Does adolescence exist?

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We all often talk about teenagers and their erratic, hormonal behavior during puberty. Personally, I prefer to use the term ‘adolescence’. That makes it enough reason to discuss both terms, puberty and adolescence first.

Adolescence refers to the transitional period between childhood and adulthood. The term is derived from the Latin verb *adolescere*, meaning growing up. Childhood ends when puberty starts. Puberty is derived from the Latin *pubescere*, which means “covered in hair” and refers to the sexual maturation of boys and girls.

Puberty is triggered by changes in the blood hormone levels, regulated by the hypothalamus, pituitary gland, and the gonads (ovaries or testicles). Notable external changes include the growth of body hair: pubic hair, hair under the armpits, leg hair, and facial hair. This hair growth, therefore, led to the use of the term puberty.

I will need a third term during my presentation: infantilization. This term is used in the scientific study of the history of childhood to describe the historical process that, from the 17th century, led to childhood gradually lasting longer and the distance between children and adults gradually increasing. Adolescence refers to the bridging of the period between childhood and adulthood, and this period, too, infantilized from the 17th century and, therefore, steadily increased.

A stricter terminology requires sexual maturation to be called puberty, and we use the term adolescence to describe the period from puberty to becoming an adult. In our everyday language, however, these terms are often used rather arbitrarily. If adolescents demonstrate difficult behavior, or rather if adults view their behavior as difficult, such parents often call this behavior “pubertal”, referring to the period of puberty.

Obviously, from a historical perspective, puberty has always existed; without puberty there would be no reproduction, and you and I would not have existed. However, has adolescence always been there too? The answer is “No.” Throughout the Middle Ages there was no such thing as adolescence. This term was first referred to by Jean Jacques Rousseau; who had such a great impact on our present-day thinking about development and upbringing. It was Rousseau who pointed out that his Émile was not born once, but twice. First, he was born from his mother, and then again as a grown up and sexually mature man. Rousseau was with this description the first author after the Middle Ages who described the modern idea of adolescence. He described adolescence as a period of crisis. I quote:

*The child who is maturing is moody and erratic, and has a more or less strong aversion toward parental authority; it does not want to be led any more. In this period (I am still quoting Rousseau) it does not want to have anything to do with the adult, it is unreasonable and mutinous; in short, it is unmanageable. It should be kept in mind, however, says Rousseau, that all this is of the greatest significance. The child is maturing; after this crisis nothing human will be foreign to it.*

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Rousseau’s description closely dovetails with the current general notion. The only issue that a modern-day reader of Rousseau’s work would be surprised about is that he speaks about a brief crisis (literally: "…ce moment de crise, bien qu’assez court…"). Since Rousseau, the period of adolescence has continuously increased. The following Figure, based on 27 papers by 33 academics, hailing from 16 Western and Eastern European countries, all specialized in adolescence research and together in Paris in 1988, provides a good impression. The Figure demonstrates that, in 1988, adolescence apparently referred to the age-period from 10 to 30, with a special focus on the ages of 12 and of 15 to 16 years old, which were seen as the peaks of the puberty and adolescence periods, respectively. Nowadays, some thirty years on, the second apex would probably appear a little later. Since Rousseau, adolescence has not only increased in its duration, but also in intensity. This starts with the description by Stanley Hall who, in 1904, wrote the first groundbreaking two-volumes book of 1,300 pages on adolescence. He introduced the term of adolescence in its modern meaning. He described adolescence as:

Adolescence is a time of oscillations and oppositions, between inertness and excitement, pleasure and pain, self-confidence and humility, selfishness and altruism. Society and solitude, sensitivity and dullness, knowing and doing, conservatism and iconoclasm, and sense and intellect.” (White, 1994, p 119; Hall, 1904, p. 40).

Hall’s thinking was of a strong biological nature and, as a result, his work on adolescence to a large extent has contributed to adolescence often being considered a vital, biologically embedded, universal developmental stage in human development. Hall acquired his theories in Germany. In his time, American students used to go to Germany to study psy-

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**Figure 1.** Number of times that a particular age has been mentioned in a conference on adolescence (Koops, 1990)
Psychology, now the German students come to the United States. In Germany, he picked up the notion of *Sturm und Drang*, an allusion to the movement of poets who, according to the standards of the time, demonstrated rather anti-social behavior: they dressed in a bohemian style, sometimes practiced partner swapping, etc. Hall translated the concept of *Sturm und Drang* into *Storm and Stress*. That’s why now, in American textbooks, our students read that adolescents experience a period of Storm and Stress, usually without having the faintest idea where this term originated from.

