

The Concept of “Youth” - Fact or Fiction?¹

Several years ago, I was involved in research about the needs of young people in small rural and remote communities throughout Australia. As part of the study, I talked with Aboriginal communities in the East Kimberley, W.A.²

Some community members did not know what I meant when I said I wanted to talk about *youth*. They simply didn't see young people as a separate group within the community, so they found it difficult to talk about them in isolation from other community members. I tried to explain what I meant by describing *youth* as in between being *children* and *adults*. This was not helpful - they saw people as *children* before they went through *business* (initiation) and *adults* after that. I tried describing *youth* as just before children became *independent*. This was not helpful either. The thought of people being able to exist on their own did not make sense to them. Everyone was seen as an interdependent part of a whole community, no matter what age they were.

It was only when I used a Western explanation - people of high school age - that the concept of *youth* made some sense to the people I was talking with.

This experience made me question my beliefs. I thought everyone went through a stage called *youth*. This paper examines this assumption, and looks at the origins of the concept of *youth* and how it has developed over time.

Definitions Used in this Paper

Belief = an assumption. Something we have always thought was true, but have not examined in detail.

Fact = all the available evidence supports this statement. As soon as any information is available that challenges this, it can no longer be called a fact.

Theory = a way of organising ideas to try to explain something. Sometimes theories are presented as though they are facts. This does not make them true.

¹ © Copyright Suzi Quixley 2009. Based on an external unit entitled *Understanding Young People*. This unit was targeted at Aboriginal students in rural/remote communities, and was written for Advanced Certificate in Community Services (Youth Work). The original version is © Copyright Aboriginal Study Centre Program 1993, DETAFE, Pt Augusta, SA. Apologies for the age of the references in this article - the next version will update these!

² The result was: Quixley, Suzi (1992) **Living, Learning and Working: The Experiences of Young People in Small Rural and Remote Communities in Australia**, National Youth Coalition for Housing, Canberra.

Impact of Beliefs on Youth Work

Youth Work is based on the belief that there is a separate stage that everyone goes through, called *youth* or *adolescence*. Most of us have grown up believing that this is a *fact*. The truth is that the concept of *youth* is a very recent, Western idea.

Between about age 10 and 20 years, people go through bodily changes. *Puberty* is a biological **fact**. It occurs in every known culture.

Most psychologists believe in the **theory** that these biological changes are *naturally* accompanied by other changes (eg. emotional, spiritual, behavioural). Most sociologists and anthropologists believe in the **theory** that the idea of a separate developmental stage in people's teenage years is driven by the environment in which they live - their society and culture.

Clearly, our beliefs in this area directly impact on every aspect of youth work practice. They are particularly pertinent when working with young people from non-Western cultures.

Examining Your Assumptions

Before reading this article, you might find it useful to do a couple of exercises to identify your existing beliefs:

1. A word association exercise: List 10 words you associate with each of the following - *child*, *youth*, *adolescent* and *adult*.
2. Identifying your assumptions: Write 6 current beliefs you hold about both *youth* and *adolescence*. (These may be similar or different.)

If you see young people as more like *children*, you are likely to have very different behavioural expectations than if you see them as more like *adults*.

The words *youth* and *adolescent* have emerged from different bodies of thinking. Do you think of them as similar? Do you use them in different contexts? When talking with different people? How would you define *youth* and *adolescence*?

History of *Youth* and *Adolescence* in Western Culture

Philippe Aries, in a landmark book on changing concepts of childhood, talked about young people's social role during the 17th Century. At that time, young people could join the army at age 11. There were army lieutenants who were 14 years old. At one time, every soldier in the French army was under 18 years old³. Similarly:

- Joan or Arc was burnt at the stake at the age of 19.

³ Aries, Philippe (1962) **Centuries of Childhood**, Penguin Books, London, page 318.

- Thomas Chatterton wrote all his poetry before he suicided at the age of 17.
- Martin Luther was a full professor at the age of 24.⁴

These days, most people in Western societies consider anyone under 18, or 21, or 25 still not a full *adult*. Yet, in the past, people clearly fulfilled *adult* roles at a much younger age than they do now.

The Concept of *Childhood* - Middle Ages to the 1800's⁵

In the Middle Ages (1000-1400), age was not considered very important. A person's age was just a fact of life, like their height or weight. People were considered *infants* until age 5 to 7; they were then *adults*. Families had little privacy and everyone lived crowded together, resulting in constant contact between people of different ages. There was also ongoing contact between people of different classes (eg. masters and servants). This resulted in many people, from different families, living **interdependently**. The main function of *family* was to pass on name and property.

In the 1500's and 1600's, this began to change. The concept of the family as a separate, small group began. Initially, this change was restricted to the upper classes - where people had sufficient resources to purchase private space, and live as more discrete family units. A few people began to think that children shouldn't mix with adults. However, most people continued to believe that children should not be treated differently to adults.

By the end of the 1600's, changing ideas about family and childhood started to spread to lower income groups. Some children over 7 were thought of as **dependent** for the first time. People interested in religion and psychology began to argue that people needed a chance to develop during childhood. They argued the importance of training children so they could become *thinking men and good Christians*⁶. But the opportunity to have a childhood was largely restricted to boys. Until the 1600's, many girls were engaged at age 6, and married and running whole households by age 10. The idea of childhood took about 2 centuries longer to develop for girls than it did for boys.

