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ABSTRACT

Adolescents at three grade levels (7th & 8th, 9th & 10th, and 11th & 12th) filled out open-ended questionnaires on their personal view of adolescence. Examination of the responses indicated large differences in how adolescence is defined as a function of grade level. Differences were also found in attitudes toward death, life goals, maturing and social behavior related to grade in school.
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Adolescents on adolescence: a survey of important issues for adolescents¹

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Many studies of adolescence represent attempts of researchers to retrospectively make sense of the confusing period encompassing the ages from 11 to 21. Studies which have examined attitudes of adolescents (e.g. Brittain, 1963) often demonstrate which of a number of specific response options the subject is most likely to select. This paper is a report on a preliminary study in a line of research attempting to examine information and insights about the condition of adolescence generated by the members of that population group themselves. This study, to be followed by a larger scale, more elaborate one, asked subjects to respond in essay format to a number of open-ended questions regarding the developmental period commonly called adolescence. A sample of junior and senior high school students, divided roughly into three groups by age (an early, middle, and late group) wrote essays in response to six open-ended questions about adolescence. Essays were examined by two independent raters who noted the most frequently occurring items in each response. Comparisons were then made between the frequency of various of the major categories represented in the three age groups. These response categories are, in effect, the concepts and issues used by adolescents to describe their own life situation. They speak to the major concerns, expectations, fears and attitudes in their lives now, those areas which most likely should be addressed by scientists or practitioners attempting to understand and treat people in the transition phase between childhood and adulthood in our culture. The sample generating responses was small and the generalizability limited, but many subjects eloquently expressed the process of their lives.

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Method

Subjects

Subjects were 123 students in grades eight through twelve in three schools in the Tidewater area of Virginia. The area is an urban/suburban community composed of a cross-section of socio-economic classes, ethnicities and occupations. The area also includes a number of military personnel stationed at nearby installations. The sample included 40 students in seventh and eighth grade (ages 13&14), 33 students in ninth and tenth grade (ages 15 & 16), and 50 students in the eleventh and twelfth grade (ages 16 - 18).

Procedure

A six question open-ended questionnaire was administered by regular teachers in English and Social Studies classes in the participating schools. Students were asked to fill out the instrument, answering the questions in essay form, either in class or at home. Following completion, they were returned to the administering teacher. The anonymity of the respondents was clearly stressed and participation was optional. Completed questionnaires were returned to the experimenter by mail.

Instrument

The questionnaire was comprised of a cover sheet reading "Adolescence Questionnaire" and space to fill in age, sex, and grade of the respondent. The following six pages, each contained one question each page leaving room for an essay length response. The six questions asked were as follows:

- 1) What is adolescence?

- 2) If you had to explain to an adult about what it is like to be an adolescent in the 1970's, what would you say?
- 3) If you could control anything in your life which you currently do not, what would it be?
- 4) Of all the things that have happened to you over the past few years (during your adolescence), what has been the most important to you?
- 5) Looking ahead to the future, what is the one thing you fear the most?
- 6) Are there any questions you would suggest be included in the questionnaire?

Measures

Each response was read by two independent raters and categories of response were devised (e.g. enjoyable, developing maturity). The task was such that inter-rater agreement was almost complete. The responses were then separated by grade into three categories (7-8, 9-10, 11-12) and the most frequently occurring responses for each age group were noted. Categories within responses receiving less than three references in each age group were omitted from the final comparisons.

Results

Analysis of the data was complicated by the fact that each response category was not necessarily independent of another. In other words, a person could give a response which was scored in three categories while another subject scored in only one category. The most straightforward analysis seemed to be merely expressing the percentage of the total responses to that question (by age group) which included reference to a category. The data is therefore expressed in terms of the percentage of subjects including that category in their response. (e.g. 31 percent means that 31 percent of subjects responding included this category in their answer to the question posed.)

4.

The analysis of the responses to Question #1 are presented in Table 1. The left-hand column shows the five most frequently occurring responses and the percentage that response was given at each grade level. No adequate test for significant difference was found to help interpret the results. In terms of content, it is apparent that there are some large differences in the important components of a definition of adolescence depending upon grade level. The definition for younger adolescents include at least three aspects whereas for middle and older adolescents, the development of maturity is the principle characteristic used to define adolescence.

Insert Table 1 about here

Question #2 is analysed in Table 2. Younger adolescents, according to this table; view their adolescence as a primarily enjoyable experience while middle and older adolescents most frequently used the adjective "difficult" to describe their experience. In addition these two groups expressed an increasing concern for independence and older group members stressed the "differentness" of being adolescent. It is also interesting to note that "alienation" was not mentioned by younger adolescents but seemed of some importance to those in the middle group. They also showed a much greater awareness of the social pressure aspect in their descriptions.