According to Hall, storm and stress are unavoidable: we all have to pass this phase, growing into adulthood is not possible without it. Ever since Stanley Hall’s work, the term “normative turmoil” has been readily used. The term implies that a turbulent adolescence is the norm. It was Anna Freud (1895–1982), Sigmund Freud’s (1856–1939) daughter, who extended this “normative turmoil” to the extreme. She inferred, and this is considerably more extreme than Hall, that:

“To be normal during the adolescent period is by itself abnormal.” (Freud, 1958, p. 275)

Despite Hall’s theory of the biologically vital “normative turmoil”, it makes rather more sense to understand his interest in adolescence from a culturally-historical point of view. The 19th century industrialization had put children outside the scope of the adult world like never before.

The best book about adolescence that I know of is the one by Epstein (2010), in which he explains that Hall sees adolescence predominantly as the outcome of the industrialization. The factors that he discusses and documents at length include: the urge that women and men have to protect their children against the long working hours in the new factories; the new assumptions about the weakness, helplessness, and incompetence of young people; the deliberate attempts by the new trade unions to protect the jobs of older employees by excluding youngsters; the ambition of leading industrialists to create new generations of trained laborers through mass education; the founding of new companies and industries geared to youngsters that created a new youth culture (Disney, Fisher-Price, the pop music industry, youth fashion, gaming, etc.); and numerous toy industries. Both the exclusion from the work in the factories and the creation of youth-oriented industries placed the youngsters outside the adult world.

Stanley Hall, as we may assume, did not discover a biologically based developmental stage, but described a relatively new culturally-historical phenomenon.

The first and most successful author who wrote about the cultural specificity of the adolescence was the cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead (1901–1978). The book that made Mead instantly famous - her book about growing up on Samoa (Mead, 1928) - is the most interesting one. It led to the notion accepted worldwide that Mead had proved that adolescence is a cultural phenomenon created by us Westerners. It was aimed at a wide audience and very successful; more than a million copies were sold and it is still being printed. The core of Mead’s message can be found in the *Introduction* of her book:

*Mothers were warned that “daughters in their teens” present special problems. This, said the theorists, is a difficult period. The physical changes which are going on in the bodies of your boys and girls have their definite psychological accompaniments. You can no more evade one than you can the other; as your daughter’s body changes from the body of a child to the body of a woman, so inevitably will her spirit change, and that stormily. The theorists looked about them again at the adolescents in our civilization and repeated with great conviction, “Yes, stormily.”* (Mead, 1928,
The message has a rather ironic tone, indicating that the “theorists” did not understand much about it at all and that what they said and wrote actually created the problem, which was unnecessary. For Mead, who had carried out fieldwork on the Samoan island of Ta’u, had collected data about a total of 68 girls, aged 8 to 20 years old. Based on her data, she deduced that growing up in Samoa did not go hand in hand with what Hall had called “storm and stress”. Unlike American girls, the Samoan girls did not suffer a mental crisis during their adolescence. Samoan teenagers were rather carefree and relaxed. According to Mead (1928, Ch. 10), explanatory factors for the absence of storm and stress were: “the general good-naturedness of the Samoan society: the full knowledge of and experimentation with sexuality; and the absence of the reservation of sexual activities for fixed and important relationships.”

Mead’s work on Samoa may have brought her global fame, but as from 1983 it also made her suspect. Her work was radically criticized by Freeman (1983, 1998), who believed that Mead had had no notion at all about the Samoan sexuality and intimacy. The debate about Freeman’s disqualification of Mead’s research became the fiercest debate in cultural anthropology. Freeman wanted to prove that Mead had provided her readers with a myth. His book received instant worldwide attention. Freeman, a New-Zealand anthropologist, worked as a teacher on Samoa for three years around 1940. He learned to speak the language fluently, was adopted by a Samoan family, honored with the traditional title of “Chief”, and conducted ethnographic and archaeological research. In 1965, Freeman returned to Samoa to conduct further research, and decided to try and refute Mead’s findings. He worked on Mead’s location: on the island of Ta’u. He interviewed various chiefs who had known Mead and were very critical of her depiction of Samoa. Nearly 20 years later, Freeman published his book, in which he claimed that Mead had provided a profoundly mistaken picture of the Samoan society and the behavior of the Samoan people. There is practically no assumption Mead made that Freeman has not turned around.