By the 1700's it was widely believed that male children, at least, needed special care and attention. This included being kept safe, being taught and being physically cared for. Children started to be seen as the most important part of families.

By the late 1700's schools started to focus on children, and treating students differently from adults for the first time. Schools had existed from the Middle Ages onwards. But, they had nothing in particular to do with children. People of different ages went to school, often for only 1-2 years. It was not unusual for someone age 25 to be sitting next to someone age 12, doing the same classes. As schools became more focused on children, they became preoccupied with discipline. By the late 18th Century it was widely believed that boys should go to school for 4-5 years, or if they didn't attend school, they should do military service.

⁴ Westhorp, Gill (1990) **History and Development of Youthwork in Australia**, page 18.

⁵ Data in this section largely comes from Aries 1962.

⁶ *ibid*:129

By the early 1800's it was thought normal for boys to be children into their teenage years. Many people believed that the same applied to girls. However, the length of childhood experienced by each child still depended largely on family income. Poorer families often needed their children to work to bring income into the family, or for their daughters to marry so they were no longer financially dependent on the family.

By the mid 19th Century, the idea that everyone went through a stage called *childhood* was widely accepted. People still went straight from being a *child* to an *adult* - although the age at which this was seen to occur had extended. Whilst in the Middle Ages, you were seen as an *adult* once you were weaned, by the 1800's you were seen as a *child* until sometime in your teens.

By the mid 1800's, the concept of adulthood had also changed. People were seen as increasingly separate from each other. With the growth of factories, individuals had access to individual income and the choice of becoming more independent. Throughout the 1800's, as the middle class grew, the individual became increasingly important. The link between adulthood and **independence** became progressively more popular throughout the 19th Century. (However, it wasn't until the mid 20th Century that achieving independence was seen as the key criteria for adulthood in Western culture.)

The Beginnings of Youth Work - the mid to late 19th Century⁷

By the mid 19th Century, some people began to worry about the number of children who were in adult roles. Laws were passed to stop children being allowed to work. On the one hand, this protected children from working long hours in dangerous jobs. But poorer families often had many children, and could not afford to care for them. Many of these children, particularly boys, were sent out to survive on their own. Given that they were not allowed to work, they often had to steal in order to survive. These *street* children were seen in one of two ways. Either they were lazy and irresponsible, or, they were violent and dangerous. Laws were made to try to address this problem.

Some middle class people, the *philanthropists*, explained the problem by arguing that poor families provided a *bad* environment for children. These *child savers* aimed to get children out of these situations into *good* environments - either strict, middle class families or institutions.

Others believed that these children had too much spare time. They aimed to fill in that time with recreational activities, designed to teach the children *good*, middle class values. Most activities were very formal and patriotic, with programs typically being militaristic in style. Separate programs were conducted for boys and girls - the boys being taught to lead, obey and think; the girls being taught to be *good* wives and mothers.

Another way that society tried to control these children was by making schooling compulsory. But many families could not afford to send their children to school.

⁷ Data in this section largely comes from Aries 1962.

Schools were all private, were predominantly run by churches and focused on Christian religious study. Girls and boys were educated very differently.

The mid to late 19th Century marked the beginning of youth work in Western culture. It wasn't called *youth work* then, but many of the ideas were similar to youth work today. The *vagrants* or *delinquents* of the 19th Century were talked about in a similar way to *street kids* or *young offenders* today. Homeless young people's choices have not changed much - with fostering arrangements or institutionalisation still playing a significant role. Many people in Western societies still think of young people as a problem - in need of discipline, or *good* values to fix them!

By the beginning of the 20th Century, *children* were precluded for the first time from key parts of the *adult* world, particularly the means to earn a living and contribute financially to their family. This led to a discrete group of disenfranchised children who were firmly located outside family and social structures. For the first time, active social control measures were put in place to manage this group.

The Concept of Youth or Adolescence - the early to mid 20th Century⁸

During the 19th Century, the concept of *youth* or *adolescence* was not widely accepted or seen as a separate stage in life. From the 1500's onwards, some psychologists had talked about *adolescence*, but there were a variety of interpretations of the concept, and different views on the age at which adolescence ended.

In the early 20th Century, governments in Australia began to acknowledge that the problem of children on the streets was not being solved. Governments began to provide services themselves, instead of relying on churches and others. Both State and Commonwealth governments gradually took an increasing role in the lives of young people over the first half of the century. Young people's lives, whether they were at school or working, became more formal and structured:

- **State Governments** set up government schools offering free education. This made it easier to force most young people to go to school, regardless of their family income. They also focused on young people who were not in school, and established laws about work for young people, beginning with apprentices. Whereas previously apprentices mainly learned their skills *on the job* by working alongside experienced trades people, new laws instituted formal *off the job* training as a prerequisite for qualifying as a tradesperson.
- **The Australian Government's** first direct involvement in young people's lives was the Defence Act of 1911. The Act made cadet training compulsory for 12 - 18 year olds. During the Great Depression of the 1930's, the Commonwealth became more involved in young people's employment and training - through training schemes for unemployed young people, employment counselling and short term job creation. Beginning in the 1940's, the Commonwealth funded

⁸ Data in this section largely comes from an article by Geoffrey Sherington & Terry Irving entitled *Youth Policies in Twentieth Century Australia*, published in **Youth Studies** (August 1989).

higher education (universities and colleges) for the first time. This meant that more people could undertake tertiary education.

