and problematic social behavior is a very old phenomenon in the lifecycle of young people (Fox, 1977). And then there is the famous quote of Aristotle, which is cited as proof that something we recognize as adolescence was also evident in the days of ancient Greece (at least among the privileged classes). Read Aristotle’s description of adolescence in Table 1.1, and compare its themes with Anna Freud’s account, in Table 1.0. On this basis it would be hard to deny that the psychological experience of adolescence is a universal feature of the human lifespan.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1.1 Aristotle on “Youth”</th>
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<td>The young are in character prone to desire and ready to carry any desire they may have formed into action. Of bodily desires, it is the sexual to which they are most disposed to give way, and in regard to sexual desire they exercise no self-restraint. They are changeful, too, and fickle in their desires, which are as transitory as they are vehement....They are passionate, irascible, and apt to be carried away by their impulses. They are slaves of their passion, as their ambition prevents their ever brooking a slight and renders them indignant at the mere idea of enduring an injury....Youth is the age when people are most devoted to their friends or relations or companions, as they are a then extremely fond of social intercourse and have not yet learned to judge their friends....If the young commit a fault, it is always on the side of excess and exaggeration; for they carry everything too far, whether it be their love or hatred or anything else....They regard themselves as omniscient and are positive in their assertions....Also, their offenses take the line of insolence....Finally, they are fond of laughter and, consequently, facetiousness, facetiousness being disciplined insolence.”</td>
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Summary: Thus far we have been reviewing the argument that adolescence is a universal experience of the human lifespan. One strand of this argument is that pubertal maturation and physical development set in motion a cascade of psychological reactions, which are mostly of turmoil and stress. G. Stanley Hall argued that the storm-and-stress of adolescence reflects a “biogenetic” law of recapitulation. Teenagers are retracing the steps of a difficult period in human evolutionary history. The psychoanalysts, such as Anna Freud, argued that puberty heralds the return of Oedipal conflicts from the toddler period. So, for Hall, adolescence is a recapitulation of a stage of evolution; for psychoanalysis, adolescence is a recapitulation of a stage of psychosexual development. Both recapitulations result in storm-and-stress for adolescents; both result is a behavioral and psychological signature that we recognize as typically adolescent. And the driving force in either example is the fact that individuals are subject to biogenetic laws (Hall) and to instinctual biological drives (Freud) that force youth into a phase of adolescence.

Status Acquisition

So one support for the universalist thesis of adolescence is the universal reality of physiological processes like instinct, drives and puberty. The second support is the notion of status acquisition. No society, according to this view, fails to recognize the importance of the years between puberty and adulthood (Eisenstadt, 1965). In every society there is some mechanism whereby children come to acquire the trappings of adult status. In preindustrial and traditional societies, the acquisition of adult status might come as a result of a rite-of-passage that might takes weeks or months to complete. In foraging societies, for example, a boy might have to kill his first large game as a rite of passage. In complex modern industrial societies, the process of status acquisition drags on for many years, perhaps a decade or longer. But a phase of adolescence is evident in both examples. Adolescence refers in both cases to the duration of the acquisition process. In the preindustrial case, adolescence lasts weeks and months, or as along as it takes to complete the puberty ritual. In the industrial case, adolescence lasts ten years or more. What both have in common is a period of social apprenticeship that is set-aside for youth to learn what is required of responsible adulthood.
The argument, then, runs like this: status acquisition is universal in human societies: adolescence is a period of status acquisition; adolescence is a universal part of the human lifespan.

Cross-Cultural Evidence Schlegel and Barry (1991) conducted an important study of over 340 pre-industrial, traditional (foraging and horticultural) societies around the world. In their view the key issue for understanding adolescence is how societies cope with the fact that teenagers are biologically capable of reproduction before they are granted full adult social status. Some traditional societies cope by separating the children from the family at puberty (to prevent close-inbreeding); or by redirecting the attention of the biological adolescent to same-sex peer groups that are closely supervised by adults. So puberty looms large as an event that has social significance—it signals that one is ready for sexual reproduction. In fact, the onset of puberty—menstruation in girls and ejaculation of semen—typically signals that the child is ready for the community’s rite-of-passage.

But for Schlegel and Barry (1991) the rite-of-passage does not mark the transition from childhood into adulthood, which is how it is usually understood (Hurlock, but as the transition from childhood into adolescence. The transition to adolescence was marked by a public community-wide ritual in about 70% of societies in their sample (and was somewhat more common for girls than for boys), and these rituals typically revolved around the themes of fertility and productivity (importance of being a good provider or contributor to the community’s way of life). The end of adolescence was typically indicated by marriage. Most boys were married between age 16 and 18, or about 2 to 4 years after first ejaculation. Most girls were married by age 16, or within two years of first menstruation.

