

## A Study of Adolescent Attitudes

*For many of us, life as an adolescent was vivid with new contrasts between the experiences of our daily lot and those of others whom we might soon come to resemble. It was hard to believe that that vividness, of realization of a point of view peculiar to our age, would ever fade; yet the astonishing reality is that even after very few years it had almost gone, lost in a kaleidoscope of more recent images. John Young's student teachers, themselves barely out of their teens in many cases, were sent to refresh their memories with interviews of high school students, and were given a number of common topics to discuss. Young himself has since patiently listened to and read all the material of 254 interviews, and without benefit of numbers, employing only a personal humanity exercised lifelong, reports the general impressions that come up: Adolescents are much like adults; perhaps they are adults indeed, subject as a group — under like conditions of relative isolation and comfort — to the same reactions of boredom and hedonistic thoughtlessness.*

Upon being informed by the editor of the *Journal* that he was planning a special issue on adolescence and wanted me to write an article, my reaction was immediate: "Oh, No! Surely there is nothing more to be said." Whereupon he pointed out that since I had been teaching a university course in adolescent psychology for years, I would if I refused appear to have been operating under false pretences. With this "encouragement," I agreed. What follows is a report on a project which my students and I had been involved in for several years.

As one of the assignments in the basic educational psychology course, all IG\* students were required to conduct an interview with an adolescent.

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\* "IG" refers to McGill University's one-year teacher-preparation program taken by students already holding a university degree — usually a B.A. or B.Sc.

Although no formal or pre-determined list of interview questions was prepared, it was suggested that certain basic topics should be discussed. These included school, teachers, family relationships, hobbies, drugs and alcohol, sex, religion, vocational aspirations, religion, politics, and any other matters which appeared to be of interest or concern to the adolescent. The university students were required to find their own interviewees and were advised to select a "normal" adolescent. It was emphasized that this was not a psychological case study but merely a semi-organized conversation during which the adolescent would be given an opportunity to express his opinions upon a number of everyday topics. Confidentiality was assured and each interviewee was advised that no one except the interviewer and the unknown professor at McGill would know what had been talked about during the interview.

It was suggested that the interviews be taped if the adolescent agreed to this; if not, the interviewers were advised to take brief notes during the interview and to write up the material immediately following the session. This report is based upon the material contained in the tapes or in the written accounts of the interviews.

The sample consisted of 254 adolescent interviews thus conducted during the years 1976-1979. I should emphasize the fact that since this is not a serious research project, no statistical analyses were made. In order to give the account a measure of academic respectability, however, I will provide one table showing the distribution of the data. This is for general information only, since no comparisons in terms of age or sex were made.

It will be seen from Table 1 that the age range is from 13 to 19 with a definite concentration around 16. Virtually all of the subjects were attending English-language schools in the Greater Montreal area. Most were in the regular

Table 1

**DISTRIBUTION OF SUBJECTS IN TERMS OF AGE AND SEX**

Number of Subjects			
Age	Male	Female	Total
13	3	7	10
14	12	13	25
15	15	27	42
16	29	63	92
17	27	41	68
18	9	7	16
19	—	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>254</b>

academic stream, although some were enrolled in technical/vocational courses. The majority were of Anglo-Saxon or Jewish extraction, but there were quite a few of Italian origin and there was a sprinkling of young people with Greek and Portuguese parentage. Relatively few French-speaking Canadians were involved.

It is obvious that this is not a truly representative sample of the total adolescent population. It includes only those from one area; there is not an equal number of males and females; it excludes young people who have dropped out of school and those who have a job; most come from an English-speaking background; and there are no real "hard core" juvenile delinquents. Since all were volunteers, it can be assumed that they were the kind who are willing to talk about themselves and their opinions with an interested outsider. In general, they became part of the sample simply because they were available. In spite of these restrictions, it may be said that these adolescents constitute a sample of a not-insignificant group.

While some of the interviewers were "mature" students who came into teacher training relatively late, most were in their early or mid-twenties. There was approximately the same number of males and females. No formal training in interview techniques had been given, but general guide-lines about how to conduct an interview were provided.