It wasn't only governments which were structuring the lives of young people. Non government organisations (mainly churches) continued to play an important role in recreation and welfare services for young people. During the early 20th Century a number of formal, adult-led youth organisations (eg. Boy Scouts and Girl Guides) were established. All featured military-style structures, and focused on teaching young people *good* middle class values. They were typically single sex organisations which taught girls and boys very different social roles.

Governments took an active role in saying what was *good* and *bad* behaviour for young people. The Commonwealth Government formally recognised the role of non government organisations. Laws were made about behaviour such as underage smoking, and government institutions were established for *juvenile delinquents*.

Most laws treated young people as adults once they turned 17. But, just as in earlier centuries, access to *adulthood* depended on young people's background and sex. If they were considered *neglected*, young people could be placed under State control until they were older. For example, in Queensland boys could be under the control of the State until they were 18; girls until they were 21. Indigenous young people were controlled even more strictly, under Aboriginal protection laws.

During the first half of the 20th Century, *youth work* was mainly in the voluntary sector and very few youth workers were paid. The language used to describe young people gradually changed. Between 1900 and 1920, they were generally called *children*. From the 1920's to the 1940's, the word *juvenile* was commonly used, especially in relation to criminalised young people. By the 1940's the word *youth* began to appear for the first time.

Youth becomes Truth - the 1950's to today⁹

After World War 2 jobs were very readily available. It was easy for most young people to get work. As a group, they had more money to spend than any previous generation. Businesses soon realised that young people had discretionary income. For the first time, special products were made for sale to young people (eg. coke, clothes, records and cars). For the first time, white young people with money had a lifestyle which was very different from others in the society. **This was called a youth culture.**

Not all young people were part of this culture. Indigenous young people and the children of newly arrived migrants (mainly from Europe), were generally excluded by a mixture of laws, racism, poverty and cultural expectations. Many young women were excluded by family pressure or marriage. Young women who were part of the 1950's youth culture were often portrayed as *mad* or *bad*.

The *youth revolt* of the 1960's was mainly amongst white, middle class university students. But it did impact on other groups of young people. Some of this

⁹ Data in this section comes from Sherington & Irving and my personal experience.

movement was concerned with social justice issues. The interest in civil rights included opposition to the Vietnam War, and the rights of social groups who missed out within Australian society. This included some concern about the rights of Indigenous Australians and women. However, a significant proportion was acting out of self interest, driven by the new individualism of the 1950's - their unwillingness to fight in Vietnam.

Governments were very concerned about the emerging youth cultures of the 1950's and 1960's - mainly because the young people at the centre of these movements were *the leaders of tomorrow*. Many committees were established to try to find a solution to the *youth problem*. These groups largely concluded that young people should be controlled more. They encouraged existing youth organisations to be more active. They set up other forms of adult-led youth organisations (eg. *trendy* church youth groups). An even greater emphasis was placed on trying to ensure that young people attended school.

These measures did little to undermine the existence of youth cultures. However, the nature of those cultures did change - largely as a result of other factors. As the youth market for consumer goods expanded, young people from a range of backgrounds became increasingly preoccupied with material goods and their personal quality of life. The early 1970's were a period of turbulence within Australian politics. The younger generation played a key role in voting the Whitlam Government into power - driven, at least in part, by their promise to end Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War. Once conscription had ended, the impetus for activism was gone for many young people. As a result, the mass appeal of the youth movement faded quickly. However, governments did realise that they needed to be seen to be listening to young people. The voting age was dropped to age 18 and organisations (particularly youth sector peak bodies) were funded to enable young people to formally contribute their ideas to government.

During the late 1970's State and Australian governments responded to this range of factors through developing secular youth work programs and funding paid positions in existing voluntary youth organisations and newly emerging community organisations. **The paid youth sector was born.**

Some of these programs, particularly at a community level, were driven by student activists of the 1970's and advocated for social justice issues and engaged with community development. The majority, both within the government and non government sectors, were driven by the same commitment to deal with the *youth problem* as has characterised work with young people (whether called *youth*, *adolescents* or *children*) for the past 500 years.

Toward the end of the 1970's, the job market started to shrink and youth unemployment affected large numbers of young people. Just when young people had begun to have a little political power, they had less economic power. Young people had become used to being economically independent during the 1950's and 1960's, when there were plenty of jobs. Suddenly, many young people were forced to become economically dependent again. Governments dealt with this problem by taking more control over young people's lives - a trend that continues today. Young people are encouraged to stay at school for longer. The value of youth wages has progressively reduced. Most young people earn below the poverty line, and cannot

live independently. They are pressured to do more and more training, and the number of young people in higher education continues to increase.

Over the past 30 years, society's approach to young people and the youth sector have progressively conservatised. The age at which people are seen to reach adulthood has extended - again, as in the past, along economic lines. Young people who conform to social expectations (eg. have a secure job or become a parent) are seen as *adult* at a relatively young age. Young people who fail to achieve economic security (eg. are unemployed or students) are forced into an extended childhood through no longer having access to sufficient income support to live independently until they are 26 years old. Social control mechanisms, such as imprisonment, are increasingly being used to manage those young people unwilling to adhere to socially-prescribed priorities.

Government services targeted at young people are increasingly focused on teaching young people to behave in a socially-prescribed way. Young people are seen as having *special needs* which require intervention in every aspect of their lives - housing, income, education, training, recreation, health, employment... Youth workers are employed to *help* young people in all these areas.

