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The Kaleidoscope of Adolescence

Experiences of the World's Youth at the Beginning of the 21st Century

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A century ago people were intrigued by a new invention, the forerunner of the modern kinescope. By inserting a strip of paper containing a series of pictures into a drum, then spinning the drum while peering through a set of slits around the drum's perimeter, one could watch the pictures on the paper slowly coalesce into a repetitive set of coordinated movements. From the drum's disparate pictures, a single, moving picture appeared before one's eyes.

In many respects, our understanding of adolescence at the outset of the 21st century mimics this instrument of entertainment from Victorian parlors. We spin together the related but distinctive features of life for youth around the world and discern a common image of their movement from childhood into adulthood. At a superficial level the pictures coalesce to give the impression that young people worldwide share the same challenges, interests, and concerns. We speak of the emergence of a "global youth culture" (Schlegel 2000), in which young people – at least in the middle class – wear the same clothing and hair styles, listen to some of the same music, and adopt similar slang expressions. We remark on how the world is "shrinking" by virtue of new technologies (e.g., the Internet) that bring people from far-flung corners of the globe into close contact with each other. We emphasize the commonality of experience among youth as opposing ideologies falter and economic systems begin to meld.

The provocative opening sentence to A. Bame Nsamenang's contribution to this volume (see Chapter 3), however, challenges any satisfaction we might take in this kinescopic image. "Adolescent psychology," he

contends, "is a Eurocentric enterprise." The truth is that a disproportionate number (if not most) of our images of what happens in adolescence are based on the American and European "teenager." In reality there are markedly different "adolescences" in other parts of the world that stand apart from Western accounts of what does or should happen during this transitional period between childhood and adulthood. Consider that two-thirds of Indian adolescents dutifully – and willingly – accept their parents' management in arranging a marital partner for them (Chapter 4), or that many young women in the Philippines sacrifice their own futures to go to cities to earn income to send home to their families (Peterson 1990). The negotiation of autonomy, which has been seen to be central to Western adolescence, is not a central motif in these cultures. Consider, too, the thousands of street youth in Kenya, and in many other parts of the world, who develop remarkable competence in surviving and carving a niche for themselves in urban environments (Aptekar & Ciano-Federoff 1999). The developmental tasks – and achievements – of these youth bear little resemblance to those one finds in textbooks on adolescence. Millions of adolescent boys and girls in the Middle East are permitted little contact with each other, even in school (Chapter 7). What can be said of their development of gender roles and sexuality that has any resemblance to what happens in other parts of the world? Even our claim that the length of adolescence is expanding because of delayed entry into marriage or work, while true in many parts of the world (e.g., see Chapter 10), is not evident in Russia; there, youth are actually marrying at *earlier* ages than in the past in order to legitimize sexual activity (see Chapter 8). Likewise, Mexican women experience strong pressure to marry and have children by their early 20s (see Chapter 9).

Scrutinizing the experiences of young people from this global perspective provides a very different image of adolescence than was common among 20th-century European and North American scholars. In effect, as Verma and Saraswathi allude to in their portrayal of youth in India (Chapter 4), we must replace the kinescope with a kaleidoscope – with a more varied and colorful set of moving pictures. The forms that adolescence takes within a given culture, let alone across cultures, are remarkably diverse and distinctive. Certainly, there are some repeated themes in the biological, cognitive, and psychological imperatives of human development, and in common challenges brought on by the new global world of the 21st century. But these issues are adapted to the needs and exigencies of societies and are often transformed and given different meaning within distinctive cultural systems.

As the world continues to get smaller, as peoples come into contact through increased communication and emigration, it is time to take a closer look at these kaleidoscopic variations. It is no longer sufficient to adopt the parochial view of adolescence in one culture and claim an understanding of this age period. Scholars who study adolescence, practitioners who work with youth, business leaders concerned with a new generation of employees, policy makers, and even parents must first divest themselves from Eurocentric, universalistic notions of adolescence. They must examine adolescence in historical and cultural context, be open to its variegated forms, and recognize its tentative or evanescent nature.

Objectives of This Volume

Our objectives in this volume are to ascertain the extent to which adolescence is a discernible stage of life in various regions of the world and to examine how this period is experienced in each region. We are concerned with how key societal institutions shape this phase of life, who the important people are in adolescents' lives, and how youth negotiate the opportunities available to them. We are also concerned with how the experiences of adolescents are changing, how the trajectories of their lives are being altered as the societies around them change and as adolescents look to the future.