Hence, the duration of adolescence is notably short, especially for girls. Between puberty and marriage adolescents in these societies spend most of their time with same-sex adults in productive activities centered on the home; and take a greater part in adult family activities and the affairs of the community. Boys, more so than girls, live a greater part of their daily life with same-sex peers. Interestingly, heterosexual intercourse was either tolerated or accepted (with a limited number of partners) in 65% of 155 societies with information for boys; and 60% of 163 societies with information for girls. In some societies (25 for boys, 17 for girls) homosexual activity was also permitted. Two other findings are of interest. First, in some societies, it is parenthood, and not marriage, that brings full measure of adulthood. Second, in about 20% of the societies in this sample, adolescence was followed not by adulthood but by an intervening stage of “youth” wherein young people were given further opportunity to experiment with roles, occupations and possible marriage partners.

So, for Schlegel and Barry (1991), adolescence is a socio-cultural necessity, although a brief one. It begins biologically, with puberty, but ends socially, with marriage and parenthood. And in the two to four years of its duration, youngsters learn what it means to be a productive member of the household, tribe and community.

Let’s “compare and contrast” the image of adolescence that emerges from Schlegel and Barry’s anthropological study with the image of adolescence in modern Western societies, such as the United States, Canada and the European Union. First, with respect to similarities, the universality of adolescence in both cases is tied fundamentally to the experience of puberty. Second, adolescence is a period of status acquisition, but its duration varies. It is quite brief in traditional societies, lasting just 2-4 years, but quite long in modern societies, lasting perhaps 10 years or more. Third, some of the things that we associate with adolescence, such as sexual experimentation and peer group activity, seem as much in evidence in pre-modern societies as it does in modern ones, as do the more subjective feelings of self-doubt, stress and ambiguity (Schlegel & Barry, 1991).

By way of contrast we can say that adolescence does not seem to end with marriage and other social role transitions in modern societies like it does in pre-modern ones. The problem of what to do about unmated biologically mature boys and girls is solved by gender segregation and early marriage in pre-modern societies; there is no apparent solution to this problem in modern ones. Finally, adolescents in tribal and pre-modern societies spend much of their time doing productive things with adults, and are active in the public affairs of the community. In modern societies the
activities of adolescents and adults are not tightly connected and adolescents are given little to do of any public importance.

Thus far we have been building the case for the universalist view of adolescence—that adolescence is a normal and necessary part of the human lifespan, and is evident, therefore, in every human society and culture; and in history. The inventionist camp disputes this view, and it is now time to see why.

The Inventionist Thesis.

The inventionist camp argues that the status and function of young people has changed so dramatically in recent times that it does make sense to speak of adolescence as a universal phenomenon. John and Virginia Demos (1969) argued, for example, in a famous paper, that adolescence was an American discovery and simply did not exist prior to the latter decades of the 19th-century. Most claims of this camp draw upon historical evidence of how the lives of young people were changed as a result of broad demographic and economic changes in society. There was a time in the colonial period and in the decades leading up the Civil War when teenagers worked alongside adults in virtually every productive area of society (Enright, Lapsley & Olsen, 1985). Youth had an important role to play to insure the survival of families and communities; and the productivity of factories and farms depended upon the work of teenagers (and children). Moreover, as Joseph Kett (1974) has shown, young people were on the move. For those who wanted to pick up and “start a life” there were few institutional barriers to stop them.

However, beginning in the 1880s and 1890s, the status of young people began to change. Increasing urbanization meant that more young people were congregating in cities without much work, but their large number perhaps drew more attention to this phase of the lifespan than in the past. Increasing technological innovation, industrialization and immigration forced unskilled teenagers from the work place or else replaced them with adult immigrant workers. In addition, this period saw the passage of numerous “child-saving” laws in most states — child labor laws that excluded children and teenagers from paid work; and compulsory education laws that compelled their attendance upon the schools, and for increasing number of years (Lapsley, Enright & Serlin, 1985). The pressure to remove young people from the work force, or else prevent them from competing for work by forcing them to attend school was particularly strong during periods of economic depression when unemployment was high (Troen, 1976).