Interviewers were specifically advised to avoid putting on the parent or teacher mantle, in order to encourage a free discussion uncontaminated by the inhibiting effect of possible criticism or censure. It was apparent that the young people were pleased to have an adult show an interest in their attitudes, and they welcomed the opportunity to express these attitudes. Very few if any of the interviewers felt that the adolescent was "putting them on."

In sum: the conclusions of this study are based upon the information provided and the opinions expressed by 254 adolescents to 254 adult interviewers. If the interview was taped (and most were), I listened to each one and under certain specific headings made notes concerning the attitudes expressed. The same procedure was followed for written interview reports. Conclusions drawn from the study are based upon general patterns which were revealed by the interviews rather than from numerical comparisons. Although this procedure may not satisfy the requirements of a proper and respectable research design, I feel that the conclusions are none the less valid even though not buttressed by statistical legerdemain.

## **Results of the Study**

I have decided to discuss the interview material in terms of a few specific themes. These are topics which seem to be of interest and concern to adolescents, and reference to some or all of them was made in most of the inter-

views. They are the following: family; school; teachers; hobbies; drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes; sex; vocational aspirations; religion; politics and current events; and, for want of a better word, "idealism." To present some generalizations about the attitudes of these adolescents toward these topics is the main purpose of this study.

Everyone is aware of the inherent danger of generalizing, and the sceptic tends to look askance at all generalizations. Oliver Wendell Holmes is reported to have said: "No generalization is wholly true; not even this one." This paper should be read with that in mind.

## Family

I was impressed by the number of times I wrote "good relationship" when listening to adolescents talking about how they get along with their families. Of course there is a generation gap but surely that is to be expected, since everyone interprets the world around him in the light of his own perceptions and conceptions, and these are based upon his life experiences.

There are situations, of course, in which rather serious conflicts may occur. This was perhaps most apparent when the parent — especially the father — was brought up in a different culture in which the parents' word was law, and in which no manifestation of the child's independence would be tolerated. Some of the older interviewees — especially females — believed that their fathers were excessively rigid and strict, and they wished to move out of the family circle in order to gain more freedom and independence. At the same time, they tended to understand why their parents felt that way, and one 18 year-old said that if she were her father, she would probably react in a similar manner.

Although many adolescents state that relationships with their parents are good, they tend to talk over their "problems" with their friends rather than with their parents. Some state that they can discuss serious and intimate matters with one parent but not with the other. Although no check list was made, it would appear that in these situations the mother is more frequently the confidante.

The interviews revealed no unusual patterns in sibling relationships, and reports of differences of opinion among children of the same family were not uncommon. Younger children sometimes feel that the older ones get more privileges and can make their own decisions; the older may complain that the younger are spoiled and are allowed to do things "I couldn't do when I was their age." In spite of these causes of friction, most adolescents are glad that they have siblings. This is evident when one discusses family matters with an only child. Many "onlies" resent their onliness and state that they miss having someone with whom they can play, confide, or even fight.

It would appear that frequently an older brother or sister may act as surrogate parent. When asked whom they confide in or ask for help with their prob-

lems, some adolescents say, "with my older brother/sister." "Why?" "Because he/she is nearer my own age and understands my problem better than my parents."

Some indicate that they do not discuss personal matters with their parents because the parent is too busy. In the majority of such cases, the parent is the father. On the other hand, a common interest in sports, cars, or crafts, is an important factor in producing a friendly parent/adolescent association. Several interviewers asked their subjects if they would bring up their own children in the same way in which they had been brought up themselves. Surprisingly, a large number thought that their parents had done a pretty good job and they had no major criticisms to offer. Not surprisingly, when asked what changes they would introduce in their own child-rearing practices, the common response was: "Give them more freedom and independence."

### **School**

Because all the interviewees were attending school and because the interviewers were potential teachers, it is obvious that school and school-related topics were rather thoroughly discussed. Most of the young people were quite pleased to have an opportunity to discuss their school and schooling, and they tended to respond to questions quite freely.