Insert Table 2 about here

5.

The responses to the third question concerning those aspects of their lives over which they would like to exert control are presented in Table 3. Younger adolescents showed a tendency to desire control over themselves and others while the older two groups again expressed the theme of desire for independence. The older adolescents also expressed a desire to gain control over life in general.

Insert Table 3 about here

Table 4 presents the data concerning the perception of the most important events occurring during the adolescent years. There appears to be a decreasing frequency of responses related to activity and relationships with the opposite sex with increasing grade level and age.

Insert Table 4 about here

Finally, Table 5 is an analysis of the data related to the expression of fears about the future. Death, a major concern for the younger adolescents, is referred to less with increasing age in the sample while job and financial concerns are most important to the oldest group. As before, there also appears to be here an increasing concern for independence with increasing age.

Insert Table 5 about here

6.

Question #6 was designed to determine if there were areas of substantial concern not tapped by the other questions. There seemed to be two important themes which emerged from this data. First, there was a desire to express opinions about school and relationships with teachers. Second was a theme which reflected concerns about whom one had as close friends and as life models. The revised form of the questionnaire includes a question about whom the person feels most comfortable confiding in and whom they would choose most to be like. The data from this question in the present study was not consistent enough even to present in a table. Many subject did not even respond to this final question.

Discussion

The results of this study are equivocal at best. They really represent the first attempt to explore current issues for modern adolescents. They provide little more than direction for future research. This direction does, however, issue from the spontaneous responses of adolescents themselves, not from the theories of scientists. It may be up to the researchers and the clinicians to follow up in the areas they feel to be most important, but the first blow has been struck by those to be studied.

Using the material and direction from this study, a study including a state-wide sample of 2500 adolescents is being planned. The data from that future study should provide more substantial evidence as to the concerns of this generation of adolescents. The size of the future sample will also allow for the examination of variables such as SES, race, urban/rural environment in addition to grade level. It is hoped that the state-wide study will in turn

breed a national study.

REFERENCE

Brittain, C. V., Adolescent choices and parent-peer cross-pressures.

American Sociological Review, 1963, 28, 385-91

FOOTNOTE

1. The author wishes to acknowledge Mr. Homer Allen and Ms. Jean Bunnell for their assistance in gathering and analysing this material.

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Table 1

Definition of Adolescence (Question 1) by Grade Level

Definition	Percentage of Grade Level		
	7-8 (n=35)	9-10 (n=33)	11-12 (n=50)
Specific age	31	21	28
Specific stages	29	15	2
Developing maturity	29	48	74
What I am	29	9	
Responsibility	17	24	26

Table 2

Description of the Adolescent Experience (Question 2) by Grade Level

Description	Percentage of Grade Level		
	7-8 (n=36)	9-10 (n=32)	11-12 (n=49)
Enjoyable	44	22	20
Difficult	36	53	59
Different	25	28	39
Parental pressure	14	16	12
Independence	11	22	29
Social pressure	8	34	12
Alienation		22	12

Table 3

Desire for Control over Specific Aspects of Life
(Question 3) by Grade Level

Aspects	Percentage of Grade Level		
	7-8 (n=34)	9-10 (n=32)	11-12 (n=49)
Others (actions, feelings, opinions)	32	13	16
Self	29	16	18
Humanitarian factors	26	6	8
Other individuals	24	6	8
Physicality	15	6	8
Material aspects	6		12
Independence		38	27
Life in general	6	13	27

Table 4

Most Important Events During the Adolescent Years

(Question 4) by Grade Level

Percentage of Grade Level

Events	7-8 (n=35)	9-10 (n=32)	11-12 (n=49)
Activities	49	38	33
School/Work	29	16	20
Personal	29	19	18
Opposite sex	29	22	12
Parental relationships (positive)	17	16	14
Maturity	14	28	22
General friendships	2	25	14
Peer relationships		6	16

Table 5
 Expression of Future Fears (Question 5)
 by Grade Level

Fears	Percentage of Grade Level		
	7-8 (n=38)	9-10 (n=32)	11-12 (n=48)
Death	39	19	15
Job or financial concerns	21	19	31
Separation	13	16	8
Marriage and/or family	13	19	6
Ill-fate	8	22	17
Aging	5	19	6
Independence	11	19	25
Loneliness		16	10

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