Young people increasingly had no economic function; and they were confined to age-graded schools until well into middle teenage years. Indeed, the way schools are structured into elementary, junior and senior high levels corresponds with the structure of adolescence with its early-, middle- and late-periods. (Elder, 1975). Before when there was considerable age mixture between adults and youth in most contexts of socialization in previous generations, there was now age segregation. Teenagers spent most of their day in the company of other teenagers but rarely with adults, a circumstance that allowed a youth culture to flourish. Whereas before there were very few institutional barriers standing in the way of a young person coming-of-age in previous generations, now entry into the adult role structure of society had to be regulated by laws and certified by diplomas (Kett, 1974; Proefrock, 1981).

And by the early twentieth-century there was a general consensus that this is as it should be. In 1904 G. Stanley Hall published his influential study of adolescence that appeared to justify the increasing restraints placed upon youth. He drew attention to their psychological instability, to the normal storm-and-stress of these years, and of the need to expose adolescents to the civilizing forces of education. In the years that followed young people came to be seen as individuals with special needs requiring their own branch of medicine (pediatrics), their own system of education (the comprehensive high school) their own forms of recreation under adult supervision (youth groups), their own juvenile justice system (Tyack, 1976). The age of adolescence was upon us. The social position of youth is now dramatically different from what it was in previous centuries, and in this sense lays the notion that adolescence is a modern invention of recent vintage (Fasick, 1974).

For the inventionist, then, the most important thing for understanding adolescence is not status acquisition, but rather status
deprivation. At one time in history, young people moved away from the family at an early age; were relatively independent; and had important economic functions in society. But at a later time in history, between 1880 and 1920 by some accounts, broad social forces (urbanization, immigration, industrialization) and child-saving legislation (compulsory education, labor laws) deprived them of this status. As a result teenagers have been turned into adolescents. To be an adolescent is to be dependent, immature, incompetent, and confused. It is to be involved in a role that is not tightly connected to the adult role structure of society. Moreover, the institutions that have been created to preoccupy them, such as the comprehensive high school, has made the transition to adulthood more difficult by increasing the gulf between youth culture and the values and preoccupations of adults (Coleman, 1974).

Katz and Davey (1978), in their study of youth in the Canadian city of Hamilton, concluded that adolescence is a period of institutionalized dependency that came to characterize young people in the 19th-century. Furthermore, they suggested that the behavior that we come to associate with adolescents has little to do with puberty but rather with their reaction to dependency, “in the curious new conflict between biological maturity and cultural childhood that 19th-century society inflicted upon its youth” (p. 117). In other words, a “childish” status is imposed upon biologically mature individuals, and many of the stereotypes that we have of teenagers can be traced to the conflict and confusion that this entails. Modern society forces young people into a state of dependency and for a long time, and refuses to certify their passage to adulthood until certain institutional requirements are met, such as graduating from high school. It further provides a set of constructs (“identity crisis”, “storm and stress”) by which to interpret their experience (Enright, Levy, Harris & Lapsley, 1988); and if adolescence is in fact a difficult time it has little to do with puberty per se; but with the fact that social maturity is withheld from biologically mature individuals.

It is interesting to speculate whether some forms of adolescent behavior can be thought of as rebellion against being treated this way. The high rate of delinquent and antisocial behavior, the fact that 25% to 50% of adolescents drop out of high school, and the proliferation and attraction of youth gangs, makes one wonder if some teenagers just won’t be turned in to “adolescents.” The inventionists say that adolescence is an optional status, not a necessary one, and some segment of the teenage population will not respond well to a long period of “institutionalized dependency.” When official society withholds its certification of adult status, these youth will find their own way to take on the trappings of adulthood, perhaps through alternative sub-cultures and gangs, whose initiation rituals remind one of the rites-of-passage of traditional societies (Bloch & Niederhofer, 1958).

Summary

We examined two sides of an argument concerning the nature of adolescence. One camp suggests that the subjective and psychological experience of adolescence is universal, both cross-culturally and historically. The universalist thesis rests on two supports: (1) the universality of puberty and (2) the universality of status acquisition. The second camp argued that adolescence is a way of coming-of-age that emerged in the latter decades of the 19th-century and early 20th-century. It argues for an historical point of view, one that reveals a systematic pattern of status deprivation that resulted in the long period of dependency that we now associate with adolescence.