To do this, we asked an international team of scholars with extensive background studying young people to comment on the nature of adolescence in 8 specific regions of the world. In some cases these regions were a single country, one we thought would provide some representation of a larger geographic area. In other cases, authors describe adolescence in 2 or more nations that share some cultural similarity. All authors are experts on their regions, and most are native to the locales they describe, so all could draw on personal experience, as well as findings from research studies, including sources in local languages that would be difficult to access from outside.

These scholars were given a formidable task, namely, to summarize and evaluate the character and conditions of adolescence within their regions of the world. Of course, even within a region or nation, there is enormous diversity on almost any criterion: family organization and routines, religious practices, norms and traditions, economic and human resources, leisure activities, and so on. Thus, authors were often forced to generalize features and trends and/or to focus on subgroups

within a given region. To facilitate comparisons across nations and regions, authors agreed to organize their commentary around a standard set of topics: definitions of adolescence, family relations, peer relations, education, preparation for work, health issues, social services, civic engagement, and media use or influences. Chapters 3 through 10 each contain a section on each of these topics, except in cases where a topic is not really relevant to the lives of adolescents in that particular region of the world. Some chapters contain additional sections of specific relevance to adolescents in a region. To provide a general background for the regional reports, Chapter 2 describes current and projected demographic features of the world's youth. We end the book (Chapter 11) with a forward-looking commentary on the actions and policies that schools, governments, businesses, parents, and others should consider to improve the future life opportunities for youth.

Emerging from the chapters of this book is a more contemporary and comprehensive view of life circumstances of adolescents around the world. This first chapter highlights key features of this view by examining the way in which adolescence is defined in different cultures, the way that major social contexts nurture individual development during this stage of life, and recurrent themes that emerge from our contributors' assessments of the lives of youth in their sections of the globe.

Definitions of Adolescence

To begin with, one can learn a lot about the nature of adolescence in a given culture simply from the way it is defined. In some cases, there is simply no term to describe adolescence, a certain sign that the society does not regard it as a distinct and important stage of the life cycle. Until recently, this was the case in many East Asian societies, according to Stevenson and Zusho (see Chapter 5). Often, such societies were organized so that children take on major adult responsibilities at an early age; in their activities, young people are not commonly segregated from adults. Agrarian economies, in which children and young people work the fields or herds alongside adults are the most common examples of this arrangement, but it also persists in some more industrialized economies. There are also special historical circumstances that call for a redefinition of adolescence. In Chapter 9, for example, Welti describes how adolescence is suspended and childhood curtailed in several Latin

American countries in order to justify the recruitment of young people into the armed forces fighting civil wars or conflicts with neighboring nations.

In other societies (e.g., India and Japan), adolescence – at least until recently – has been subsumed under the larger label of "youth," which typically encompasses a broader age range than the 2nd decade of life. "Youth" may subsume all young people under age 20 (including young children). The implication is that there is nothing special about adolescence. In some instances, "youth" includes individuals from age 10 or so up to 30 or 35, an age categorization that suggests that one is not completely mature, responsible, and deserving of full respect as an adult until this much later age. This perspective may be encoded in laws, such as the Youth Policy Act in India, which is intended to provide services to people up to the age of 35 (see Chapter 4). Curiously, however, health and social service personnel who carry out the law's mandates have found it useful to formulate separate approaches for individuals under age 20 (children and adolescents) and those age 21 or older (who might be considered late adolescents or young adults).

Still other societies have no single term for adolescence, but a variety of words that are applied in specific circumstances or with reference to specific groups of young people. According to Booth (Chapter 7), the Arabic term for adolescence, *murahaqa*, is used in academic texts but not in common parlance. The term has sexual overtones and captures the layperson's perception of adolescence as fraught with sexual temptation, a period in which adults must closely supervise a young person's activities. Interestingly, G. S. Hall (1904) endowed the term with similar connotations. There are other Arabic terms that are used in daily conversation to refer to individuals in the adolescent stage: *fata/fatat* (masculine and feminine forms) or *shabb/shabba*, which connote marital status or level of responsibility for or obligation to others. These reveal important dimensions of the adolescent period in Arabian societies. China and Japan also have several terms that can be used to refer to individuals during the adolescent period, but no general term to designate this life stage as a whole (See Chapter 5). These terms refer to the stage of puberty, one's generational status within the family, or the legal rights and responsibilities a person has. Most often, however, people are likely to refer to a young person by her or his school status, as a middle school student or high school student. Because this is the central role for adolescents in Japanese or Chinese society, it is no surprise

that it is the preferred reference point for understanding and organizing adolescence in these societies. The common term for adolescence in the United States, *teenager*, brings forth images of recklessness, rebellion, irresponsibility, and conflict – hardly a flattering portrait but one that captures the worried stance that most adults in that society take toward young people.

