

Concepts of youth and adolescence

Concepts of youth: a discussion

It has been suggested that not all human societies recognise a life-stage similar to that which we now label “adolescence”. However, while cross-cultural researchers are sensitive to the possibility that this is a culturally-relative construct, there is no doubt that the passage from childhood to adulthood is biologically a human universal. Culturally, in terms of how different societies interpret and articulate this passage, there are undoubtedly different levels of emphasis. The process may be either elaborated or downplayed. We do know, however, that the cultural recognition of adolescence is widespread across societies. (Burbank1988; Condon1988). This was acknowledged in the establishment of a major cross-cultural study emanating from the US, the Harvard Adolescence Project, which sent out anthropologists to different regions of the world in the early 1980s. These included the Arctic (Copper Eskimo, Inuit), and Australia (Arnhem Land Aborigines), as well as several locations in Africa and Asia. Since the perspective was multidisciplinary, it was necessary to incorporate both the physiological and sociocultural definitions of adolescence into the research methodology (Whiting & Whiting 1988; Condon 1988; Burbank 1988).

In Western society, the concept of adolescence or youth, as opposed to childhood or adulthood, began to be elaborated around the turn of the century. Until the eighteenth century, adolescence was confused with childhood, for childhood was not thought to end with the onset of puberty. Around 1900 “youth” became a literary theme in Europe and, as Philippe Aries notes, people began seriously wondering what youth were thinking (Aries 1973). At the end of the First World War, he writes,

...adolescence expanded: it encroached upon childhood in one direction, maturity in the other...Thus our society has passed from a period which was ignorant of adolescence to a period in which adolescence is the favourite age. We now

want to come to it early and linger in it as long as possible (ibid., p.28).

The category “youth” in its present form emerged in sociological thinking in the late 1920s in association with the work of the Chicago School, which established two enduring images for our society: adolescence as a social and psychological problem and youth as the delinquent (Hebdige 1988). As Hebdige observed, this tradition fixed the frame of reference for the study of youth and established the parameters of what was worth studying: the association between deprivation and crime, youth culture, gangs, the deviant subcultures, “youth-as-trouble, youth-in-trouble” (ibid, p.27). In our society “youth is present only when its presence is a problem, or is regarded as a problem” and, realising this, young people invite others to take notice of them by “dressing strangely, striking bizarre attitudes, breaking rules, breaking bottles, windows, heads, issuing rhetorical challenges to the law” (ibid, p.17). Hebdige himself dissects these issues (thus becoming one of those focusing on youth) in his analysis of youth “style” as a form of refusal (1979). By the 1950s the term “teenager” had appeared, and became intimately bound up with the creation of the youth market, with money, distinctive clothing, records and discos. One researcher notes that the term did not have currency among Inuit in the Canadian Arctic until the arrival of television in early 1980 (Condon 1990).

In Australia, the growing focus on (and creation of) youth and adolescence as distinct entities has increasingly communicated itself to Aboriginal people. While this is only to be expected in urban areas, it has also taken place in remote communities. Based on my own research observations it is possible to state that many young Aboriginal people in some of the most “tradition-oriented” of the bush townships now sport the trappings and display the “style” of youth elsewhere: their clothing is determinedly different from that worn by adults; their hairstyles and jewellery, the music they listen to and their comportment – all these are in deliberate contradistinction to others around them. Television by satellite, local radio and TV stations, videos, cassette recorders, local rock bands and discos, are all features of everyday life in the

deserts of Central Australia and the mangroves of the north. Young Aborigines to varying degrees also flout formal and informal rules, appear disproportionately before the juvenile courts, and engage in drug-taking which “allows” further displays of unsanctioned behaviour. To all intents and purposes then, some young Aborigines have wholeheartedly adopted the symbolic realm of adolescence as we know it: rebellion, resistance and refusal. In addition, Aboriginal adults to a large extent display similarly despairing attitudes to their young people as do their non-Aboriginal counterparts. The elderly frequently assert that the “young fellas” of today are not like they were in their day and that they (the adults) had paid attention to the teachings of their parents and did as they were told. These statements should, of course, be treated with a healthy dose of scepticism for, as Geoffrey Pearson has pointed out, nostalgia is clearly an active ingredient in this timeless debate (Pearson 1983, p.220).

While there is a substantial body of theory (particularly from psychology) on youth and adolescence, this is still deficient because of its focus on adolescence primarily in Western industrialised societies (Condon 1990). As Condon cautions, “it may well be that a whole body of theory has been developed that cannot stand up to the litmus test of cross-cultural comparison” (ibid, p.268). Erik Erikson’s (1968) assertion that the major challenge facing young people in the “development of a distinct identity” is undoubtedly pertinent to Aboriginal youth today, but his concentration on choice of future career as an indication of successful identity formation, for example, may not be so appropriate.