Both sides of this debate seem to point to something fundamentally correct about adolescence. Both sides agree that adolescence cannot be understood without reference to a broader socio-cultural context, including generational and historical factors. Adolescence is a social status that is shaped and given meaning by contextual forces (Mortimer & Larson, 2002). Both sides can agree with this. For one camp, the inventionists, these contextual forces actually bring adolescence into existence as a new way for young people to come of age. For another camp, the univeralists, the universal expression of adolescence is given unique expression by each society depending on its level of modernity. Adolescence is universal, this camp argues, but whether it lasts for two years or ten is a matter of socio-cultural context. And this applies not only to broad comparisons between cultures, but to variations within particular societies as well. There is great diversity in the way that adolescence is experienced even among North American youth of different economic classes, ethnic groups and cultural background (Montemayor, Adams & Gullotta, 2000), and many of the
findings that we discuss in this book will be qualified by reference to these demographic categories.

A Conceptual Framework. Our look at the debate between universalist and inventionist perspectives on adolescence has brought us to one important theme: Adolescence cannot be understood without reference to the context in which it takes place. We will sharpen this claim by taking up the second problem on our plate, which is how to understand development. As we will see, contextual themes will also be evident when we wrestle with the meaning of development.

And a Loose End. But there is one loose end that we must tie up before we move on to consider conceptions of development. Just what is the truth about adolescent storm-and-stress? We noted that G. Stanley Hall and the psychoanalysts have led us to believe that turmoil is the norm and that adolescence is a special challenge for adolescents and their parents and teachers. Let’s close our examination of conceptions of adolescence by getting a better handle on this issue.

Storm and Stress Revisited

G. Stanley Hall’s biogenetic theory of adolescence is not supported by developmental scientists, nor is Freudian psychoanalysis an attractive theoretical option for most contemporary researchers. Still, the biogenetic and psychoanalytic idea that adolescence is a normal period of storm-and-stress is deeply ingrained in our popular conception of adolescence. Many parents and teachers expect adolescents to take risks, to challenge authority, to be anxious and depressed, insecure, moody and difficult to manage (Buchanan & Holmbeck, 1998; Buchanan, Eccles, Flanagan, Midgley, Feldlaufer & Harold, 1999). The belief in adolescent storm-and-stress is also prevalent among university students, especially if their own adolescence was thought to be troubled (Holmbeck & Hill, 1988).

Some argue that notions of turmoil and distress are so common and deeply-felt because for many decades commentators were either influenced unduly by the dark psychoanalytic vision of adolescence (Adelson, 1985) or because they drew inappropriate conclusions about all adolescents from the small number of troubled clients they saw in their clinical practice (Oldham, 1978). And some would argue that this preoccupation with the dark side of adolescence has not abated entirely, as is evidenced by the negative topics (e.g., risk-taking, psychopathology) addressed by scientists in published research (Ayman-Nolley & Taira, 2000; Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

Still there is now a consensus that normal adolescent development has little in common with these exaggerated fears of storm-and-stress, at least for most youngsters (Petersen, 1988, 1993; Reuter, 1937). Most adolescents handle this period without evidence of serious conflict with parents, identity crisis, rejection of adult values or trouble in close relationships (D’Angelo & Omar, 2003; Dornbusch, Petersen & Hetherington, 1991). Most adolescents do not experience turmoil (Offer, 1987; Offer, Ostrov & Howard, 1984). Perhaps as many as 80% of teenagers show normal functioning in the way they negotiate the adolescent transition (Offer, Ostrov, Howard & Atkinson, 1990; Offer & Schonert-Reichl, 1992). Most adolescents get along with parents and other adults, are positive about their family, enjoy good relationships with peers; cope adequately with conflict and with emotions such as anxiety, depression, anger and guilt (Offer & Offer, 1974). Indeed, adolescence is a time of many positive changes in the direction of increasing competence along many fronts, including self-esteem, intellectual functioning, self-regulation, interpersonal relationships and autonomy (Crockett & Petersen, 1993; King, 1972). Moreover these patterns are found in at least nine other countries (Offer, Ostrov, Howard & Atkinson, 1988).

So storm-and-stress is neither inevitable nor common, and most developmental scientists reject the notion out of hand as a myth or stereotype. That said, it is also true that the transition from childhood to adolescence is associated with an increase of problem behaviors and other worrisome trends. For example, the incidence of depression increases fourfold during adolescence over childhood rates, especially for girls (Graber, 2004). In a famous survey of 14-15 year olds on the Isle of Wight, Sir Michael Rutter and his colleagues found that feelings of misery, inner turmoil and self-deprecation were quite common (Rutter, Graham, Chadwick & Yule, 1976). Adolescents do show wide and quick mood swings (Larson, Csikszentmihalyi & Graef, 1980) and more negative affect
to life events (Larson & Ham, 1993; Moneta, Schneider & Csikszentmihalyi, 2001). More conflict in the family is reported during adolescence than during childhood (Collins & Laursen, 2004; Laursen & Collins, 1994). The incidence of delinquent and risk behavior is so common during adolescence that some scientists think it is normative (Moffitt, 1993). The school drop-out rate in many communities is shocking. And no one can take satisfaction from the fact that 1 in 5 adolescents show significant impairment in their adjustment.