Beneath this kaleidoscope of nuance and innuendo, the common element we see is an interval of transition and preparation between childhood and adulthood. Whether it is short or long, whether it is unnamed, named, or understood through a variety of terms in different situations, nearly all societies have a period of transition when young people continue a process, begun in childhood, of equipping themselves to be full adult members of society.

Contexts of Development and Socialization

What preparation adolescents receive is shaped in large part by the fundamental contexts in which they spend time (Whiting 1980), and the chapters of this book provide penetrating descriptions of these contexts across societies. For our purposes here, we will examine these contexts as the domains in which adolescents gain (or fail to gain) valuable resources for their later lives. They provide reservoirs of experience. They offer models, guidance, teaching, social control, and material resources that prepare youth for adulthood.

Family: Diverging Forms and Altering Resources

Families are everywhere one of the most, if not the most, important contexts for adolescent development. But the nature of adolescents' family experience varies enormously. Some youth grow up in close-knit, hierarchically organized, extended families that provide a web of connections and reinforce a traditional way of life. Others come of age in nuclear or single-parent families, with whom they may spend little time – or have close, intimate relationships. In the Arab world, families continue to be quite authoritarian and patriarchal; adolescents are taught strict codes of conduct and family loyalty (Chapter 7). In the West, parent-child relationships are less hierarchical than in the past, and the diminished authority of parents may contribute to the relatively high rates of deviant behavior that characterize several European and North American societies (Chapter 10). Such variability occurs both between and within societies.

A trend noted by most of our authors is that the types of families adolescents experience are changing. Across nations, we see the expansion of family forms during the last half of the 20th century, including more divorced families, single-parent families, remarried families, multiresidence families, and, in some settings, more gay and lesbian families. Trends evident in most regions also include greater family mobility, migration to urban areas, family members working in distant cities or countries, smaller families, fewer extended-family households, and increases in mothers' employment (Larson et al. 2002).

These many changes alter the capacity of families to provide resources to adolescents and the types of resources they provide. When families live apart from extended relatives, it deprives adolescents of daily access to useful models and sources of advice. When youth leave impoverished rural areas to seek better employment opportunities in urban areas, they typically strain the family's capacity to provide emotional and instrumental support (Chapter 6). Maternal employment brings additional resources to the family, including money, new social capital, and – something particularly useful to female offspring – modeling of making one's way in the economic sphere. Smaller families have contributed undoubtedly to a trend in many parts of the world, including India, Southeast Asia, and the Arab nations, toward greater openness and communication between parents and children. This allows youth to benefit from a new level of attention, advice, and emotional support.

Thus, within this enormous diversity, a common theme is that families are facing new challenges and adapting in new ways. In some cases, adolescents are being deprived of resources that were of great value in the past – such as the ready advice and support of a grandmother and the stability and security of a rural village. But they also are gaining access to new family resources, like more-open relationships with parents and the indirect benefits that come with mothers' employment.

Schools: Expanding with Variable Effectiveness

Educational institutions make up another important context of many adolescents' lives, one that is specifically devoted to giving them resources to prepare them for adulthood. Several authors, but particularly Fussell and Greene (Chapter 2), regard improvements in education and vocational training as crucial to ameliorating current and future circumstances for young people. Indeed, expansion of educational opportunities for youth in Japan, Korea, and China helped to propel these nations into strong positions in the world economy in the latter portion of the

20th century (see Chapter 5). Educational participation and completion rates are high in these nations. Despite the stress that youth endure preparing for qualifying examinations, education has helped raise the standard of living for individuals and for these countries as a whole, lifting some of them out of the category of developing nation.

Generally speaking, developing countries are increasing the number of youth in school, with potential future benefits to their youth and their economies. However, many nations in Africa and South Asia, and some in Southeast Asia and Latin America, still have a long way to go before achieving even universal primary education. The authors also report that schools in these nations often fall far short of their mission. Welti (Chapter 9) laments a decline in recent years in the percentage of Latin American adolescents who have access to secondary education or who can afford to attend higher educational institutions. Verma and Saraswathi (Chapter 4) as well as Nsamenang (Chapter 3) depict the shortcomings of educational systems that nations carried over from colonial rule. Modeled on European systems, the schools were (and remain) remarkably insensitive to indigenous educational systems and the needs of adolescents in a particular region. Nsamenang comments that, "As it stands today, the school is not yet fully suited to the agrarian life paths of the bulk of the continent's peoples, as its quality has been declining and its relevance to the life journeys of Africans." The indigenous system, he explains, is peer oriented, features participatory learning, and is focused on socializing responsible participation in the family and community – objectives that are ignored in the formal educational system. The hierarchically organized formal system, with its didactic instructional techniques, forces adolescents to straddle two worlds in their quest for a meaningful identity and viable coping strategies. It is reminiscent of the "multiple worlds problem" that, according to Phelan, Davidson, and Yu (1998), ethnic minority adolescents face in the United States.

