

ED 030 137

CG 003 107

By-Adelson, Joseph

Adolescent Perspectives on Law and Government.

American Psychological Association, Washington, D.C.

Pub Date 68

Note-11p.; Paper presented at the annual meetings of the American Psychological Association, San Francisco, California, August 30--September 3, 1968.

EDRS Price MF-\$0.25 HC-\$0.65

Descriptors-*Adolescents, *Cognitive Development, *Cultural Differences, Government (Administrative Body), Laws, *Political Attitudes

English, German, and American youth from pubescence to late adolescence were interviewed in order to discern the maturation of political perspectives. By comparing youngsters in three countries with different political traditions, the differential impact of social ideas was examined. At each age level subjects were matched for sex and I.Q. and, the national samples were matched for age, sex, and I.Q. Cognitive maturation was found to be involved in the developmental changes observed. For adolescents from all three countries the following was found: (1) a shift from concrete to abstract modes of discourse, and from concrete to formal operations (Piaget) in analyzing political problems, (2) a decline in authoritarianism and a growth in democratic and humanistic views of social and political issues, (3) a shift from a punitive to a rehabilitative emphasis in dealing with crime, (4) an increased understanding of the needs of the total community as against the single individual, and (5) in general, a change from absolutistic to relativistic and pragmatic ways of formulating political issues. The patterns of political thought unique to each of the national samples are presented. (PS)

Adolescent Perspectives on Law and Government*

Joseph Adelson

University of Michigan

The research we will report today has had as its aim to study the acquisition of political philosophy during the adolescent years. We have always known, in a rough and general way, that adolescence is marked by a rapid growth in the comprehension of political ideas. At the threshold of adolescence, at 11 or 12, the youngster has only a dim, diffuse and incomplete notion of the political order; by the time he has reached 18, he will, more often than not, be a fully formed political creature, possessing a stable and coherent understanding of political structures and functions, and in many cases, committed to a philosophy of government. How does this transition take place? In particular, how do learning and cognitive maturation interact to produce these sweeping changes? As a first approach to these questions we undertook a developmental and cross-national study of adolescents. Youngsters of 11, 13, 15 and 18 were interviewed in three countries--the United States, England, and Germany. By interviewing youngsters from pubescence to late adolescence we hoped to discern the maturation of political perspectives; by comparing youngsters in three countries with rather different political traditions we hoped to get some sense of the differential impact of social ideas.

For our interview schedule we wanted a format which would not prove to be too difficult for younger subjects, and at the same time not tediously simple-minded for older adolescents. Our pretesting taught us that we should avoid questions tied to current political issues, for these tended to elicit

*Read at the 1968 meetings of the American Psychological Association.

ready-made opinion--that is, slogans, clichés, and catch-phrases. We devised an interview schedule which began with this premise: imagine that a thousand people leave their country, move to a Pacific island to establish a new community. Once there, they are confronted with the task of developing rules and regulations for governing themselves. The items were open-ended and to some degree projective: We asked simple open-ended questions, such as, "What is the purpose of government?" or "What is the purpose of law?". We also asked dilemma questions--for example, "What should be done about a religious sect which refused to undergo vaccination?" or "Should people without children pay public school taxes?" We also made extensive use of linked sequences of questions, which allowed us to explore a political issue as it unfolded. For example, we said that some concern was expressed about cigarette smoking, and asked the child to comment on a number of proposed solutions, such as forbidding it, raising taxes, prohibiting advertising, and so on. We then said that a prohibition law had been passed, but was being commonly violated. What should be done then? This format allowed us to survey a wide array of topics, many of them traditional issues in political philosophy: the scope and limits of governmental authority, the reciprocal obligations between citizen and community; conceptions of law, freedom, crime, political partisanship, political influence, utopias, and so on.