On this basis Arnett (1999) has argued that it is premature to give up entirely on the notion of adolescent storm-and-stress. It is not a myth, in his view, for a significant number of adolescents and their families. A modified view would acknowledge individual differences in the ability to cope with challenges; that alongside emerging competencies there are vulnerabilities; and that the positive and negative aspects of the second decade of life must be considered in equal measure.

Arnett’s (1999) point is a reasonable one. When compared against childhood there is more conflict with parents during adolescence, more extreme fluctuation in moods, and more risk behavior. On this basis it seems appropriate to invoke the language of modified storm-and-stress to characterize adolescence. But what if we compare adolescent adjustment not with children but with adults? Here we might get a different take on the problem. For example, the median age of onset of depression is not adolescence but the early twenties. The incidence of depression is also much higher in adulthood than in adolescence. The same can be said for suicidal behavior. The rates of suicide are dramatically higher in adulthood, particularly late adulthood, than in adolescence.

There is also evidence of significant continuity of emotional and behavioral problems that are evident in children’s lives long before they reach adolescence (Weiner, 1985). In one study, for example, many of the predictors of adolescent psychopathology were already evident by 9 years of age, with some predictors going well back to infancy (Reinherz et al., 1993). Similarly, adolescents who are chronic offenders have a long history of poor adjustment (Moffit, 1993).

These examples suggest two things. First, that for many significant problems, the period of greatest concern is *not* adolescence but adulthood; and second, many problems that are seen in teenagers did not arise because of adolescence, per se, but can be traced to causes in the child’s developmental history. In this case they brought their storm-and-stress to adolescence rather than having it emerge there (Strober, 1986).

Finally, Weiner (1992) points out that the distribution of adjustment among teenagers and adults is broadly comparable. For example, about 20% of teenagers show significant problems that should be brought to the attention of mental health professionals; about 60% show occasional upset and turmoil, but not sufficient to disrupt daily life; and 20% show little evidence of stress or turmoil. But this distribution also characterizes the incidence of mental health in adulthood. About 20% of adults, too, should seek professional help; another 60% will show occasional stress and turmoil which does not otherwise disrupt daily life; and 20% will show few signs of being perturbed by life.

What this suggests is that the prevalence of mental health, and of mental health problems, is virtually identical in both teen and adult populations. This means that psychological disturbance is not uniquely characteristic of adolescence, and that adolescents are no more likely to become psychologically disturbed than are adults. Or, to put it more positively: *adolescents are just as disposed to mental health as are adults.* In this case perhaps the language of storm-and-stress might just as well apply to adults as it does to adolescents.

This might seem like a lot of fussing over the expression “storm-and-stress” but it is important to have a clear idea of what the term can reasonably stand for. To use the term in the modified sense urged by Arnett (1999) is perfectly reasonable when the point is to draw attention to the kids that will not find it easy to manage the developmental challenges of adolescence. The usual expectable routine long enjoyed during childhood will be altered with adolescence, and teenagers and families will have to find a way to accommodate each other. This can take some getting used to; it will be occasionally stressful, and one can expect some emotional and behavioral storms along the way.
But these have to be distinguished from serious problems that are
not at all part of normal adolescent development. The real danger with a
mythic view of storm and stress is that it leads parents and teachers to
believe that the real symptoms that are observed in their children and pupils
are just the normal manifestations of a passing phase. It’s not a passing
phase. Many kids who need professional help will fall through the cracks
because problem behaviors were not seen for what they are, as diagnosable
symptoms that require intervention rather than the normal storms-and-
stresses thought typical of adolescent development.

Of course there is much more to say about risk behavior and
adjustment, and we have perhaps said enough about conceptions of
adolescence to whet the reader’s appetite for what comes later in the
textbook. We take up the problems of risk behavior and mental health in
Chapter 12. The resilient and positive dimensions of adolescent
development are considered in Chapter 13, and we examine community-
and school-based prevention and intervention programs in Chapter 14. We
are now ready to take up the second major task of this chapter, which is
how to understand development.