The Definition of Adolescence: One Term Fails to Adequately Define This Diverse Time Period
by Amanda J. Degner

The term adolescence is commonly understood to define the period of life between childhood and adulthood (Kaplan, 2004, p. 1). This time frame, however, not only describes a very diverse reality, but adolescence varies considerably across cultures, over time, and within individuals.

Therefore, one developmental term or stage marked “adolescence” clearly fails to provide the best frame of reference for this diversely experienced developmental period of life. Western culture, for example, defines adolescence as the time period from puberty to age 18 or 21, but non-Western cultures tend to mark the beginning of adulthood with rites of passage often following the onset of puberty. These rites mark the end of an individual’s childhood and his or her acceptance into adult society.

Likewise, adolescence has not always lasted until age 18 or 21, even within our own culture. For example, prior to the Industrial Revolution, the family functioned as an inclusive unit; thus, the transition from childhood to adulthood was relatively short. As children performed adult tasks, they became adults as early as age 13 (Sisson, Herson, & Van Hasselt, 1987). Last, among teens themselves, adolescence is experienced differently by individuals of the same biological age. Experiences and physical maturation are not the same for all teens. The age of onset of puberty, the rate of development, and the expression of such development is individually expressed among different teenagers (Kaplan, 2004), making even the physical marks of adolescence vague and misleading.

The concept of adolescence and the term teenagers seem to have originated within Western culture. The transitional period as described by Kaplan (2004, p. 1) varies by society and culture. Americans expect adolescents to achieve autonomy, identity, and independence due to a shared individualistic culture (Pipher, 1994).

These American virtues and milestones, however, are not desired characteristics for adolescents in all cultures. For example, consider the Vietnamese culture. Asian cultures are collectivistic in nature, in which group harmony and loyal family membership are prized above individuality, autonomy, or individual satisfaction (Pipher, 1994, p. 88). These cultures value tradition, conformity, obedience, and fitting into family and society as opposed to the independence, individualism, exploration, and self-expression common in Western cultures (Kaplan, 2004, p. 4). Therefore, the lack of congruency across and within different cultures makes the term adolescence fairly inaccurate as a definition for one distinctly inclusive time period.

Just as cultures differ qualitatively from one another in terms of identifying and defining their adolescents, so the term adolescence differs qualitatively across time and history. Before the 1930s, many children began performing adult work tasks after an 8th-grade education (Kaplan, 2004). Children consistently shared adult work such as tending livestock and harvesting crops (Sisson, Herson, & Van Hasselt, 1987). When the economy began to collapse in October 1929, so did jobs for younger workers. In the 1930s, young people were displaced from the workplace as secure jobs were created for men supporting their families (Hine, 1999).

Though secondary education had been available since the 1600s, it was not until the mid- to late-1930s that a significant proportion of children over age 13 attended school, thus initiating in a
"transitional period" created by the newly formed high school (Kaplan, 2004, pp. 7-8). Prior to the Great Depression, adolescents shared in adult responsibilities, but with the onset of mandatory secondary education, adolescence now exists well into the individual’s 20s (Hine, 1999). Therefore, the definition of adolescence has changed greatly over the past century (Kaplan, 2004).

Lastly, adolescence is uniquely experienced within individuals even of similar chronological age. The physical onset of puberty is not the same for all adolescents. Adolescence may begin as early as age 9 for some girls, or as late as age 13 for others. Thus the physical experiences of these individuals will vary greatly, as will their social experiences. Girls who mature earlier than their peers often begin “adolescence” looking older than their chronological age (Kaplan, 2004, p. 81). Consequently, early maturing girls are often treated differently than their later-maturing peers. Because they look more mature, others often treat them as though they are older, requiring them to act as old as they appear. Such expectations overlook more age-appropriate socio-emotional development and needs of these girls. Although they may appear more independent and confident, these girls also report greater emotional distress than their later-maturing peers (Kaplan, 2004, p. 81).

The definition of adolescence as the time period between the onset of puberty and age 21 lacks validity and fails to address the cultural differences, historical influences, and individual expressions of this transitional stage from childhood to adulthood. The task of defining adolescence remains a confusing one due to the fact that adolescents themselves are influenced by various factors that determine when childhood ends and adulthood begins.

In this special issue of CHARIS, each researcher attempts to define adolescence and describe adolescents. Readers need to remember, however, that the terms adolescence and adolescent fall short of serving as the comprehensive, blanket definitions that point to a set of shared similarities among individuals between the onset of puberty and age 21. At best, adolescence describes vast inter- and intra-variability experienced uniquely across cultures, historical times, and individuals. These terms serve merely as guidelines to describe individuals experiencing their own unique transitions from childhood to adulthood.

References