Freeman’s work has posthumously caused Mead major damage: thanks to Freeman, Coming of Age in Samoa can now be found on lists such as The 50 Worst Books of the 20th Century (The Intercollegiate Review, Fall 1999), occupying the first place; and on 10-Books-That-Screwed-Up-The-World (Wiker, 2008), accompanied by The Communist Manifesto, Mein Kampf, and Kinsey’s Sexual Behavior in the Human Male. Mead’s daughter, Catharine Bateson, kept coming across people who asked her: “Oh, Margaret Mead! Wasn’t her work entirely disproved?” Is all of this fair?

Shankman (2009), who himself conducted research on Samoa, thoroughly analyzed Freeman’s criticism. He proved that Freeman had made selective use of the data, creatively used incomplete quotes and omitted data at crucial places.

Freeman would write a second book about Margaret Mead (Freeman, 1998). This was triggered by his meeting with a very elderly lady, Fa’apu’aa, who admitted on camera that she and a friend had made up tall stories about nights spent with boys in answer to Mead’s questions some 60 years ago. This was Freeman’s evidence, his “smoking gun”, that Mead had been fooled by her Samoan informants. Mead’s well-preserved archives, which are still available to researchers, showed, however, that this informant had never been asked about sexual activities but only about other topics. So was storm and stress present or not on Samoa? The answer is still: No, it was not. Despite the controversies between Mead and Freeman, Mead’s assumptions about adolescence as a cultural phenomenon still stand.

Mead’s original claims have been confirmed by
the contemporary studies of Schlegel & Barry (1991). These researchers studied the data about youngsters from 186 pre-industrial societies. The following appears: 1) 60% of these cultures have no word for adolescence and no terms that point to any type of “turmoil” whatsoever between puberty and marriage; 2) most of the youngsters in these cultures spend most of their time with same-sex adults and hardly no time with same-sex peers; 3) anti-social behavior by young men is of a very mild nature (compared to their American peers); 4) teenagers in these cultures rarely demonstrate aggressive, violent, or pathological behavior. To this classic, often-cited study, many cross-cultural data can be added. I only mention Dasen’s work here. Dasen (2000) presents studies that show that the Westernization of countries always goes hand in hand with the conception of Western adolescence. Religious missions and the introduction of Western education in Kenya, for instance, led to an increase in the number of young, unmarried mothers. The same is seen in Morocco (Davis & Davis, 1989) as well as among the Aborigines in Australia, accompanied by serious conflicts between the generations. For the Inuit in Canada, the introduction of Western education, television, and a social security system managed to destroy the traditional culture and led to the conception of modern adolescence. Comparable developments took place in the Ivory Coast.

Epstein’s vision is that these developments are characterized by one and the same mechanism, i.e. teenagers in these countries are faced with the following notions when Western education and Western media are introduced there:

“...teens being treated like, and behaving like, irresponsible children (…), they are cut off from adults and from the centrality of adult culture; they’re prevented from working, or at least from making work the center of their lives; they become controlled by adults rather than part of adult life; teens, rather than adults, become their role models.” (Epstein, 2010, p. 86)

Epstein in this way describes the perfect infantilization process, resulting in adolescence.

An essential and decisive factor is the lack of contact between adolescents and adults. Research shows that teenagers spend more than 35 hours per week in the company of their peers at school and another 35 hours per week with peers outside of school. This total constitutes two-thirds of the time they do not spend asleep and is 60 hours more than the teenagers in pre-industrial countries spend with their peers. These numbers concur with the isolation of the adolescents in the Western world or, rather, they concur with the result of the infantilization process.

However, there is hope. It seems that, ever since the last few decades, the classic adolescence in Northwestern Europe is disappearing. Numerous studies, which I cannot discuss all here, show that adolescents demonstrate far less rebellious behavior than before: generation conflicts have clearly decreased. I will now show you a summary of the studies from the last decades about the so-called generation gap and the – according to Hall – corresponding “normative turmoil”. From this summary, it will be immediately evident why the belief in generation conflicts is such a persistent one.