Funding to the non government sector has progressively shifted from small (often secular) community organisations to larger (mainly church) organisations. Most youth work has re-engaged with the *child saving* approach of the last century, with its emphasis on controlling young people through labour market, education and recreation programs.

The concepts of *infancy*, *childhood* and *adulthood* have changed a lot over the past 1000 years in Western societies. The idea of *young people* as a special group with particular needs is very recent - essentially only 50 years old.

The concept of *family*, and the relationship between teenagers and their families, have also changed dramatically. The relationship between teenagers and their families has changed a lot too. For most of the past 1000 years, teenagers were seen as full adults who were part of an interdependent group. Then, they were seen as dependent on their families for care and support. Then, just as young people were able to access the means to become independent of their families, governments focused on ensuring that they became dependent again!

The Facts - Physical Changes

No-one debates the fact that human being change and grow throughout their lives. Many changes occur between the ages of approximately 10 and 22¹⁰. This stage is

¹⁰ Some argue that there are physiological changes in the brain that continue into people's 20's - but this is a **theory**, not a fact.

commonly called *puberty* - the process of sexual maturing. These changes largely relate to reproductive development and changes in size and shape.

The speed and order of this process varies according to the individual, their environment and their sex. The different speed of development for individuals is particularly impacted by genetics. Environment can also have a significant impact on development. For example, lack of healthy food or unsanitary living conditions can slow down development.

Here's an example of the steps young people go through, according to age. It is important to note that these are indicative ages - it's not unusual, for example, for a female to menstruate for the first time at 14 years old, or for males to reach puberty as early as 10 or 11, or as late as 15 or 16.

Approx Age	Main Changes	
	Female	Male
10-11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Start to grow taller & broader. ▪ Breast buds develop; some raising of nipple and breast; extended colour around nipple. ▪ Hips get wider and rounder, with more fat. 	
11-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Breasts continue to grow, with raising below the nipple. ▪ Small amount of pubic hair emerges. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Start to grow in height and build. ▪ Genitals get bigger, especially the scrotum, where the skin gets red and changes in texture.
12-13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Nipple and coloured area around it grow bigger. ▪ Begin vaginal discharge. ▪ Pubic hair spreads. ▪ A growth spurt. ▪ First period. ▪ Some get pimples. ▪ Sweat glands develop and adult body smells begin. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Some get breast knots and temporary swelling in one or both breasts. ▪ Shoulders get wider. ▪ Soft public hair appears on the skin at the base of the penis. ▪ Penis gets bigger; erections are frequent.
13-14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Slight voice change. ▪ Breasts reach full size; the coloured area around the nipple shrinks back; nipple begins to stick out. ▪ Adult pattern of pubic hair is established. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Curled/kinky hair grows in the public area. ▪ Penis skin colour becomes darker. ▪ Voice begins to change (or break). ▪ First ejaculation.
14-16	Periods become more regular.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Voice changes a lots - becomes close to an adult voice. ▪ Penis grows to full size. ▪ Hair on the face starts to spread. ▪ Adult pattern of public hair is established.
16-18	The uterus is close to full maturity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Testicles grow a lot. ▪ Hairline on the sides of the forehead recedes to a wedge-shaped pattern.
18	Reach full size - both height and build.	
19		Reach full size - both height and build.
20	Reproductive system is fully matured.	
22		Reproductive system is fully matured.

Table 1: Common Physiological Changes

The changes associated with puberty occur regardless of the society or culture people live in. History shows that this process has been happening for as long as people have recorded ideas (through writing, paintings or oral tradition). **The existence of puberty is a fact.**

Some people have argued that these physical changes are associated with a describable set of psychological changes. There are a number of **theories** that associate these changes with young people's relationships with others and how they feel about themselves.

Theories of *Youth* and *Adolescence*

Many past and present societies have customs related to sexual maturing. These include initiation ceremonies and marriage. 4 groups of theorists have been particularly interested in this stage of life:

- **Biologists** focus on the physical qualities and behaviours of life forms, including humans. Biologists played the key role in describing the physical process of puberty. They are also interested in exploring whether this physical process leads to behavioural change and developing theories about this.
- **Psychologists** study human behaviour. They are especially interested in how individual people's minds work and how this affects their behaviour. Psychologists have developed theories which argue that there are natural stages of psychological development which are *normal*.

Psychologists and biologists often agree with each others' theories. Psychologists have developed theories that suggest that young people's minds change, alongside their bodily changes during puberty. They claim that there are particular behaviours that are typical of humans during this stage, which they often call **adolescence**.

Biologists and psychologists usually start their thinking by looking at individuals. Sociologists and anthropologists usually start their thinking by looking at groups of people:

- **Sociologists** study human societies and their problems. They are especially interested in the structures used to organise societies. Sociologists have developed theories about the way puberty is treated by societies.
- **Anthropologists** study the cultures and customs of groups of humans. They have developed theories about the way puberty is treated by different cultural groups.

Sociologists and anthropologists have developed theories that try to explain the existence of a group called **youth** in Western culture today. They look at different societies and cultures to see whether they also have this concept. Many sociologists and anthropologists argue that that the idea of *youth*, as it exists in Western societies, has not always existed in other societies and cultures. They talk a lot about the effects of laws, politics, economics and religion on how this age group is treated.

The language used by different disciplines can provide a useful short cut¹¹. If an author uses the word **adolescence** (or uses *youth* and *adolescence* interchangeably) then it is likely that their assumptions, assertions or theories are based in the disciplines of psychology or biology. If an author exclusively uses the word **youth**, then they are more likely to be coming from a sociological or anthropological point of view.