Very few indicated that they "loved" school and very few said they hated it. (The absence of the latter response might have been expected because of the nature of the sample: those with extremely negative attitudes would probably have left school either voluntarily or involuntarily and thus would not have been included in the sample of the present study). A significant number said they liked school primarily because of the social contacts which it provided; others enjoyed the availability of extra-curricular activities; and some — especially those with clear-cut academic or vocational aspirations — enjoyed the courses they were taking.

As a reason for going to school, learning for learning's sake was mentioned rather infrequently. Most students had a pragmatic response: to help get a job, to get into college or university, or "because I have to go." One student suggested that there was nothing else to do and she didn't want to watch television all day!

In general, students found many of the subjects boring. It would appear that "boring" is a current cliché word, and it is applied indiscriminately to any activity which doesn't excite the students' present interest.

There seemed to be a lack of a sense of real involvement in school and school matters. This is evident in the relatively few well-thought-out criticisms of the school. Students tended to be apathetic even in criticism. Some, especially the better students, stated that school work was not sufficiently challenging to

excite their interest; others were opposed to the practice of compulsory courses and wanted greater freedom of choice of subjects; and a surprisingly large number believed that school discipline was too lax and resented the presence of disruptive students in the classroom. Most students, however, had apparently given little serious thought to analyzing the theory and practice of the school, and tended to accept it because "it was there."

## Teachers

The teacher is an ever-present living phenomenon whom the students encounter on a regular basis and, as such, is fair game for analysis — commendatory and condemnatory. "What makes a good or bad teacher?" was a question discussed in almost every interview, and the opinions came through loud and clear. The pattern was clearly polarized: the good teacher had certain characteristics; the bad had the opposite. Perhaps the most commonly-used adjective applied to the bad teacher was "boring". This word occurred so frequently that any one involved in teacher-preparation programs must feel discouraged or even dismayed. It is obvious, of course, that teachers have to face the competition presented by television, radio, movies, and rock concerts. It is difficult to get too excited or thrilled about the quadratic equation. On the other hand, some teachers are successful, for students describe the good teacher as one who can make the subject interesting and who can inspire the student to learn more about it.

Students are perceptive in recognizing whether the teacher knows his subject or whether he simply plods through a text-book. All too frequently one hears of teachers whose only teaching method seems to consist of reading from a text and dictating notes. That times have not completely changed is borne out by a memory of teachers from my own high school days who relied exclusively upon this technique.

Associated with lack of knowledge of subject is the criticism that some teachers don't seem to work very hard. Students comment favorably upon the teachers who put a lot of time and effort into their work and who are willing to give extra help to students who need or request it. The opposite point of view was expressed rather succinctly by a French-speaking student (who is attending an English-language school) when, after commenting favorably upon most of his teachers, he made the following observation: "J'ai quelques classes où les professeurs ne font rien."

On a personal level, the good teacher is described as one who likes his students and who shows an interest in them. It is obviously difficult for a teacher in a large, impersonal, comprehensive high school to establish this kind of relationship, but the fact that some do it indicates that it can be done. Students seem to approve of teachers who are strict — but fair — and are critical of those whose classes are rendered ineffective because of lack of discipline. Disciplinary

problems tend to appear more frequently in the classes of teachers who are unsure of their material and who show no interest in students. This, of course, is not a new finding, because the relationship between good teaching and good discipline has been recognized as long as there have been schools. Unfortunately, some teachers seem to be unaware of the importance of this relationship.

The essence of this section could be well summed up in the response of a student to the question, "How do you describe a good teacher?" He said: "Someone who is strict but understanding. He knows how to teach so you understand and it's interesting. A good teacher shouldn't be too easy."

### **Hobbies**

The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines a "hobby" as a "favorite subject or occupation that is not one's main business," and in some form or other this subject was discussed during most of the interviews. By far the most common response to "What do you like to do in your spare time?" was "Sports": hockey, swimming, skiing, football, basketball, etc. Musical interests, especially listening to records and tapes, seem to occupy a good part of the leisure time of many adolescents. Relatively few mentioned reading as a hobby. I suspect that this finding would be equally true of the post-television adult generation. