

# **ADOLESCENT ASPIRATIONS IN CULTURAL CONTEXT**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Adolescent aspirations are undergoing shifts because of cultural changes. Ideas of intergenerational conflict emerge as increasingly adolescents find more avenues for self-exploration. The global adolescent is at the threshold of cultural change where there are more instances of pluralism in adolescent aspirations. This paper explores the different contexts and avenues for adolescent's psychological development and the context for their aspirations as they transition to adulthood. Particular emphasis is on intergenerational difference, involvement in family, and gendered structure of opportunities.*

**Keywords:** *Adolescence, Aspirations, Intergenerational, Self-Other Distinction, Transition*

## **I. THEORIZING ADOLESCENCE: SELF-OTHER DISTINCTION**

The discovery of "adolescence" is credited to G Stanley Hall. He was greatly influenced by the post-Darwinian movement of biological and evolutionist philosophy, and saw adolescence as a 'natural' transition to adulthood. On the other hand, the non-linear, stage theorist, Erikson described development as *epigenetic* in nature. All the childhood introjections and identifications evolve into a new configuration during adolescence. To prove their aptitude for social roles is the "crisis" of adolescence of the 5<sup>th</sup> stage of Erikson's theory. Socially approved roles provide a sense of reality to the adolescent[1].

Kohlberg (1971) viewed moral development as one domain of identity formation [2]. Like Erikson he too is a stage theorist though taking a major separation in terms of 'age' related stages – age is less accurate indicator of development of ethical reasoning. At the conventional level of morality, maintaining the expectations of family, social groups, or nation is valuable for their own sake by the adolescent. A lingering concern about conformity to opinions of others and group norms are the motives for judgement – the desire to be a 'good boy', or 'nice girl'. In this context, Gilligan (1982) says that in order to live in the contemporary culture girls lose a sense of themselves to meet social expectations [3]. She advocates the relational model for identifying self and introduces that moral voices of care take precedence.

According to Loevinger conformity to roles is basis for identity (cf. Kroger, 1996) [4]. Loevinger's description of adolescent's task is 'the search for coherent meanings in experience.' Further, Loevinger says that perception of alternatives and exceptions paves the way for the conceptual complexity. A sense of self-authorship is apparent at the end of adolescent stage, which is followed by the transition from conscientiousness behaviour to appreciation of individuality and emotional independence.

Furthering this perspective, Robert Kegan (1979) gives a synthesis of the above theories [5]. Identity formation (or meaning making) is an ongoing process in which boundaries between self and others become structured, lost and reformed. According to Kegan (1979), Kohlberg's stage 3 reflects adolescent's interpersonal concordance. Here the self is not yet differentiated enough to have its relationships; rather the self *is* its interpersonal affiliations. The two major stages of adolescent development in Kegan's theory are: i) the interpersonal balance and ii) the institutional balance. The first is characteristic of transition from childhood to adolescence; and second the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Theorists have again critiqued addressing that the 'interpersonal' stage for girls and women is more prevalent and permanent than a transition to 'institutional' stage. Kegan's constructive-developmental view is not to be viewed in individual's isolation, but suggests a 'cultural embeddedness'.

These theories suggest roles (Erikson, 1968), expectations (Kohlberg, 1971), self-authorship by continuous meaning-making (Loevinger, 1996), and constructive-development by balancing complexity by arriving at a truce (Kegan, 1979) in the development of adolescent identity and thought within the cultural framework. This paper emphasizes the role of interpersonal as well as institutional affiliations in the life of adolescents in times of cultural change.

## II. SUBJECT

We can see that 'adolescence' is not limited to a transition between childhood and adulthood but research has further divided adolescence into two stages i) from childhood to adolescence and from ii) adolescence to adulthood. Secondly, a deliberate gendered perspective of adolescence is also essential hallmark of the theories. Lastly the interdependence on interpersonal relationships versus the independence by following institutional identities is also an experience of transition. Within this framework, the subject arises. Aspirations reflect how adolescents see their potential future lives. It is not just the roles they will occupy but also the timing and duration they expect to participate in that role, the conflicts they are undergoing or perceive to be undergoing as they enter into adulthood, and their negotiation of cultural expectations.

## III. PROBLEMS

The developmental processes salient during adolescence are identity formation, meaning making and autonomy. The major concerns associated with the above are – i) involvement of institutions of socialization, ii) dissemination of cultural knowledge and the seeming intergenerational continuities and discontinuities, iii) entrance of the adolescent in the work-life of adults, iv) pathways to educational development, iv) involvement in family life and relationship with parental or authority figures, and v) participation in civic life. All this cumulatively add to the wellbeing of the adolescent.