Sociological and Anthropological Theories about Youth

Sociologists and anthropologists are interested in how environmental factors affect people's development. They look at the effects of things surrounding the person, such as history, economics, family, community, culture, sex, class, society, religion and status. Most sociologists and anthropologists agree that all societies see age as significant in some way. Most say that all societies give different status or roles to people, depending on their age.

But not all societies have a stage like the modern, Western concept of youth. Many have only 2 main age groupings - infants or children and full community members (adults).

2 Main Differences in Opinions

Opinion 1 - There is no such thing as youth. A famous anthropologist, Margaret Mead, argued that there is no such thing as a separate stage called youth¹². She argued that the concept only exists in some cultures. She gave many examples of communities in which she had conducted research to support her argument. One example was in Samoa. She compared the behaviour of one sister before puberty and the other after puberty. She found that the only difference between them was the way they grew physically - there was no behavioural difference. She also talked about the Mundugumor people in New Guinea. In that society, 5-6 year olds were expected to behave in every way as an adult. She said that they did every adult job in the community. The only way in which they were different from older adults, was that they weren't married. They usually married immediately after puberty.

Opinion 2 - There may be a stage called youth, but different societies see it in very different ways. These researchers argue that social and cultural expectations drive behaviour. For example, if young people live in a culture which expects them to be dependent, they will behave that way. If they are expected to look after themselves, they will do that. If they are expected to be rebellious, they will rebel.

¹¹ Over the past century, both these words have become more institutionalised in the English language. Therefore, this is not always the case. However, it is true often enough to give a useful *first clue* about the possible assumptions of the writer.

¹² From: Mead, Margaret (1970), **Culture and Commitment: A Study of the Generation Gap**, The Bodley Head, London, page 18.

Examples of *Youth* in Other Societies¹³

The concept of *youth* as a development stage is not part of Samoan or Mundugumor culture. Nor was it part of Western culture until the mid 20th Century. Different societies and cultures organise themselves in different ways. Some include *youth* (or a similar concept) and some do not. Many have a very different notion of *youth* to the Western concept.

Some cultures are organised by age grades. Every few years, a group is formed. Everyone who was not in the last group, but have passed a certain stage (eg. puberty), are initiated into the next group. Amongst the Masai people (East Africa) this system is used with males. Every age class has a very clear role in the community. They fulfill this role until the next group is initiated. Then this group moves up one step into the next age class, with equally clear role and responsibilities. In this community, every age class lives together for some periods of their lives. The Jie people (Uganda) also organise themselves by age grade. Every 25 years a whole new generation is initiated into *adulthood*.

Other cultures see growth in many small stages. The Kayapo people (Brazil) break life into 4 pre-adult stages - infancy (up to about 4), *little boys/girls* (age 4-8), *boys* and *girls* (until puberty), *man* or *woman* (until marriage), then adulthood. Then people are named according to whether they have children or not, and how many. They are also named according to whether they are grandparents, or just old enough to be grandparents.

Where a stage exists between childhood and adulthood, each society or culture has different expectations of its members. In some cases, the naming is mainly for convenience. Sometimes there are very clear roles and responsibilities for people of a particular age. These vary from culture to culture. However, most cultures, except 20th Century Western culture, expect people in their teenage years to act as adults in most areas of life. In return, they have most of the rights and responsibilities of adults.

Most cultures hold events of some kind to mark people's movement from one group in society to another. These *rites of passage* are often associated with puberty and marriage. Western societies do not have clear rites of passage. A variety of markers exist (eg. getting a driving license, being old enough to vote, leaving home, getting a job). However, these do not occur at a consistent age or stage in life. And there are no collective markers of a change from one level of responsibility/status/role to another.

Many anthropologists would argue that having clear rites of passage is very important to a culture functioning effectively. Some sociologists have claimed that many of the *youth problems* in Western societies are a result of this lack of clarity, and the perpetuation of elements of childhood over many years.

¹³ Data in this section is largely from Elmer Miller and Charles Weitz (1979) **Introduction to Anthropology**, Prentice-Hall International, London, pages 428 - 430.

One Anthropological Theory of Youth

Margaret Mead¹⁴ proposed that there are 3 different cultural approaches to *youth*:

- **Type 1:** Exists where at least 3 generations of people live closely together, and children learn from the adults in the community. In these cultures, people usually learn from earlier generations, through the stories told by the oldest generation. Mead believed that in this type of culture, there is a very strong sense of cultural identity. In these communities, there is no separate stage called *youth*.
- **Type 2:** Develops during the breakdown of Type 1. This is where there are no grandparents in the immediate living situation. Because there are no elders to learn from, every generation has to do a lot of learning for itself. This means that both the parent generation, and the child generation, must learn from people in their own age group. This often leads to the development of a separate stage called *youth*. The expectation of a period of rebellion typically occurs in these cultures.
- **Type 3:** Occurs when children grow up in isolation from either of the older generations (parents and grandparents). If children return to their community and teach the older generations the new things they have learned, this **can** create a new version of the culture. Then, the culture as a whole can become the first type again. The old and the new have been resolved into a common culture.

