

"What's the Point of Having A Voice If It's only When I Don't Speak that I'm Understood?" Adolescence As A Social Construction

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Abstract: In the world of human behaviour scholars, adolescence is seen as an emotionally critical period. It's a period of great physical and psychological transformations that often lead to some restlessness and sadness. It is characterised as a phase of searching for and building identity. The contemporary teenager is a being of paradoxes, he can enunciate absolute, intangible truths, and at the same time intimately doubt himself, his body and others. He is often altruistic and, at the same time, can be selfish. He feels these contradictions and it could be said that adolescence is exactly this period when the individual experiences the contradictions and the suffering they conceive. Adolescence is a dynamic process, a cascade of events that culminate in the biological, psychological and social maturity of individuals. This evolution involves a search for identity, in a body that is different every day.

Keywords: *adolescence; identity; personal development.*

I. Introduction

In 1533, Catherine de Medici was taken from her native Florence to marry Henry of Orléans, second son of Francis I of France. Without any preparation, she was led to her young husband's bedside, to a strange court and country. In her eyes, childhood had come to an abrupt end. Zana Muhsen, author of the book *Sold* - an exceptional document on a practice common in many societies - portrays the world of two girls aged 14 and 15, sold by their father, married in a village in Yemen, held hostage by a husband of a different nationality to their own and taken from their mother. This book shows us the early end of a childhood. "I lie on the bed. My eyes closed. Thinking of nothing, solidifying myself, becoming stone. He's a boy who clumsily tries to play the man. I feel nothing. Immobility protects me. It's not me that that filthy thing is happening to. I'm not the one suffocating. I'm not there. Zana (...) is dead. Dead. (...) I've just been raped by a child. All night long, my stone eyes gaze at the lizards on the ceiling, the only witnesses to that filthy act. (...) The wolves and hyenas produce a mournful concert in the night of the mountains. It is they who scream in my place." (Muhsen 2002: 65). The end of childhood can be seen as the setting of the sun. While the sun sets everywhere, it rises somewhere, and above all it never sets without rising again. This is how adolescence comes about (Braconnier, 2000). "Childhood was once reduced to the short time between birth and the age of seven (...).

The changes in sensibility that began to take place from the Renaissance onwards tended to postpone integration into the adult world, increasingly later, and to mark out, with well-defined boundaries, the time of childhood,

progressively linked to the concept of learning and schooling. It is important to emphasise that this was an extremely slow movement, initially confined to the wealthier classes." (Pinto, 1997: 44).

Adolescence is often associated with irreverence, transgression and risks. Becoming a teenager is no easy task. Growing up implies losing the tranquillity, security, certainties, dreams and joy of being a child, in order to start living in uncertainty and searching for oneself. The word adolescence comes from the Latin *adolescere*, which means to become a man/woman or to grow into maturity. According to the World Health Organisation, adolescence comprises the period between the ages of 10 and 19, triggered by bodily and physiological changes resulting from biological maturation. It is an age full of contradictions. It resembles something very important that we have just lost and something essential that we have yet to find. It is a period of great uncertainty. Costa (1998:8), referring to these uncertainties, states that "growing up implies losing the tranquillity, certainties, security, dreams and joy of being a child, to start living in uncertainty, searching for oneself, dreaming of an adult world that seems increasingly distant and less attractive. Adolescents often respond to these feelings with a lack of optimism, curiosity and energy." It's a body that changes, it's desires that aren't always fulfilled, it's realising your own powerlessness to achieve what you thought was easy, it's feeling suddenly invaded by an intense need to love and be loved. She/he will feel the need to turn outwards, in an incessant search for someone who corresponds to her/him. The possibility and desire to experience love relationships - very characteristic of this stage - hangs over her/him. Adolescence can be compared to the drama of a lobster: "When lobsters change their shell, they begin by losing the old one and are left without defences - it's only a matter of time before they make a new one. In the meantime, they are in imminent danger. It's a bit the same for teenagers. And it costs so many tears to make a new shell that it's a bit like getting it back.