In a of Figure 2, it is shown that adults have a far more positive opinion of their own generation than of the younger one. They are, however, more negative about boys than about girls and the least negative about their own children. The most interesting data is covered in the next two lines, which demonstrate that adults are much more negative about youngsters than about their own generation, while the line below shows that youngsters think this too. They may be slightly more positive about their own generation than the adults are, but they
are just as positive about the adults as the adults are about themselves. Meeus has called this the ‘reverse generation gap’, as it is not the adolescents that think negatively about the adults, but the adults about the youngsters. This reverse generation gap can be seen as a universal declaration of the negative thinking about ‘today’s youth’. Adults have a negative opinion about youth, possibly based on their fear that these youngsters will not handle their cultural and social achievements well enough. They subsequently attribute the negative relationship with the next generation to the youngsters from this generation. This, apparently, has been going on for centuries: more than 3,000 years ago, the Phoenicians inscribed the following on a clay tablet: “Modern youth has been spoiled. She is evil, godless and lazy. She will never be like youth in the past, and she will never succeed in conserving our culture.” (Korschunow, 1978, p. 114; see Koops & Zucker- man, 2003, p. 351)

Research also shows that the much-discussed mood swings are not more prominent in adolescents than in other age groups. The contact between the generations has become far more informal than in the past 200 years; generation conflicts are no longer widespread. All this applies predominantly to European youngsters, and perhaps I should say Northwestern European youngsters.

It looks as if the developments in Europe are ahead of those in the United States. For the particularly strong infantilization of adolescents also has a commercial cause: the creation of a special market for children and adolescents perpetuates a separate youth culture, cut off from the adult world. This commercial foundation of the infantilization is nowhere as soundly grounded as in the US. On an annual basis, more than 200 billion dollars are spent by teenagers (Epstein, 2010, p. 360). The market leaders proclaim this money as “pester money”, i.e. moaning money, money for products that teenagers moan for. One out of three high school students owns a credit card as well as 84% of college students. A quarter of the mobile phones are bought by youngsters, for a total amount of about 35 billion dollars. We can, therefore, conclude that:

The isolation of teens from adults brought about by the industrial Revolution has been a boon for American business, which has, in turn, widened the gap between teens and adults (Epstein, 2010, p. 361)

Despite all this, we still come across increas-
ingly critical observations about the adolescence both in scientific research and in the media in the United States. The above-mentioned book by Epstein plays a large part here.

In a nutshell, his proposals suggest that we should refrain from age determinations. Commands and bans should not be based on age but rather on what Epstein calls competencies. He uses many chapters of his book to explain that the adolescent competencies continue to be seriously underestimated. Youths who are made responsible for serious and important issues appear to be able to take on far more responsibility than is regularly assumed. I refrain from repeating Epstein’s examples and only like to point to the history of the so-called “child prodigies”.

Before and during Rousseau’s time, there were ample examples of, to our eyes, amazingly talented children. Wieland (1733–1813) read the work of the Roman author from the first century BC, Nepos, when he was 8 years old, and that of the Roman poet Horace who lived at the same time, when he was 10. Goethe (1749–1832) wrote in German, French, Greek and Latin before the age of eight. ‘Turnvater’ Jahn (1778–1852), the founder of gymnastic and the architect of the horizontal and the parallel bars, was able to read and write when he was four. And what did the ‘adolescents’ of the past occupy themselves with? Pascal (1623–1662), at 12 years old, wrote a discourse about sound that was taken seriously by the academics of his time as well as an essay about the conic section which they say beats all works on this matter since Archimedes. Menno van Coehoorn (1641–1704) was sent from Friesland to Maastricht at age 16 as captain of an infantry squad. Heinrich Jung-Stilling (1740–1817), childhood friend of Goethe, read Luther and Calvin when he was 11. Rijklof Michael van Goens (1748–1810) wrote a sound discourse (in Latin) against the burials in churches at age 14 and when he was 17 he wrote three literary essays that have been considered as the basis of the modern Romantic period in the Netherlands. Subsequently, on July 25, 1766, only 18 years old, Van Goens was appointed extraordinary professor of the antiquities, national history, eloquence and the Greek language at the University of Utrecht. Feith (1753–1824) went to Franeker as a student when he was 13 and obtained his Ph.D in Law at age 17. Staring (1808–1877) obtained his doctoral degree when he was 20.