This theory fits well with Philippe Aries' ideas. Aries believed that the concept of *youth*, as it is currently understood in Western culture, only exists in Western societies. He also argued that the development of the concept of youth was part of a wider social attitude. When people talk about young people, they often see them as a problem. Aries saw this as the result of a wider social attitude which sees anyone who is different as a problem. He thought that the same explanation might apply to racism.¹⁵

Sherington and Irving also thought that youth was a concept developed to separate young people from the rest of the community. They argued that a similar explanation could be given for attitudes toward people with low incomes, and women, in Western societies.¹⁶

Some Sociological Theories about Western Societies¹⁷

Over the past few decades, there have been many articles about the prolonging of youth or adolescence in Australian society. Many sociologists have also talked about the different age at which *youth* is considered to have ended for different young people, depending on their level of conformity to social norms and expectations.

Some sociologists have argued that **if the age of achieving adulthood can be extended and re-extended, and if different people are considered young at different ages**, then the concept of *youth* must be an invention created to suit the needs of the society (or particular members of society) at the time.

¹⁴ Mead 1970:39.

¹⁵ Aries 1962:399.

¹⁶ Sherington & Irving 1989:11.

¹⁷ This section draws on White, Rob (1989) **No Space of their Own: Young People and Social Control**, Cambridge University Press, London.

Fundamental incongruences exist in the definitions of *youth* in Western societies. If a person is unemployed, they often remain economically dependent on their parents until age 26. They may well be treated as a child in relation to cleaning their room, or being home by a particular time each night. Yet, they were able to vote, drink and drive a vehicle at age 18. And, if they commit a crime at age 18, they are tried and sentenced as an adult. Is this 25 year old a *child? youth? adult?*

Some sociologists are concerned that young people are becoming more and more separated from the rest of society. That they are too old to be treated like *youth*. That being unemployed or being pressured to remain in education for longer, creates tensions that they take home with them. That this places them at greater risk of tensions in the home environment, which might lead to violence, substance abuse, homelessness or even suicide. That having little money might increase the likelihood that these young people will commit crimes.

The Catch 22 is that when young people do become violent, or homeless, or unemployed, this is often treated as an indicator of immaturity. When they act in a way that demonstrates depression, lack of confidence or anger, this is treated as an *adolescent problem*.

Many sociologists would argue that these behaviours have been created by the pressures that society has placed on them, rather than their age.

The idea of *youth* or *adolescence* as a stage of life does not exist in every culture. Some sociologists and anthropologists believe that this indicates there is no such thing as *youth* - that this is merely a construction developed to meet social needs. Some believe that there is a stage called *youth*, but it is treated very differently by different cultures, and young people will behave according to the expectations of their particular culture.

Psychological and Biological Theories of Adolescence

Sociologists and anthropologists see social, cultural and other environmental factors as being most influential in young people's behaviour. Psychologists and biologists see individual factors as at least of equal importance.

Psychologists and biologists are interested in the individual development of human beings. They examine people's emotional, intellectual and physical development, and look for patterns which are common to all humanity. Most agree that people go through certain *normal* steps in their development. This includes a stage called *adolescence*. Some believe this is expressed differently in different cultures. But they still believe that everyone goes through adolescence if they develop *normally*.

Most psychologists and biologists agree that there is a strong connection between the bodily changes of puberty, and wider changes in young people's lives. Since it is largely psychologists that have articulated these changes and developed theories

about adolescence, this section primarily refers to psychologists (rather than biologists). There are a range of theories about *adolescent development* - the following aims to provide an overview of the common ground across their approaches.¹⁸

What is Adolescence?

Most psychologists believe that you can examine changes occurring inside a person's psyche, through observing their behaviour. They believe that there are particular changes in emotional, social, sexual and intellectual behaviour which occur concurrently with puberty.

Different psychologists believe that *adolescence* ends at different ages. Some argue that it ends at 18 - 20 years old, concurrently with sexual and physical maturity. Others argue that it lasts longer - even as late as 30 years old.

Some believe that adolescence occurs in several short, discrete stages. Others argue that it is a continual process.

Most psychologists argue that human beings develop in a similar order. They believe that every stage has to happen before the next can begin. If people don't go through all the stages, in order, then they face problems. They call this *abnormal development*.

Psychologists see *adolescence* as the time in between being a *child* and an *adult*. It is the time during which people move from being dependent to being independent. This is the time when people need to let go of the good things about being a child (eg. being cared for, or not having to make decisions). They must make decisions about the sort of adult they want to become, and learn to behave like an adult. It is a time of major changes for every young person. This change is reflected both internally and in their relationships with others.

Most psychologists believe all young people need to do certain things before they become *adults*, for example:

- Decide what their own values and beliefs are.
- Decide how they want to live their life (eg. whether or not to marry, what job they want, where they are going to live).
- Learn how to think in a big picture way, so they can make these decisions.
- Learn how to become independent, and take responsibility for themselves.
- Think about the future.
- Deal with the new sexual feelings they are experiencing and decide what they want to do with them.
- Learn how to have new, mature relationships with other people.

At the core of these dilemmas is the central question: **Who am I?**

¹⁸ This section is largely based on Lerner, Richard M. & Spanier, Graham B. (1980) **Adolescent Development: A Life-Span Perspective**, McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York.

