# Adolescence — A Cultural Dilemma

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Alienation, militancy, bizarre dress and drug abuse are four characteristics often associated with adolescents, as individuals or as groups. If these associations gel into a superordinate category of "Hippie" or "Yippie," the response of the adult world is, at least, hostile, if not frantic. What is it in current youth culture that so disturbs contemporary adult society? What is it in adult society that has given rise to a distinctive youth culture? What are the effects of two coexisting cultures on society, the family, and the individual? How are we going to cope with, if not integrate these two cultures? These are the issues addressed, incompletely to be sure, in this paper.

Parsons and Bales[1] presented a theory of socialization in which personality development was construed as a process of inner differentiation brought about by the child's participation in, and identification with, a system of intrafamilial social relationships. Their conceptualization of personality development complements those expounded by Freud, Erik Erikson, and others, using a psychoanalytical framework to understand personality development, in that the inner unfolding of ego potentialities must be facilitated by an interaction process with significant individuals in the environment. Whatever combination of theories one uses as a frame

of reference, the sequence of interactions between child and parent, child and family, child and peer group, child and outer world remains a consistent feature. If, as Erikson has said[2], there is a necessary cogwheeling of life cycles between the nurturing adult and the child, how has it come about that we have passed a cultural crossroads with a distinctive adult culture on the one hand and a strong and widespread youth culture on the other hand? That these cultures should be so inimical to each other can be understood in terms of the developmental process of adolescence — the adolescent needs to reject the parent in the process of denying his own weakness and searching for his own identity. That this rejection of the parent should have become as institutionalized in degree and extent that it has today, is a matter of deep concern and demands attempts at explanation.

### *The Family, Conflicts, and Communication*

Consider the following imaginary, yet typical, vignette: A teenager is being driven to school by his father, a successful business executive. The youngster tries to use the brief ride to school as an opportunity for dialogue but can't seem to get around to saying something that is on his mind. The father, equally uncomfortable, retreats to a barrage of routine questions on the order of: "How are things going at school?"; "Why don't you get a haircut?"; "Do you know any pushers at your school?" By manner of delivery he conveys a message of: "Don't tell me anything I don't want to hear." If they discuss an issue like Vietnam, the father sympathizes with the anti-war posture but is quick to condemn equally the Yippies, S.D.S., and other militant youth factions.

The son escapes from this discomfort when they arrive at his high school — an institution of 2500 or more students. In his day at school, he rotates to many classrooms where he is lectured at by busy, underpaid educators who are finding it increasingly difficult to remember their students' names, let alone their individual differences.

In the routine of his daily work, the father engages in various tasks in the furtherance of his company's economic welfare. These

involve a sales campaign in which it is decided to sell the company's product by associating it with sex, the relief of anxiety, a well known sports figure's image, and the reckless pursuit of pleasure. If it is an automobile being sold, it might carry the name (as one automobile, in fact, does) "The Eliminator." If the product is a snowmobile, it might carry the name "T.N.T." If the item is an alcoholic beverage, or a tobacco product, freedom from loneliness could be emphasized, as in the commercial that says, "Me and my Winston, we've got a real good thing."

The profit picture of the company is further enhanced as father has an astute tax advisor who recommends that the company take advantage of depreciation tax shelters to avoid paying tax on the company's full income. If a labour negotiation makes up a part of the father's day, he, as a representative of management, is required to take a stand favouring the preservation of the company's profit margin, even if a price increase should result. This is contrary to the demands of labour for a larger share of profits combined with stable prices to preserve the value of the dollars earned.

Returning home that evening, the father finds his son and wife in a heated argument triggered off by the son's having been reported by the school to be a user of marihuana. Inevitably, the parents say, "How could you do this to us after all that we do for you?"

Although this example focused predominantly on the father's daily life in his work role, let us assume that mother and son conducted themselves completely in accordance with the demands of their own social systems. An analysis would then reveal three individuals, although living in the same family, existing in three separate social systems. The father, in the world of industry; the son, in the world of his peers and his high school; and the mother, in the world of her neighbourhood friends and women's organizations.