At this stage we must address the question of whether the notion of adolescence for Aboriginal people in Australia is an entirely imposed and alien one. Some authors contend that this is indeed the case. McConnachie (1982) asserts that adolescence did not exist in traditional Aboriginal society. C.H. and R.C. Berndt (1978, p.141), two of Australia’s leading anthropologists, note that in traditional Aboriginal communities “adolescence was not singled out as a period of storm and stress” but that it has indeed become that now in many areas. McConnachie (1982, p.47), an educationalist, believes that the existence of a defined group of adolescents has been reinforced by transitional colleges (e.g. Yirara and Kormilda in the Northern Territory) which have physically isolated this age-group from their communities, and by the use of the adolescence category by teachers, recreation officers and others working in Aboriginal communities. Certainly, schooling has gathered up and redefined young Aborigines, and in the process has made

the teen years of the male ambiguous in status. In addition, the attenuation of the distinctive responsibilities of adult men [among western desert people] by western influences has further obscured the stages of transition from boy to man (Menziess School of Health Research 1991, p.35).
There is evidence, however, that Aboriginal people

do have definitions of this stage of life in the process of physical and social maturation, and associate it with notions of increasing self-reliance and “sense”. One of the ways of tapping into a society’s conceptualisations of different life-stages is by looking at language. There are about 25 extant Aboriginal languages in Australia and, according to the 1986 Census, 18% of Aboriginal people speak their own language at home. There is indeed a variety of linguistic terms which recognise the period between puberty and adulthood which we call adolescence. In east Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, for example, Aboriginal people using Creol (a form of Aboriginal English) apply the terms “young” or “single” to girls at the time when their breasts begin to grow, and to boys when they develop facial hair and their voices change. Among Pitjantjatjara-speaking people in northern South Australia, a teenage girl or young woman is called *kungkawara*; and a young man in the pre-initiatory stage is known as a *nyiinka*.

In Arnhem Land (NT) girls were “married” pre-menarche, at between nine and 14 years of age, to men older than they. Now, however, the girls studied by Burbank (1988) marry at around 17, while young men marry in their early twenties. For these Aboriginal people, then, the period of “maidenhood” has lengthened, while the period of bachelorhood has shortened. For both boys and girls, the teenage years were and are perceived to be the time when they gain “sense” and begin to learn the proper behaviour of an adult. Among desert people, the term *nyiinkananyi* (meaning raise up a boy to the age of *nyiinka*) is also synonymous with that boy becoming self-reliant (Goddard 1987, p.88).

Along with with indigenous young people studied by Condon (1988; 1990) in the Canadian Arctic, Aboriginal youth have now become a distinct entity to which population concentration, schooling, the peer group, and television have all been contributors. The decline of traditional economic roles for young people (because of secure food supplies) has allowed the period of youth to become expanded, and this has coincided with a reduction in close one-to-one contact between mature adults and younger people. The attenuation of the specific responsibilities carried by mature men, together with unemployment (particularly in recent years), has reduced the opportunities men have to learn and display skills and earn a decent wage. As a report from the Menziess School points out:

Because of widespread unemployment, working for a wage has not become the new model of manhood. The lifestyle of the unemployed adult has become the model for youngsters (Menziess School of Health Research 1991, p.35).

Inuit populations of the Arctic have many features in common with Aboriginal Australians, including their hunter-fisher-gatherer economic systems and highly mobile populations. Among the Inuit the passage from childhood to adulthood was rapid in pre-settlement times,

for the scarcity of resources did not allow for a prolonged period of adolescence. Children had to learn the skills of survival. Like the Inuit, young Aborigines now have a lot of time on their hands, and they share this time with each other. Condon points out that while Inuit adults may view this non-productivity with some dismay, for young people the prolonged periods of talking, hanging around, playing sport and fiddling with guitars have social and psychological benefits within the peer group itself (Condon 1990). It may be that the peer group is in fact a refuge from parental criticisms and expectations.