Psychologists see *adolescence* as a time when young people are dealing with many issues and emotions at the same time. It is *normal* for them to feel confused. Some of the other things they believe young people often experience are:

- Being unstable (eg. having mood swings and behaving unpredictably).
- Feeling insecure, and sometimes avoiding other people.
- Being depressed.
- Rebelling and having conflicts with their parents and other authority figures.
- Trying out new behaviours, especially behaviours which are socially proscribed (eg. drug use, crime, speeding).
- Spending lots of time thinking and worrying about how they look and feel.
- Thinking lots about themselves, but not caring much about other people
- Looking for heroes to follow or copy (to save them having to make some decisions for themselves).
- Being very self-conscious or easily embarrassed.
- Feeling like no-one understanding them - that they are different to anyone else.
- Worrying about failing or making a fool of themselves.
- Having *big* plans about what they want to achieve with their life.
- Thinking that their friends, or other peers, are the only ones who have some understanding of them.

Most psychologists consider these *normal* behaviours ... provided they don't go too far.

When do Adolescents Need Help?

Different psychologists have different responses to this question.

A few think that the *storm and stress* of adolescence does not need to happen. They argue that where the society, community and family of the young person is supportive, difficult behaviours become unnecessary. They propose that if young people are behaving in an angry or stressed way, this means they have a problem and need some help.

Most psychologists think that some *storm and stress* is normal. But they disagree about when it becomes *abnormal*, or a problem requiring intervention:

- Some think that young people need help when they seem to be having problems in their relationships with other people. They are particularly concerned when these problems are extreme, and the young person seems to be withdrawing from others or attacking people with regularity. They argue that these behaviours can lead to loneliness; that loneliness can lead to drug abuse, offending, failing at school or even suicide.
- Some think that you can tell if an adolescent is not adjusting properly. Symptoms include continual anxiety and intra-personal conflict, and unduly strong responses to stressful situations. Again, this can be expressed through depression, anger or extreme moodiness. Or, it might be reflected through continual *child-like* behaviour. Or, it might be reflected through lack of confidence or very negative self-image and continual attempts to get approval from their friends. Or, they might show off or try prove themselves to their peers, through taking major risks.

- Some think that adolescents experience problems if they don't care about anyone else, and avoid closeness with other people. This might be reflected through not caring if their behaviour hurts others. Or, being aggressive, and having extreme reactions toward anyone with authority over them. Or, not accepting any restrictions on their lives or behaviour.

In other words, most psychologists think that if any of the behaviours that are *normal* for adolescents occur in an extreme way, then that is a problem requiring intervention. The difficulty is in finding consistent means to assess when behaviour becomes extreme or *abnormal*.

Why do Problems Occur?

Different psychologists have **very different** theories about the reasons for problems during *adolescence*.

Some psychologists work closely with biologists and concentrate on the physiological aspects of development. They believe that problems occur when the young person's brain doesn't develop or function properly. Some see other physiological factors, such as genetics or hormones, as central.

Some focus on the intelligence and cognitive ability of the young person. They believe that adolescents with problems are not intelligent, or have limitations in some areas of their thinking (eg. practical or analytical thinking).

Others concentrate on the emotional development of the adolescent. They are interested in whether their personality has developed in a way they consider *normal*.

Many psychologists see the family in which the young person grew up as central to their prognosis during adolescence. Some believe that problems during adolescence occur because of the way a young person was treated as a child. Sometimes they think problems occur because of the way they are being treated now. These psychologists look at factors such as parental strictness, the amount of time/love/attention given to the young person and the parental role in teaching young people.

Some psychologists believe that adolescents who experience problems, did not learn all the things they needed to whilst growing up. This may derive from a lack of parental contribution (eg. learning about values and behaviour), or lack of contribution through other social systems (eg. schools).

Some are interested in social or environmental effects on adolescent development. They believe that negative experiences at school, or cultural differences, or unemployment, or coming from a low income background, may make it more difficult for some young people to go through a normal process of development. But they still see any problems as largely driven by one of the individual weaknesses above.

Is Adolescence a New Idea?

The general idea of a stage called adolescence is not a completely new idea. It has been explored by writers and researchers in Western culture for several centuries. It

was also described by early Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle. The Greek culture was, in many ways, similar to Western culture. But the idea has only been widely accepted in Western culture in recent years. And, it is difficult to find the concept in the writing and stories of most other cultures.

It does seem to be a mostly-Western, and mostly-new, idea which has been driven by the psychology discipline.

Psychologists are concerned with work out what is *normal* for human beings - in the way they grow, think and end up. Most believe that all human beings go through a stage which they've called *adolescence*. They believe that this is true, regardless of the cultural or class background of a young people.

Comparing Sociological and Psychological Theories about Young People

Sofar, these two perspectives have been treated as completely separate schools of thought. In fact, some sociologists support psychology-driven theories. Some psychologists take a more sociological approach.

The debate about whether a life stage called *youth* or *adolescence* exists, could be drawn as a continuum:

- At one end, are the people you believe that *youth* is a stage that is completely **natural**. They argue that the beliefs of different societies make no difference to the fact that everyone goes through this stage. They believe that some social structures contribute to *abnormal* youth development.
- At the other extreme, are the people who think there is no such thing as *youth* or *adolescence*. They believe that different people go through different developmental stages according to the society they live in. That it is the culture, beliefs and values of each society that determine the developmental stages of individual members. That *youth* or *adolescence* are entirely **nurtured** beliefs.

In between, are the people who haven't been mentioned much in this article. They believe that the Western concept of adolescence doesn't occur universally. But there is an important stage that everyone goes through whilst growing up. They look at the different ways that culture and environment affect this development. Two examples of groups in this middle ground are cultural anthropologists and some social psychologists.