In the neighbourhood of a lobster without protection there is almost always a CONGRO lurking around ready to devour it. Adolescence is the drama of the lobster!" (Pereira, 2002: 17) Adolescence can be seen as a stage of life in which the personality is in the final phase of its construction and sexuality is part of this process as a structuring element of the adolescent's identity. We know that adolescence is a phase characterised by confusions, contradictions and ambivalences linked and managed in a process that leads to identity formation. Adolescence is situated between two essential poles: dependence linked to the need for protection and independence linked to the need for autonomy; but at the same time there is a great deal of insecurity; it is essential at this stage to correctly and adequately assimilate what is their unique freedom. The onset of adolescence is not easy to identify, since it corresponds to a period of physical maturation involving growth that leads to changes in the size, composition and, similarly, shape of the body.

Adolescence is a period of life characterised by the concept of development, in terms of the transformation that is constantly imposed when it comes to describing the different aspects of growth. We can therefore characterise adolescence as a process of physical, psychological, emotional and social development. At this stage, there is an extraordinary curiosity and euphoria about certain subjects, particularly sexuality. The fear and uncertainty that develops around this subject can lead the most unbelieving and least experienced teenagers to be confronted with premature sexual experiences that are poorly conducted, sometimes ending in unwanted pregnancies. Adolescence is a second age of all the whys, and the word sex is part of all of them. It's the time to decide whether or not to take that step, which is seen as the entrance to the adult world, but also a passport to many risks. There are many doubts: is this the right time? Is this the right person? And then what?

Adolescence is an ambiguous concept that varies from culture to culture. What all definitions seem to have in common is that it is characterised as a period of transition from childhood to adulthood. To consider a pregnancy during adolescence is to consider a double wave of adaptation and a double movement of realities that converge towards the entry into adulthood. In terms of time, we can characterise adolescence as a three-stage process:

Early (10-14 years) - The greatest interest is in same-sex partners, but interest in the other sex appears. Conflict with parents begins; the teenager behaves like a child one minute and an adult the next.

Intermediate (15-16 years) - Acceptance by the group is a major concern and often determines the teenager's self-esteem. The teenager engages in dreams, fantasies and magical thinking. She/he fights for independence from her/his parents, shows emotional instability, displays angry behaviour and mood swings. Heterosexual relationships are important.

Late (17-21 years) - The adolescent intensifies interest in the opposite sex, develops abstract thinking, starts making plans for the future, seeks emotional and financial independence from parents. Love becomes part of intimate (heterosexual or homosexual) relationships, and the ability to make decisions is assumed.

In parallel with the many physical transformations that take place in boys and girls as a result of the action of sex hormones, and when new feelings and emotions are experienced, sensations also arise in relation to their own bodies, which are more or less pleasant and exciting.

The awakening of sexuality is part of human development. Marked by evolution and impetuous changes, adolescence manifests itself in all areas of a young person's life: in their relationships with themselves (with their body, emotions, mentality, sexuality...), in their attitudes and values towards life, in their intellectual development, in their family. As adolescence is an essential stage of life, it is crossed by multiple tensions. Adolescence is a difficult time for both young people and their parents. If, on the one hand, the child is in the process of growing up, it is no less true that the parents are also developing as parents, and it is not always comfortable to lose the status of parents of children, always present and easy to control, to become parents of future adults, independent, who are already threatening abandonment, citing their loneliness.

In the world of human behaviour scholars, adolescence is seen as an emotionally critical period. It's a period of great physical and psychological transformations that often lead to some restlessness and sadness.

It is characterised as a phase of searching for and constructing identity. The contemporary teenager is a being of paradoxes: he can enunciate absolute, intangible truths, while at the same time intimately doubting himself, his body and others. He is often altruistic and, at the same time, can be selfish. He feels these contradictions and it could be said that adolescence is precisely the period in which the individual experiences the contradictions and the suffering they conceive. Adolescence is a dynamic process, a cascade of events that culminate in the biological, psychological and social maturity of individuals. This evolution involves a search for identity, in a body that is different every day. Sampaio (2001a) states that the search for identity, as well as autonomy, are the essential issues of adolescence. It can be said that it is the passage from childhood, a period characterised by dependence on various authority figures, through psychological growth, to the acquisition of autonomy and independence. To be an adolescent is to experience a conflict between the inherent nature of childhood and the development of autonomy that will lead to the beginning of adulthood.