This introductory discussion about notions of adolescence is not irrelevant to considerations of the health of this age group. As we shall see, the social and cultural changes experienced by adolescents and young adults are having definite effects on their health status. Changing sexual and marriage practices are influencing both the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases and the age at which young women bear children; the use of alcohol and tobacco (and other drug substances) among young people is undoubtedly influenced by the burgeoning peer and friendship networks, as well as by more psychological factors such as the establishment of non-conformist identities. In turn, increasing alcohol use and smoking by pregnant women are affecting the birth-weight of their offspring. Alcohol use is associated with youthful suicide and attempted suicide among both Aborigines and indigenous peoples in North America. The increased availability of cash to young people may influence their choices of purchased food, and enable more frequent access to motor vehicles and alcohol, resulting in a higher frequency of injury and death from accidents. Writing of Victorian Aboriginal (Koorie) people, Ian Anderson makes this observation on youth:

In practical terms adulthood begins earlier for Aboriginal people than for many non-Aborigines – perhaps around the age of 15. By this it is meant that not only do we see illnesses normally associated with older age groups of people in the general community in younger age groups in Koories, (diabetes is the classic example); but also many issues confronting adults in the general community such as finding work, childrearing, coming to terms with issues of identity and general survival, are dealt with by Aboriginal people at much younger ages (Anderson 1988, p.49).

The Aboriginal youth population in Australia

The most recent Australian census estimated the population of Aboriginal young people between the ages of 10 and 24 to be 83,427. According to this source, young Aborigines thus form 37% of the total Aboriginal and Islander population. The greatest proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth fall in the 10-14 age

bracket as shown in Table 1.

The proportion of the Aboriginal population under 30 years old was 72%, which is in marked contrast to a figure

Table 1: Aboriginal and TSI youth age groups, by sex

	10-14	15-19	20-24	Total
Males	15,517	14,475	11,847	41,839
Females	14,760	14,631	12,197	41,588
Total	30,277	29,106	24,044	83,427

of 48% for other Australians and shows a disproportionate number of children and young people in the Aboriginal population.

The size of the Aboriginal population varies markedly between the states and territories, and this is reflected in differences between their Aboriginal youth populations.

However, in each state or territory, the proportion of the overall Aboriginal or Islander population aged between 10 and 24 was remarkably similar, between 36 and 37%.

Urban and rural residence

Apart from the state and territory differences in the Aboriginal youth populations, there are marked differences among Aborigines, in terms of age and sex, according to place of residence. Overall, approximately 66% of the Aboriginal and Islander population resided in major or other urban areas at the time of the 1986 Census. There were relatively more young Aborigines (aged 15-29 years) among major urban residents, while remote locality residents had more people over the age of 40 years (Tesfaghiorghis 1990, p.4). The major urban areas showed a predominance of Aboriginal females (aged 15 and over).

Table 2: Aboriginal and TSI youth (10-24) by State/Territory

Queensland	22,564
New South Wales	22,035
Western Australia	13,676
Northern Territory	12,409
South Australia	5,191
Victoria	4,608
Tasmania	2,499
Australian Capital Territory	455
Total	83,427

As Tesfaghiorghis points out, while earlier work suggested that there was a rapid in-migration of Aboriginal people into the urban areas, this has now slowed, and in the Northern Territory there has been an important rural shift as people migrate to outstations (ibid.).

The Northern Territory's Aboriginal population is primarily rural (69%) while in Queensland and Western Australia about 35% of the Aboriginal population reside in rural areas. The largest major urban component of the Aboriginal population was in Victoria (48%) and in New South Wales (36%).

Employment figures from the 1986 Census show that only 21% of young Aboriginal people between the ages of 15 and 19 are employed, and only 37% of those between 20 and 34. While the Aboriginal unemployment rate declines with age, it is typically around three times that of the rest of the population (Miller, in Altman 1991). Miller and several other authors establish the dimensions of Aboriginal youth unemployment in a volume edited by Jon Altman (1991) published by the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at ANU. Their work highlights, among other issues, the impact of the geographic distribution of Aboriginal populations upon employment

status. There are many parts of rural and remote Australia with either small or declining labour markets, and in some cases, in remote regions where Aboriginal outstations are located, there are no labour markets at all. This is often referred to as "locational disadvantage" (Altman 1991, pp.158-160).

There are 1,933 Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders engaged in some form of post-secondary education, of whom the majority (60.3%) are female. The effects of schooling on the likelihood of finding employment for young Aborigines are not clearcut, according to Jones (1991) who notes that persons with minimum schooling get into jobs with much the same status as those who left school at 15 or 16. Aborigines end up (overall) in low-status jobs regardless of how long they stayed at school – unless they obtained a post-school qualification (ibid., p.37). According to the Miller Report (1985, p.172), less than 20% of recipients of Abstudy (Aboriginal Study Grants Scheme) were actually undertaking courses which would result in recognised post-school qualifications, and half of the grants were for "personal development" courses. In 1983 Abstudy grants were assisting 21 persons at doctorate, masters or honours level.