## IV. RESEARCH CONTEXT

Cultural schema according to Quinn and Holland are models of the world that are shared by the members of a society and play a role in understanding of the world [6]. Culture schemas are intersubjectively shared by members of the group. These models are externalized as shared, discernible institutions as well as internalized by

individuals[7]. Weisner explains during childhood these cultural pathways consist of cultural activities we step into and engage with, and raises the question of how global processes change these pathways [8]. This shared knowledge of the cultural community is ‘contingent, negotiated through endless social exchanges.’ Decisions individuals make in this context, are organized by local, ecologically and culturally “situated rationality” [8].

Social and cultural positioning are important in an individual's life as they create a space within which people can think and make meaning. These spaces provide a construct where models or representation of cultural values, ideas and practices may be institutionalized [9]. This space also results in a dynamic meaning making process which helps in making communication possible by giving form to the relations between individuals and groups of people. The representations are implicit or explicit and are both individually and collectively held and resisted.

Thus, a new more global and *pluralistic* view of adolescence is emerging [10]. There are many “adolescences” because of distinct cultural circumstances and cultural systems, there is not a single youth culture. At the same time these plural developmental pathways are shaped by some common demographic and institutional forms for e.g., urbanization, participation in school, common exposure to mass media (Weisner and Lowe, 2005).

## V. KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the continuities and discontinuities in dissemination of cultural knowledge?
2. How has globalization, modernization and technological advancement influenced adolescent aspirations?
3. What is the subjective meaning of education, of entrance into the work-force of adults, and involvement in family life for the adolescent?
4. How do adolescents negotiate their personal culture in guidance with the collective culture?
5. What is the gendered structure of opportunities of adolescent aspirations?

## VI. RECENT RESEARCH RESULTS

### 6.1 Globalization and Intergenerational Continuities and Discontinuities

Globalization and modernity has affected aspirations and values. Whether cultures tend to converge – totally or partially – or diverge is a debated topic. The way values change in modern societies is summarized by the notion of ‘individualization’. Western societies have become detached from traditional institutions and authoritative forces and increasingly find their legitimation in personal choices and preferences. On the one hand individualization has created a sense of personal growth, self-expression, creativity, equality, democracy, personal freedom, gender concerns, and an “ethic of commitment”; on the other hand, individualization has brought a vast number of repressible development such as consumerism, hedonism, privatism, and narcissism [11].

In the post-modern sense, the very idea of values is seen as a denial of ambivalence, as deterministic, as a reification of cultural realities. To understand cultural change, theorist refer to the generational issues. This includes broadly a change from i) survival to wellbeing values and ii) traditional to secular values. Wellbeing in the local community context is the capacity for engaged participation in cultural activities that a community

considers desirable (Weisner and Lowe, 2005). Kagtıcibasi (2005) talks about adolescence in societies that are transitioning from traditional setup [12].

Adolescents' interaction with technology has also revealed that the internet is a unique social environment that offers a globalized social milieu. Networks can be small and intimate like instant messaging, but also large and global or national, like blogging or facebook. The importance of internet and technology is the popularity among both technologically advanced locales and others. The internet is also seen as a new tool, as it has its own set of norms that are transferred through generations of users [13].

## 6.2 Educational Attainment and Intergenerational Mobility

Increased attendance and participation in school has been the single most important influence for adolescent development. Schooling ensures skilled labour, delayed entry into workforce, reduction in fertility, and a structured environment for learning. This means that school has emerged as an important institution in the development of adolescent aspirations. Schooling also ensures transmission of more moral values (Larson, 2002).

Intergenerational mobility in terms of career aspirations is the also another domain that has brought a change in value orientations. Opportunities for intergenerational mobility has led to increase individualistic ideas and value orientations.

## 6.3 Adolescent's Involvement in Work

Studies on intergenerational continuities have shown that women's roles are more susceptible to change than men's roles over generations [14]. The most important being that of 'care'. Care work means personal care, care in interpersonal relationships, caregiving, and care of the environment [15]. The meanings, purposes and forms of socially distributed care are changing, but the practices continue (Weisner and Lowe, 2005).

The idea of care is again one in constant conflict with the idea of market. This distinction of public and private sphere of work is emphasized in literature. "Productivity" is defined differently in different cultures, for the Mississippi Choctow community being productive is associated with marriage and child-bearing [16]. For the Javanese adolescence, productivity is measured alongside the family income (White, 2011) – children are either engaged in directly productive categories like agriculture and non-agricultural activities, animal care and feeding, exchange/communal labour, non-agricultural wage labour; or indirectly productive categories like care of small children, household and collecting firewood [17].