John Kenneth Galbraith[3], in his description of the contemporary executive quotes one as saying, "How can you overwork . . . if your work is your life?" He goes on to demonstrate that behaviour like that illustrated in the above vignette is consistent with

current industrial needs and that the survival of a complex technological state depends upon the creation of reliable demand so that production levels can be assured and stable contracts with labour can be negotiated. If, in the process of creating this demand, it is necessary to abuse the emotions of love, anxiety, hero-worship, and so forth . . . is this not a small price to pay for affluence? The adolescent, I suggest, feels the price is too high. He enshrines these emotions by the creation of a youth culture which has, as one of its practices, the use of drugs to heighten the perception of emotions. If we look back at the process of our own adolescent development, we can recall that this was a time when, despite conflict with our parents, we sought out and tried to emulate adults. These might have been a sports figure, a politician, or a favourite aunt. In contemporary society (due to geographic mobility), the old friend of the family or relative may not live nearby. The "hero" is gone — his credibility lost for youth by his association with sales campaigns. Even credible heroes like the astronauts, have become tarnished by youth's resentment of the money spent on space exploration that could be used to relieve poverty. The contemporary teenager finds his peer group to be the only uncontaminated one.

The father typically espouses much higher moral values than the greed which underpins most of his decision-making at work. The adolescent equivalent of his use of legal tax loopholes would probably be branded "delinquent" or even "morally corrupt."

Kenneth Keniston[4] has described the family of both the alienated and protesting youth as having a father who espouses certain values but does not practice them. The insistence of the younger generation that the adult society practice Christian values is no more than the completion of a feedback loop in the socialization process. The reluctance of parents, and particularly fathers, to become involved in community activities that emphasize the expression of feelings of a humanitarian kind, is a strong alienating force in the life of the teenager. The interruption of the socialization process comes about when the parent refuses to live by the values he holds up to youth. The rejection of adult society is then an outcome of the child's acceptance of values initially presented to him as ideals but not preserved as goals within contemporary adult society.

Had we extended the above vignette to include the mother's day, we would have been able to reveal similar major conflicts between the needs and goals of her social system, and the demands and practices of the father's. A specific example of this is the current demand in industry that a man be prepared to accept geographic mobility as "part of the bargain" of working for a company, if promotion and success are to be pursued as goals.[5] In fact, there are definite correlations between economic success on the one hand and geographic mobility on the other hand.[6] How then does this affect the mother's life? The evidence is that an important stabilizer for the woman in our society is her network of local attachments to people and institutions which correlates with length of residence in a locality or localized kinship.[7] Young and Willmott have described the extended family as "the woman's trade union, organized in the main by women and for women, its solidarity her protection against being alone. It is, to judge by anthropology, almost a universal rule that when married life is insecure, the wife turns for support to her family of origin, so that a weak marriage tie produces a strong blood tie."[8] Living far from relatives, and moving frequently, she cannot maintain or create these attachments that are necessary for stability in her life. The adolescent, in the process of developing social skills, also suffers in frequent family moves. His network of friends, which is all-important to him, is taken from him by the dictates of father's job. We can see, therefore, that the adult world as represented by the father's social system is in major conflict with the value system of his adolescent child and with the needs of his wife for a close attachment to kin and the community relationships. Moreover, it is significant that all three individuals, when moving only within their own social systems, can remain free of conflict and derive some measure of satisfaction. It is only when they communicate, that there is a chance that their behaviour, attitudes and feelings may come into conflict. A wife, wishing to promote her husband's success in business, may have to grow insensitive to her need for close kinship or friendship ties. If she remains sensitive to these needs, she must not express them lest they conflict with a promotive move for the husband. In the light of this, we should ask ourselves not why there are barriers to communication and "generation gaps," but why it is that people within a family communicate at all?

*The School As An Agency of Socialization*

It is incumbent upon those who are concerned with the development of the young to assess the educational climate of the school in the light of its socialization function. Some evidence would suggest that motivation[9] and leadership ability can be affected by the structure and size of the school. Baird states, "It seems reasonable to think that talent will not develop unless it is used. If small institutions make accomplishment more accessible to talented students, it seems plausible to expect that these students would follow their talents. In addition, students who participate will have opportunities to explore their interests and talents."[10] However, if we look at the current educational system, student interest seems to decline in proportion to the growth in the size of the educational institution with its attendant depersonalization. The school, as a representative of adult authority, can unintentionally foster the rebelliousness typical of adolescence and become a "protest-promoting institution."[11]