What is important is that such child prodigies used to be valued very positively by the adults. Only since Rousseau, some kind of wonder about such achievements by children arises. The next step is made by Rousseau’s contemporary and follower, Campe (1746–1818), the most influential German educational innovator, who expressed the complaint,

“...that it is not delightful at all to see an eight- or ten-year-old boy “who has read a whole library of books, who can converse about the plants and animals of India, who speaks many languages, who knows all the paradigmata of Latin Grammar by heart, who calculates like a merchant and who explains the classical authors with an ability which brings tears of joy to every true schoolmaster’s eyes.” (see Koops, 2016, p. 125)

Adolescents find it difficult to grow up, because they are not accepted by the grown-up world. Adolescents, therefore, are the victims of the infantilization. As we read in Epstein, we must do everything to start to consider and treat adolescents as serious fellow people again. One of the most important measures that Epstein proposes is the termination of the long-term compulsory education from a young age. He suggests exchanging this for lifelong learning linked to acquiring professional experience and training. This would prevent youngsters from virtually only being in contact with peers for such a long
Newt Gingrich, former Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, is a passionate follower of Epstein. He developed political proposals to accelerate the development of adolescents. He suggested, for instance, to provide high school students who graduate a year sooner with a one-year college grant; and those who graduated two years earlier with a two-year grant.

I am not interested in the concrete programme that Epstein (or Gingrich, or even the West) proposes, I just wish to determine that Epstein’s book extraordinarily clearly perceives that, in the US, too, adolescence is coming to an end, or at least that a strong desire exists for this to happen.

I finally wish to add a few comments on modern brain research, which popularized the concept of the ‘pubertal brain’. This concept even led to the incorporation of the Dutch translation of this word into the last edition of the leading dictionary of the Dutch language of 2015. Strangely enough, the description provided in the Van Dale dictionary is: “the brain of a child in their puberty, when it is still developing (often used as an explanation for characteristic teenage behavior)” (p. 3138). The dictionary thus suggests here that the teenage brain is an explanation for, or cause of, teenage behavior. The concept of the teenage brain has gained laymen interest as a result of two popular books written by Crone (2012a,b). Crone, my colleague from Leiden, is an excellent researcher who conducts groundbreaking research. In her popular informative books about the teenage brain, however, she, to my opinion, overshoots in her enthusiasm. We are given the impression that the brain is the cause of our behavior. However, modern brain studies, even Crone’s own, clearly demonstrate that the brain to a large extent also predominantly is a result of our behavior. There is the consideration that if our brain causes the typical Hall-like adolescence (Crone speaks of puberty when she means adolescence) it cannot be explained that for hundreds of years this adolescent period did not exist, and still does not in unindustrialized countries. From an evolutionary point of view, it is unthinkable that the structure of our brain has changed in such a short time as a few hundred years. Finally: why have observations about the teenage brain become so popular? I suppose it is because they are so reassuring. As a parent, you are not to blame. For it is the brain that is at fault, it is all unavoidable and it will eventually pass. You can sleep now.

I would like to end with a number of conclusions:

1) Adolescence is predominantly a cultural phenomenon, not a biological inevitability.
2) The contemporary adolescence predominantly constitutes an infantilizing effect; it is the result of the industrial revolution and long-term obligatory education.
3) Generation conflicts, mood swings, etc., in short the “normative turmoil”, are increasingly more absent in Europe.
4) The American adolescence is still going strong, predominantly because of the indispensable business that adolescents generate.
5) We would do well to look for ways to provide adolescents with proper civic responsibility.
6) If you are a parent of one or more teenagers, you can start doing this at home.

Acknowledgement

27, March, 2018 professor Yuko Amaya (Nagoya City University) organized an international Workshop for the Japan Society of Youth and Adolescent Psychology, in Tokyo. I, Willem Koops (honorary professor of Utrecht University, The Netherlands) had the honor to be invited to present my view on adolescence research and to discuss with the young researchers, being members of the Society. I presented the written version of my presentation, fol-
ollowed by a short description of the four research programs that were presented by 4 members of the Society, followed by my impressions and comments on these programs.

It was a great pleasure to meet members of the Japan Society of Youth and Adolescent Psychology and to discover how dynamic and high level the research on adolescence in Japan is. It would be great when the international research community would have more knowledge about the ongoing research in Japan. Let us together try to intensify our communication and let us try to exchange our research ideas on a more regular basis.

I have to thank professor Yuko Amaya for her kind invitation and hospitality and wish her all the best with her leadership and mentorship within the frame of the Japan Society of Youth and Adolescent Psychology.

References