In selecting the sample, we were primarily concerned about assuring comparability among ages and among countries. At each age level, Ss were matched for sex and IQ; the national samples are matched for age, sex and IQ. At each age level in each country, we had 30 Ss, equally divided as to sex, 2/3 of whom were of average, and 1/3 above average intelligence. We did not match for

social class, hoping that the IQ matching would produce essential comparability. As it turned out, the American and German samples show roughly equivalent class distributions--the Americans somewhat higher, but the English sample has a higher proportion of working and lower-middle-class subjects. However, our analyses make it quite clear that national differences are not a function of class differences. As a matter of fact, and very much to our surprise, neither sex, nor IQ, nor social class is of much importance in determining the growth of political ideas. To anticipate our findings, what does matter, primarily, is age, and secondarily, nation.

Perhaps our most striking finding is the sharp decline in authoritarian conceptions of government and law over the course of adolescence. It is a tendency which is equally visible in the three national samples, though with some variations, as we will see. The purpose of government, for younger adolescents, those 13 and under, is felt to be the enforcement of law, and in its turn, the aim of law is to curb wickedness. Whether the topic be law, government, or justice, the young adolescent's attitude is essentially the same: the citizen's duty is to obey authority, and the failure to do so merits punishment. The social contract, so to speak, is unilateral; the citizen is viewed as owing obligations to the state, but not as possessing rights.

Although this often tacit way of formulating the relations of citizen and state is everywhere discernible through the interviews of the younger subjects, it is perhaps most clearly seen in the understanding of the law. Asked the purpose of law, about 70% of those 13 and under mention restrictive or coercive functions exclusively; at 15, the percentage across all countries has dropped to 44%, and at 18, to 20%. An exclusively beneficial view of law, one which

stresses its contribution to the common good, is found in only 8% of those 13 and under, and rises to 20% and 41% at 15 and 18. For example, a characteristic response of an 11 or 13 year old, asked the purpose of law, would be: "To keep guys from breaking windows and stealing and stuff," or, "To stop people from committing murder." At 15 and 18, more typical answers would be: "To help keep us safe and free," or even more sophisticated, "I think they are a statement of customs and the ideals that people have about how they should live at certain times."

When we inquire more deeply into the younger adolescent's view of law, by questioning him about specific laws we find that he rarely imagines, on his own, that a law might be absurd, mistaken, or unfair. He assumes authority to be both omniscient and fundamentally benign; hence law is enacted only for good and proper reasons. The younger child does not possess a functional view of law; he does not, for example, suggest that a law which is inadequate or ineffective might be revised; he does not see law as mutable, as susceptible to amendment. Laws emerge from the empyrean; once there they must be submitted to.

Later in adolescence--the watershed mark is usually, though not always, between 13 and 15--a radically different view of law is evident. It is now understood that law, is a human product, and that men are fallible; hence, law is to be treated in the same skeptical spirit we treat other human artifacts; Law is no longer seen as absolute, or as external to the citizen. It is an experiment, a rehearsal. We try out the law and consult the common experience. If that tells us that the law enhances the general welfare, then it is retained, otherwise it can be abandoned or revised.

With the passage of time, we find, in short, that a critical, pragmatic, relativistic view of law emerges and becomes dominant. In confronting a proposal for a new law, the older adolescent subjects it to several sorts of scrutiny. What are its latent effects? Whose interests are served, whose are damaged? What are the long-range as against the short-term effects of a law? Can the law be enforced, and are the costs of enforcement worth the good gained by the law? Finally, does the law, whatever its superficial appeal, violate some more general principle of political belief? This is not to say that all or even most of our subjects analyze so relentlessly most of the time but these questions are tacitly being considered as the older adolescent considers the law proposed to him, while the younger one does not or cannot. Consider, as an example, the responses to a proposal that the island community draft a law prohibiting cigarette smoking. Our younger Ss were somewhat more likely to favor the idea; when asked, later on, what they would suggest if the law were widely violated, they tended to propose an Orwellian apparatus of spies, informers, secret police, and so on. Older Ss are more likely to question the feasibility of the proposal in the first place, pointing out that the law is not easily enforced, or that to enforce it would require costs far beyond the good achieved by it, that an unenforced law produces contempt for legal institutions, and that in any case the law violates the ideal of personal freedom.