Let's remember that the concept of adolescent didn't always exist. Before the concept of adolescence emerged, which expanded and consolidated in the second half of the 20th century, people passed from childhood to adulthood through religious, social or military rites of passage. From the mid-twentieth century onwards, a continuous scientific and systematic reflection on adolescence and adolescents began.

In so-called primitive societies, people passed directly from childhood to adulthood through certain events and rites that marked this passage. The first menstruation and the ability to procreate were the milestones for girls. Boys were required to prove their virility and strength. To this end, society asked the young man to prove his strength and ability to sacrifice in various ceremonies, many of which are still practised today among some peoples. Boys were expected to be able to withstand bad weather and fear, demonstrating resourcefulness and security, thus reaching the world and adult status. Anthropologists have carried out countless studies on different societies in which the beginning and end of adolescence are marked by clearly defined rites: one enters adulthood at a precise moment, with no ambivalence regarding the rights and obligations of individuals.

The well-known Studies by Malinowski (1983) and Mead (1979) indicate that issues related to adolescence are not universal, but are contextualised within a culture and a historical moment. Australian puberty rites, for example, represent one of many possible forms of initiation into adulthood. It is from this society that we will ask for our first examples. A fairly large number of tribes take part in the ceremony, which is why the preparation of an initiation feast takes a long time. Several months pass between the time when it is decided to bring the tribes together and the start of the ceremony: "The chief of the tribe sends messengers, carrying bull-roarers, to the other chiefs to announce the decision to initiate the boys. (...) Everything is done with the greatest care so that the women don't realise. Roughly speaking, the initiation ceremony comprises the following moments: 1) the preparation of sacred ground (...); 2) the separation of the novices from their mothers (...); 3) their segregation in the bush, or in a special, isolated camp, to be instructed in the tribe's religious traditions; 4) certain operations to which they are subjected, the most frequent being circumcision, the extraction of a tooth, subincision, but also scarification or the pulling out of hair." (Eliade, 2004: 24).

Throughout the initiation, the boys must follow a behaviour that is consensually considered to be the most correct for this ritual, during which they face numerous tests and are subjected to various dietary prohibitions. Each element of this complex initiation scenario has its own religious interpretation.

The initiations of girls have been less studied than those of boys. We have little information on the religious instruction of young girls during their initiation, and particularly on the secret rites they were subjected to. Despite these gaps, we can say that female initiation begins with the first menstruation. "This physiological symptom, a sign of sexual maturity, heralds a rupture: the tearing away of the girl from her family world. She is immediately isolated, separated from the community - which reminds us of the separation of the boy from his mother and his segregation. In both sexes, initiation is marked by a rupture. The only difference is that, for girls, segregation immediately follows the first menstruation and is therefore individual, while for boys, initiation is collective. (...) Female initiation rites (...) are less dramatic than for boys. The important element is the (...) It takes place in the forest (...) or in a special hut (...) they are also isolated in a dark corner of the house and, in many peoples, they cannot see the sun (...). In other places, they are forbidden to let themselves be touched by anyone or to move. A specific prohibition in South American societies forbids them to come into contact with the ground (...) there are (...) a number of food prohibitions." (Eliade, 2004: 73-75).

Levine and Levine (1966) described a Kenyan tribe in which the transition from childhood to adulthood occurs rapidly. In this tribe, the roles and responsibilities of children and adults are completely separate. The passage is strictly marked by a ritual ceremony consisting of circumcision for men and ablation of the clitoris for women.

In the Navajo people, on entering puberty and after the rituals related to menstruation, girls receive a ritual message all over their bodies from the women and men of the community, except the father (Madueño, 2004). Once these rituals have been completed, the girl or boy acquires a new identity recognised by the whole community. It should be noted that the change is not so rapid in all cultures. In modern European societies, the process of entering puberty is much slower. According to some anthropologists, the purpose of these rituals is to

move the young person from one social status to another, which is why they are called rites of passage. They are considered to comprise three stages: separation (the young person leaves their previous state), latency (the young person is between the two states) and aggregation (the young person acquires a new state). Each state symbolises the different mental stages the child has to go through to become an adult (Madueño, 2004).