Valsiner (2000) views adolescence as a social delay [18]. This social delay occurs as individuals delay the entry into adult roles. However, adolescents' initiatives are reflective of adult responsibilities. He gives the example of babysitting – an activity that is both 'care' and yet is done as paid work. Even more theorists (Schultheiss, 2013) emphasize the importance of the relational cultural paradigm – recognizing the interwoven nature of culture and relationship in understanding care work [19]. This intersectionality (mutually constitutive relations among social identities as well consequences like inequality, oppression, power relations) of multiple categories of identity emphasize relationships as a space where knowledge, understanding and multiple perspectives are created and transformed through dialogue and lived experience [19]. An example given by Schultheiss is that for many people their work should be socially valued – this in turn is the means by which they matter to others.

Glenn (1994 cf. Patton, 2013) gives an exceptional case of “mothering”, highlighting again that mothering requires mediating private and public spheres because it involves coordinating family and school schedules, negotiating services etc. Mothering, she argues, also takes place in social contexts with unequal power relations (Patton, 2013). This gendered structure is evident in adolescent girls of India where young girls take up the responsibility of caregiving to younger siblings without expectations of pay.

Adolescence as social delay is again highlighted in studies done on globalization, believing that globalization transmits the notion that “youth” is a particular time in the life course when one should be free of adult responsibilities and should develop individual talents and interests [20]. This is again in conflict with the situation in India, where there is a pressure to take on adult roles and responsibilities early on.

## 6.4 Involvement in Family

Family data and surveys across eight European countries (France, Germany, Great Britain, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden) point to the continuation of religious traditions and gender norms. Two aspects of family values are examined in this regard:

- i. perceptions about the importance of core gender relationships,
- ii. beliefs about ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ gender norms/traits.

Cross-national differences and intergenerational differences in family values show that the transformation of gender roles is associated with women’s increasing participation in the work force (Ester, Mohler, Winken, 2006). There has been a decline in pro-marriage and pro-motherhood stance (Ester, Mohler, Winken, 2006). Despite the post-modernist stance of ‘anything goes’ there has been a stance of continuity of traditional attitudes. Indian adolescent’s response to attitudes towards marriage and gender roles largely conformed to traditional norms with 63% males and 72% females preferring arranged marriages [21]. Female across social classes are encouraged to develop an *interdependent* and even sacrificial self and prepare for the roles of good wives and good mothers. Even the increasing number of career-oriented young women have the same orientation, they clearly prioritize family obligations.

The family oriented self of the Indian adolescent is apparent in the rituals that are celebrated emphasizing specific bonds of kinship. For example, the *rakhi* ritual of brother-sister bond is celebrated every year and is according much social significance – especially of interdependency on the family or maternal family in this case. Roland (1988) observes that Indians are highly interdependent and show respect for hierarchical structures in relationships [22]. He sees Indian identity evolving around ‘we’, ‘us’ and ‘ours’ rather than ‘I’, ‘me’, or ‘mine’ – reflecting a relational self (Verma and Saraswathi, 2002).

## 6.5 Gendered Structure of Opportunities

Older boys lesser emotional support system than older girls [23]. This is because girls tend to find support in their interpersonal affiliations. Whereas institutional support to girls is much less than boys. Saraswathi (2002) notes that although adolescent girls are more protected by families than boys are, but when the girls risk and break family bonds they are worse off as there is lesser institutional support available to them. The gendered structure of opportunities means there is lesser opportunities available for educational development and participation.

A model that incorporates four major constructs in delineating the career choices for girls is given by Astin (Patton, 2013). She acknowledges that career expectations are related to early gendered socialization, and structure of opportunities which both interact with each other. Factors incorporated within the structure of opportunity include distribution of jobs, sex typing of jobs, discrimination, job requirements, the economy, family structure, and reproductive technology. Astin emphasises that changes in the structure of opportunity (for example in reproductive technology) can lead to considerable change in women's career expectations (Patton, 2013).

Moreover, a number of theorists Chodorow (1978), Gilligan (1982), and Lyons (1983) emphasize the relational identity in understanding women's career patterns [24]. These theories focus on women's multiple life roles and responsibilities in addition to the notion that women define themselves in the relational and collective context, as opposed to individualistic perspective (Patton, 2013).

## VII. RESEARCH GAPS

1. Relationships with external systems, especially rapidly changing modern systems.
2. An emphasis on emergent social processes during adolescence is required.
3. There is a simplistic view of socialization with initiation ceremonies given a predominant place.
4. 'Continuity of culture' has continued attention at the expense of *emergent* and changing cultures developing among the younger generation.

## IX. CONCLUSION

There has been much differentiation of the concept of adolescence and how to define the adolescent aspirations across cultural themes. Theories of adolescent transition point to the self- other difference in locating identity. Within this comes the idea of negotiating social positioning and roles. The social expectations are changing because of the global and generational difference. Continuity of culture is no longer a priority for the older generations as the emergence of new subcultures because of globalization has led parents to also follow new trends. New modes of communication like the internet have provided early platform to the adolescence for interactions across greater social circle. This has raised more questions regarding the interpersonal communication among adolescents and their families and culture, from a developmental perspective.

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