Let us turn now to the conception of government. The trend towards decreased authoritarianism so visible in the child's formulation of law is also evident here. An exclusively restrictive view of government--that is, one which sees government only in its negative, constraining aspects--falls steadily from 27% at age 11 to only 1% at age 18.

What is of greater moment is that the idea of government itself is an achievement only slowly won. The concept of government, or indeed of any collectivity, is too abstract for our younger subjects to manage. They recognize only dimly, if at all, the existence of a social order. Hence such terms as "society," "government," and "community" are essentially empty of meaning for them. What they can imagine are personal transactions; thus, education is not an abstract process, but is reduced to the interaction between teacher and student; law is what takes place between the police and criminal; and government is a mysterious territory occupied by mayors, Presidents, and an omnipresent though obscure "them". In short, the abstract, ephemeral, intangible processes of the political domain are concretized and personalized by these adolescents below 13.

This cognitive limitation--the incapacity to imagine the social order, its structure, its functions--dominates, by its absence, the political discourse of the child younger than 15. It means that the youngster, in making political judgments, does not take into account the wider and more general social necessities. Let us offer several examples. In the area of health legislation, we asked about the purpose of a proposed law requiring vaccination and immunization. Younger Ss reply that it is to protect the health of the child; older Ss feel that its aim is to protect the health of the total community. In the area of education, we asked the purpose of a law requiring children to stay in school until they were 16. Younger adolescents answer in terms of the child's needs; it is to protect his future in life. Older adolescents may also mention this, but they will also say that society needs an educated citizenry if it is to function adequately, or that it needs a supply of

educated leaders for the future. In responding to a question on whether adults without children should pay school taxes, our older Ss point out that the society as a whole profits from public education. And we have already seen, in our discussion of law, that adolescents past 15 are able to relate law to the larger purposes of society.

It will not have escaped your attention, I am sure, that cognitive maturation seems to be deeply involved in the developmental changes we have considered. This is quite obvious in regard to the conception of government, where a failure to achieve abstractness appears to underlie the failure to adopt a sociocentric stance on political discussions. But it is also involved in the decline of authoritarianism. The child's authoritarianism seems to be based upon cognitive simplicity, as well as upon limitations in social experience. The authoritarian doctrine is simpler conceptually and thus easier to manage cognitively. That there is a marked cognitive shift in the level of abstraction with increasing age may be discerned from these results: a coding of level of abstraction--from concrete to low level to high level abstraction--reveals that in response to a question on the function of government, 57% of 11 year olds are concrete, while none are highly abstract; at 18, none in the entire sample are concrete, and 71% are abstract.

The importance of cognitive maturation is given added weight by the fact that, by and large, developmental changes are essentially similar in all three countries. For American, British, and German adolescents, then, we find the following: a shift from concrete to abstract modes of discourse, and, in Piaget's terms, from concrete to formal operations in analyzing political problems; a decline in authoritarianism and a growth in democratic and humanistic

views of social and political issues; a shift from a punitive to a rehabilitative emphasis in dealing with crime; an increased understanding of the needs of the total community as against the single individual; and in general, a change from absolutistic to relativistic and pragmatic ways of formulating political issues. We have constructed indices for many of these variables, and find almost uniformly, from analysis of variance estimates, that most of the variance is accounted for by age.

Nevertheless, there are important national differences present, which the dominance of the age factor does not obscure. Because our findings here are both numerous and complex, we will be unable to document them fully. What we want to do is offer a discursive summary of the patterns of political thought unique to each of the national samples. Bear in mind that these samples cannot be taken as representative of the nations from which they are drawn; and yet we feel that the patterns discerned in these interviews reflect some common though not necessarily universal tendencies in the three countries.