One of the main difficulties encountered by scholars of adolescence is delimiting the age that corresponds to this phase of human development. There are unequal individual rhythms of maturation, differences between cultural and geographical contexts and, furthermore, differences in trajectory and experience between adolescents. However, all the authors consulted agree that adolescence begins with pubertal transformations and ends with the achievement of autonomy and the acquisition of a stable identity. Acquiring the ability to withstand tensions and setbacks, to develop life projects and social integration. If, on the one hand, it's normal for these transformations to occur, on the other hand it's common to define this phase negatively through common expressions such as: the age of the wardrobe, silly age, box age, being in the phase... For Claes (1990), common sense phrases based on stereotypes are obstacles to understanding adolescents and their experiences.

According to Braconnier and Marcelli (2000: 53); "the main characteristic of the adolescent development process lies in the relationship that the subject establishes with their body." This relationship is expressed alternately by love, hate, joy, shame... in relation to their own sexed body or that of others.

For Sprinthall and Sprinthall (1993: 152), personal development during adolescence represents "a great leap forward, as the adolescent is now able to be more complex, understanding, empathetic and abstract through a broader perspective of themselves and others." Being a teenager means fighting your impulses and accepting them; loving your parents and hating them; being ashamed to admit it to others and wanting to talk to them; identifying with and imitating others while searching for your own identity. We can see adolescents as idealistic, artistic, generous and altruistic, as they will never be again, but also as their opposite: selfish, calculating and self-centred.

This ambivalence of feelings works for the teenager as a mixture of the need for autonomy and refuge and dependence on those who can protect them. In this paradox, there are, on the one hand, the parents, from whom the adolescent seeks autonomy, while at the same time being dependent on them; on the other hand, there is the group of friends, who both act as a support for ideals, demands or ambitions, as well as being the basis for exploration and sexual discoveries. Adolescence is the transition from childhood to the adult world and all the problems associated with this transition - the separation from family, values and beliefs. It is a period of life characterised by continuous rebirths, a predisposition to open up to the other, to what is new in itself, to cross boundaries, in a succession of discoveries and disappointments. This stage of life is linked to mystical crises, times of disillusionment, despair and immense suffering.

This is the beginning of successive deaths and rebirths, which almost always occur with immense pain and suffering. Simone de Beauvoir said that adolescence was when girls realised that men had the power and that their only power was to become submissive and adored objects. Adolescent girls thus experience a conflict between their desire for autonomy and the need to be feminine and admired by the opposite sex. Girls would stop being in order to appear. Adolescence is the time of conquests, renunciations, choices... The time of threats.

Sampaio proposes a new way of looking at adolescence: "Firstly, to completely question the traditional concept of adolescence. Realise that many of the ideas about this period are based on the observations of technicians in their offices, in the presence of young people who come to them because they are upset (or because their parents think so). (...) The preoccupation with treating troubled adolescents has also resulted in the abandonment of a global approach to the issue: in our eagerness to understand a minority, we have abandoned the attempt to understand everyone. We must also challenge the idea that adolescence is a transitional stage between childhood

and adulthood. I know it's harder to erase this point of view, but it's fundamental. When we define the period that begins with puberty and ends with the formation of personality as a transition, we are disempowering adolescents from the outset. Who wants to take on commitments if they are always labelled as irreverent, irresponsible, at the age of change, or unable to make decisions because they are not yet adults? (...) Let's therefore challenge this idea of adolescence as a bus that transports young people from childhood to adulthood, a transport where they can do all sorts of nonsense just because they are in the difficult age (...) (2006: 217-218). Sampaio thus suggests a new concept of adolescence that sees teenagers as capable of making decisions and assuming the consequences of their actions. This change would imply that the family and school assign increasing responsibilities to young people from the age of 14, instead of devising strategies for adolescents in crisis. From this perspective, there would be a long way to go and many taboos and myths to break down (Sampaio, 2006).

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