Adult institutions provide targets for rejection and hostility and young people find within these institutions, reasons to rationalize their inner need to reject anything "adult." In addition to this predisposition for conflict, there is ample explanation as to why youth culture should have begun to flourish as it has in recent years. Underpinnings for its strength come from the attitudes which prevail within the youth culture. There is an unconditional acceptance of an individual by his peers and a reverent respect for another's autonomy. Emotional contact — which may be lacking everywhere else in the adolescent's world, is a high-light of interpersonal relationships. Within the group there is power to influence members, in contrast with the powerlessness that a youngster feels within his family or within his school, where he is often a non-participant in the decision-making process. There exists a value system that is idealistic and unchallenged by practical demands, in contrast with the parents' values which may have been compromised by the exigencies of "reality," greed, or neurotic conflicts. The peer group recognizes and supports the healthy aspects of the adolescent's ego rather than reminding him of his weaknesses. This is in contrast with parents who usually anticipate the worst and try to intrude and control; or a school system that is geared to reminding

a child of infractions of rules or academic short-comings, rather than to rewarding him for leadership or humanitarian potential. Based on the idealistic present, the youth culture promises the youngster a future which is happier than the life and community created for him by his parents.

### *Drugs and the Youth Culture*

In the light of the cultural dilemma confronting youth, and the vicissitudes of development during the adolescent phase, one can explain why drugs fit so well into the contemporary youth picture.

1. By their pharmacological effects, many of the "soft" drugs relieve feelings of depression and anxiety, including those that adolescents feel in the process of giving up their parents as figures of identification.

2. The taking of drugs may symbolize the rejection of parental values but, at the same time, it is an imitation of parental behaviour which, in current society, is marked by the ingestion of tranquillizers and alcohol.

3. Another symbolic meaning to drug use is that it emphasizes the autonomy of the individual and the exercise of freedom from parental controls.

4. The psychedelic drugs, in particular, give intense feelings of significance to events that, without the drug, have little meaning. An alienated person may have intense feelings of meaninglessness than can be counteracted by the hallucinogenic group of drugs.

5. The setting for the use of drugs is usually in a peer group, in pleasant surroundings with appropriate music. The intense pleasurable feelings produced by the drug become associated with this setting, in contrast to other environments in which the youngster is involved. By comparison, all other experiences tend to take on a bland, meaningless complexion.

### *Bridges Across The Cultural Gap*

If a cultural gap exists, it is an external projection of an internal discrepancy within the individual adult concerning his behaviour, attitudes and feelings. What he sees in youth that he cannot accept are the idealistic goals that he once felt were his but was later forced to abandon. Having buried them, he has been able to come to terms with the demands of his life as an adult. The adolescent reminds him of a conflict that lies buried within himself — the humanitarian striving versus the behaviour that has been chosen by him as expedient within his social system. Consequently, each individual has the potentiality for reducing the generation gap in terms of his ability to perceive and express his humanitarian instincts. When these have been reconciled, there is likely to be very little barrier between the generations. The adult would then likely find that youngsters reach out to him in hunger for healthy dialogue. Having been able to enter "the other world," the adult can assess his own abilities to develop the strengths within the youth culture. The positive interaction among the young, together with their tolerance for personal differences, is a potent tool they can use in support of each other, whether in school, recreational or clinical settings. Nothing is more illustrative of this than the numerous indigenous self-help clinics that have sprung up in the youth ghettos all over North America.

Current programs for youth must allow the young participation and access to power. Participation in the decision-making process need not mean domination by youth (as parents and authorities usually fear). Experience has already shown[12] that participation in the educational process can be a potent way of "turning on" young people.

If we use Keniston's data in a predictive and preventive sense, the way to avoid alienation in youth is for parents to involve themselves in community affairs in such a way as to demonstrate their humanitarian impulses through action as well as attitudes. A preliminary to a reconciliation of feeling, attitudes and behaviour often comes with involvement in programs stressing self-awareness, such as Encounter or T-groups.

*Summary*

If we look at our contemporary society, we find within it at least three coexisting social systems. These are centered around the father and industry; the mother, her family and community; and the youngster, his peer group and the school. In the current cultural climate promoted and sustained by the "New Industrial State," the goals and practices of these social systems are often incompatible in major ways. This leads to pressures towards alienation of youth and the reduction of dialogue between family members. Programs to reverse these trends would stress self-help and responsibility of young people for planning and accepting the consequences of their own behaviour. Such approaches would also encourage community participation and emotional sensitization for parents. These would reduce the gap between feelings, attitudes and behaviour, now revealed as a gap between adult and youth cultures.

*References*

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