Let us begin with the German sample. They are the easiest to understand, perhaps because German habits of political thought have already been the subject of so much analysis and commentary. Relative to the other countries, our German youngsters prefer having the government strong, and see the citizen's duty as obeying the authority of the state. There is relatively less emphasis on the rights and privileges of the citizen. The preferred asymmetry of power between rulers and ruled appears to rest upon a view of the citizen as weak, dependent, and inept; authority is idealized because it is competent and strong, and thus can protect the helpless and insecure citizen. The emphasis upon the confusion of the people is a constant refrain in the German interviews. Some

excerpts may illustrate this: On the purpose of government, "People must all be guided somehow...they can't otherwise make sense out of what happens to them." On why laws are needed, "...so that all the people can live in such a way that they don't have to think about what's going to happen to them very much." On why a law forbidding smoking is a good idea, "Otherwise people could have to decide for themselves if it's good or bad for their health or not." Related to this is a fear of diversity, for diversity breeds chaos and disunity. Our German subjects stress the need for a homogeneity of opinion. One S argues that laws must be uniform. "Everyone must have the same opinion." Another says that if people followed their consciences in regard to law "a lot of different opinions would arise." The result would be anarchy, and anarchy seems to be seen not as people running around berserk and following their lusts, as an American imagines it, but rather people wandering about lost, confused, unguided. The solution to this is a strong, united state, centered upon a few wise leaders.

Turning to the English, we find them to be the most surprising and the most difficult to understand of the three national groups. This is so, perhaps, because one can find traces of three political traditions in their interviews; the English are in part Hobbesian, in part 19th century liberals, à la John Stuart Mill, in part children of the welfare state. They are Hobbesian in that they take a guarded view of human nature; men are greedy, selfish, willful; it is the war of all against all. Above all greedy; the English sample comes through as intensely oral, obsessed about supplies, deprivation, self-indulgence, theft, and envy. They score highest of the three groups on an index measuring concern with impulse control. And because they see men as prepared to steal

what is not rightfully theirs, they are prepared to see government take a strong hand in regulating public conduct. This they are in some respects as authoritarian as the Germans are. But there is a vital difference, in that the English do not idealize authority--far from it; they are suspicious and resentful of those who would rule them. Government is a necessary evil; hence the English seek to limit the scope of government. They make much of the distinction between the private and the public. Government must not interfere with the private domain, especially the pursuit of pleasure; yet it must be strong enough to regulate the competition of private interests in the public domain. At the same time, the English are attuned to a welfare concept of government, and see it as the obligation of the state to distribute benefits equitably, and assure minimal standards of subsistence. Government, then, emerges as a kind of stern Headmaster, setting down rules which limit the invasion of one's terrain; at the same time it is a kind of Nanny who distributes supplies equally.

Finally, the Americans. They are, by a considerable margin, the least authoritarian of the national samples. We thought at first that this might be due to the fact that the American sample has a somewhat larger number of upper-middle class subjects, but closer analysis suggests otherwise: Americans of working-class origin score lower on authoritarianism than upper-middle-class German or British subjects. The democratic emphasis in the American interviews stems from a benign view of both the citizen and the government. It is assumed that the citizen ought to be and in fact will be responsive to the needs of the total community, and will accommodate his interests to the general good; on its side, the government is seen as the executive of the

general will. Thus, there is little felt distance between the citizen and collective authority. The American political philosophy, as it is revealed in these interviews, bears the stamp of John Locke's thought--an emphasis on consensus, on social harmony, on the rights of the governed. But this optimistic view of the political process does not altogether conceal certain tensions and dilemmas. One of these has to do with the restraint of individualism. Our American subjects value such individualistic ideals as autonomy, initiative, and achievement. They fear a strong central authority because it may inhibit the free exercise of these qualities. It is understood, as part of an implicit social contract, that the individual will not abuse these freedoms to infringe upon the rights of others, that he will exercise self-restraint. But there is no guarantee of this, and Americans seem preoccupied with finding some balance between allowing sufficient freedom for achievement, and yet finding means of controlling rampant individualism. A second problem arises from the emphasis on consensus and social harmony. As many political commentators have noted, this can give way to a somewhat insipid politics of togetherness, one which stresses being a good fellow, not rocking the boat, going along with the majority.