Even when they are culturally relevant, schools in many parts of the world are challenged to recruit quality staff and develop programming suited to the changing nature of adult work (Shanahan, Mortimer, & Kruger 2002). Santa Maria (Chapter 6) and Welti (Chapter 9) lament the disorganization and limited funding of schools, as well as the inadequate backgrounds of instructional staff in their regions. Likewise, Booth (Chapter 7) notes that despite their success in boosting literacy rates, many schools in the Arab states suffer from overcrowding and underpaid or unmotivated teachers. According to Santa Maria (Chapter 6),

unemployment rates in the Philippines are highest among youth with the most advanced (postsecondary) degrees because their educational training is not tied to the labor needs of the society. Arnett (Chapter 10) points out that schools in the United States often fail to provide the background and training that students need to move easily into the labor market, a stark contrast to the apprenticeship system that operates effectively in several northern European nations.

The good news, then, is that more youth than ever before are in school. Two concerns, however, are that the schools are often poorly fitted to the culture of their students, and in many cases the curriculum fails to provide them with the skills that will be most useful to successful adult work.

Peers: Increasing Interactions with Mixed Results

By comparison to family and school, adults around the world often take a more ambivalent posture toward the role of peers in adolescents' preparation for adulthood. Peers do offer valuable resources: companionship, emotional support, and an arena in which to try out and learn important social skills. But peers are also implicated in promoting consumerism, negative attitudes toward school, and life-compromising behaviors such as drug use, violence, and other delinquent activity.

The societies described in this book display dramatic variability in their response to this ambivalence, from rigid restrictions to active promotion of interactions with peers. Rural India and the Arab states, in particular, exemplify a restrictive response. According to Booth (Chapter 7), opportunities for peer interaction (outside of kin relations) are severely limited in the Arab world, especially for girls. If girls attend school, it is usually in gender segregated institutions. In the same societies, opportunities for interaction with the other sex or the development of romantic and sexual relationships are constricted. The result is that peers make comparatively little contribution to adolescent development (indeed, there is little research on them). In other societies, however, peers figure prominently in adolescents' daily lives. Nsamenang (Chapter 3) comments that "[t]he peer group is a ubiquitous institution in sub-Saharan Africa." Similar circumstances are noticeable among youth throughout Europe and North America (see Chapter 10). In these contexts peers often subsume some responsibilities otherwise assumed by parents. In extreme cases, peers become surrogate families. Street youth in Latin America rely upon networks of peers to help negotiate survival in urban settings (see Chapter 9).

A common observation across this spectrum of societies is that the role of peers is expanding. In societies where peer interaction has been limited, the authors report that adolescents are having more peer interaction during school, going to and from school, and in shared leisure activities, with the clearest trends in the middle class (see Chapters 6 and 7). Adolescents are sharing interests with friends and relying more on friends for advice and support. A related change is that adolescents' involvement in romantic relationships and in premarital sexual activity are increasing, especially as age of marriage comes later. Rising rates of premarital intercourse appear to be more common among youth in higher social classes and urban areas, where parents wield less authority or cannot supervise youth as closely. Santa Maria (Chapter 6) links increased rates of sexual activity among South Asian youth to decreased parental supervision resulting from mothers' employment and young people's migration to the city for employment. Under these circumstances, peers emerge as a more powerful force in young people's lives as they are the preferred source of sexual information and the context for meeting sexual partners. Where societal norms discourage sexual activity, it remains a furtive activity, often engaged in without contraceptives. As a result, it is becoming a major source of the proliferation of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV infection.

If there is a theme to the chapters' treatment of peer relations, then, it is that this expanding context of adolescents' lives is bringing both positives and negatives. In some cases, adolescents themselves seem ambivalent about the capacity of peers to meet their needs. Russian youth, for example, rate their peers as low in kindness and high in bullying, relative to their counterparts in European nations. Yet, Russian adolescents also value close friendships and seem to have no more difficulty maintaining good relations with friends than youth in other nations (see Chapter 8 for details). Greater interaction with peers is providing adolescents new resources – an arena for experimenting and learning new skills – but it is also, for some youth, a source of new problems.

Other Contexts of Preparation

Beyond family, school, and peers, there are other contexts that play a major role in adolescents' lives in different parts of the world. Like those we have already reviewed, these contexts can offer youth valuable resources as well as subject them to liabilities. Large numbers of youth from rural peasant and urban poor families in the developing world