

# Questioning Popular Representations of 'Youth'

We somehow manage continuously to publicise, with little if any questioning, the fantasies and misconceptions about adolescence which professionals and journalists have constructed ever since G. Stanley-Hall started the ball rolling in 1904 with his book called *Adolescence*. In 1904 and in 1994 we find the roll-call of the twentieth century common-sense about these young people that an American journalist called 'teenagers' in the late 1940s: 'they' are difficult, often moody even rebellious; they are always making trouble; and they are full of anxiety as they confront the great challenge 'society' has posed, the need to make the transition to mature adulthood.

The ways in which we understand and categorise sections of the population and particular individuals matter. They matter because how we see things affects our behaviour and what we do - especially in terms of problem solving.

We hear many comforting stories of problematic young

people as 'the others' who are deviant, difficult and different. 'We' are alright; 'they' are the problem. The great American sociologist, Talcott Parsons, wrote back in 1942 about the ways in which 'youth culture' was marked by irresponsibility. Such thinking must be one of the more amazing examples of adult blindspots for, as Parsons wrote this, Western governments run by 'responsible' adults were tearing the globe apart and killing its peoples on a mass scale previously unheard of.

So much of this great account of youth begins with the implicit assumption that they — young people — are different, even exotic. The question, 'what is youth?' is often asked in the same way that the classical anthropologist might have queried the strange life-worlds of African pygmies, or in the same way a zoologist might inquire about a rare species of fauna from deep within the Amazonian rainforest. Is 'youth' to be understood as a rare and exotic species about which we

can fantasise using our ideas and images of teenagers as repositories for our collective fears and anxieties, about the disruptive and dangerous potential of adolescence? The question 'what is youth' may well be asked in humorous and light-hearted ways, but it is a way of representing young people that has very serious and practical outcomes in terms of how we relate to 'them' (young people).

Throughout this century we have developed an armoury of psychological and sociological theories and research about youth (or 'adolescence' and its manifestations in 'youth cultures') which are systematically applied to such projects as defining, 'What teenager is that?' (*Sunday Age*, 27 March 1994).

These ways of understanding young people quite clearly define what the 'normal process' of socially necessary and psychologically inevitable adolescent maturation into a successful adult role looks like. It talks of adjustment and development into appropriate

social roles and clearly states what we can expect in terms of a proper transition towards the development of adult psychological capacities. It is also good at defining what every first-year social/youth work student learns to call 'mal-adaptive behaviours' as they use their psycho-social models to 'diagnose' the first 'symptoms' of 'dysfunctional youth'.

And the media, as Stanley Cohen first pointed out in the 1970s, loves nothing better than to whip-up a good 'moral panic' about 'teenage hooligans', 'adolescent gangs' and 'crime waves' of 'feral adolescents'. Certainly representing young people as peculiar objects of concern makes for interesting and often entertaining reading. For some, such approaches can also alleviate anxiety by providing expert assurances and guidelines for parents and adults about how we *ought* to behave towards our problematic teenagers. Often this is done in the same breath by experts who tell us that



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today's parents have been overwhelmed by a surfeit of professional expertise!

Experts and professionals in the management of the soul have been very active through the twentieth century, marking out the territories of adolescence, seeking out identifying markers and warning signs or symptoms of 'delinquency' or 'anti-social attitudes'. The list of causal explanations for teenage deviance changes little over the years, varying but slightly according to the socio-cultural shifts of the time. Over the past five decades we have seen 'working mothers' held responsible for delinquency or rebellious children. Or naughty and disruptive adolescents have been explained in terms ranging from a lack of spiritual guidance, bad parenting, dysfunctional families or even defective genes.

The processes of defining 'problem youth' in all their various forms is an enterprise that has justified in many cases the normalising interventions of the experts into the lives of young people and their families. Once the work of 'discovering', identifying and diagnosing the problem is complete, the solution usually requires professional help to 'normalise' the young person. So we see the behaviour measured according to 'scientific' knowledge that

determines 'proper' adolescent development and adjustment into adult roles and status.

It is time to question all such scientific claims and categories. It is time to question our eagerness to operate out of these frameworks and to rely on the expert without recognising the professional interests such experts have in expanding their clientele.

It is especially time to question the ways in which we insist on categorising young people, defining them variously as delinquent or maladjusted, or to invent new categories like 'the sulker', 'the mirror addict', 'the rebel', 'the volcano', 'the worry wart', the 'drug dabbler', and the 'sexplorer' (*Sunday Age*, 27 March 1994). Such approaches provide the bases for typologies that cause considerable damage to our capacities for relating to and understanding young people. The apparent 'need' we seem to have to exoticise 'youth' in many instances gives certain aspects of their behaviours deviant status thereby inhibiting our capacity to relate to young people for who and what they are — that is, people who happen to be young.

We need to resist that tendency to think about and to portray young people as some rare and peculiar species

whose behaviour enables us to understand and respond to them according to where they fit in the matrix of types. Despite all that is written about 'youth', there is little substantive difference between 'them' and 'us'. That is not to say that the experiences of being young do not have their peculiarities or needs. It does, however, mean that it is time we went past those traditional ways of discussing 'youth'.

It is time to begin to question the credibility of claims that all young people can be defined by reference to a transitional process between childhood and adulthood — a process characterised by experimentation with identity; a time for learning about independence. Surely these features are not unique to adolescence. I know of no other phase in the life-cycle that does not include all those features we employ to define adolescence. The experiences of life in one's thirties, forties or even seventies can be just as transitional and full of 'storm and stress' and trial and tribulations as the teenage years.

The message here is simple. If we are really serious about being close to, loving, empowering and supporting our young people, we need firstly to re-examine the ways in which we have come to see

and think about them. When young people are angry they often feel and get angry for exactly the same reasons as adults do: they can't cope, they feel 'got at', or they feel that they have been subject to an injustice. Like older people, young people worry about how they look and about work, education and friends. Older people, like young people, use drugs, feel insecure, go into rages and often experience angst about their identities. It is unhelpful to be assured that 'external' factors such as adolescents' 'revolting clothes' are nothing to really worry about; to be told that young people have always had extreme visual behaviours and that we, as adults, ought simply to overlook such minor irritants. If appearance is the issue, let's just look around at the grooming habits of adult bodies, with their bulging bellies, balding heads, crinkly faces, and 'old fashioned and distasteful clothes'. Surely how we perceive such qualities depends on where we stand.

If the way we relate to young people is a problem, the big first step towards solving it is to begin valuing our own knowledge about our children and our capacity to know and live with them. This involves not seeing young people as different from ourselves. It involves identifying commonalities rather than insisting (with the legitimacy of scientific research methods) on the ways in which 'they' are different. It means questioning the keepers of knowledge and their confidence about the apparent naturalness of the categories they create. It means taking back our own ability and capacity to know our own children.