Psychologists from non-Western backgrounds are particularly interested in this middle ground. Eileen B. Wilson-Oyelaran, for example, is a Nigerian psychologist who has thought a lot about the interaction between youth development and her culture¹⁹.

¹⁹ See; her article in Valsiner, Jaan (ed) (1989) **Child Development in Cultural Context**, Hogrefe and Huber Publishers, Toronto, pages 51-66.

Western psychology sees the relationship between mothers and their children as very important, but Wilson-Oyelaran says that this is an essentially Western starting point. About ¼ of the women in Nigeria live in polygamous households. In these settings, a number of different wives and their children live together. Similarly, people in other cultural settings live in a variety of extended family groups. In these situations, children are raised by many people, and may have relationships with other family members which are at least as important as their relationship with their mother. Further, often women have large numbers of children, and cannot give each the dedicated attention that is possible in typical current Western households. Many households in Nigeria are **interdependent**. Yet, Western psychology sees becoming **independent** as a key sign of maturity/*adulthood*. In other words, Western psychology sees adults in these cultures, by definition, as *pre-adult* or immature.

Whilst Wilson-Oyelaran does seem to believe in stages of development, including the general idea of *adolescence*, she argues that the current definitions of adolescence are Western-based. A cross-cultural concept of adolescence would be very different. It would have to take account of the lifestyles, beliefs, values and thinking processes of different peoples throughout the world.

In summary:

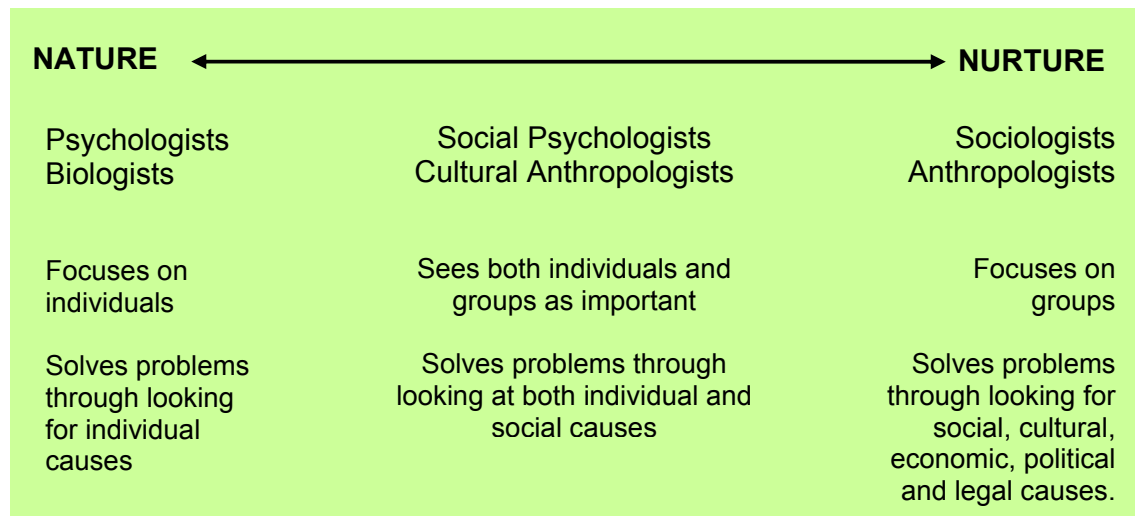


Diagram 1: Different Concepts of Youth and Adolescence.

Important Questions for Youth Workers

Some of the questions raised by this article are:

- Do all young people need to go through adolescence? By which definition?
- Is adolescence a stage that only occurs when culture are breaking down, and young people see the previous generation as a failure and therefore want to find a better way?

- Does the *testing out* and *values development* of adolescence need to occur in a culture where young people can see that it is functioning well?
- Is adolescence an idea that has been constructed to pressure young people into conforming to Western social values?
- Is the concept of adolescence a self-fulfilling prophecy? Is it becoming a world-wide trend because of the power of Western culture and the promotion of Western values?
- Has the concept of adolescence been constructed to distract attention away from the inequalities faced by some young people?

There are no *right* or *wrong* answers to these question. However, it is important that each youth worker develops their own, considered opinion. This is because your beliefs will directly impact on your model of service, and your approach to interaction with young people:

- If you conclude that adolescence is *natural*, then your youth work should logically focus on helping individual young people to deal with their problems and change their behaviour. You would see these problems as based on the individual weaknesses of these young people.
- If you conclude that the concept of youth is a social construction, then you are more likely to focus on social causes of the problems young people face. You would focus on trying to make society more responsive to the rights and needs of young people, for example through advocacy or community development work.

Sherington and Irving²⁰ proposed that Western societies have 3 different ideas of who young people are:

1. **Citizens of Tomorrow:** These people believe that the next generation need to be taught how to be *good adults* so they can run Australia well in the future. People who see young people this way are likely to focus on encouraging young people to participate in education/training and become involved in responsible youth activities.
2. **Social Problem:** These people are particularly concerned about *problem youth* and often see groups such as Indigenous young people, street kids or unemployed young people as important to work with. They want to teach these young people to be *good adults*.
3. **Social Movement:** These people believe that young people have unique expertise that they can contribute to society, and argue that young people can have valuable ideas about how society should be. They think it's a good idea for young people to be outspoken.

Which camp do you fall into?

You might find it useful to revisit the list of assumptions you identified before reading this article. **Have your beliefs changed? What impact will this have on your work with young people?**

²⁰ Sherington & Irving 1989:18.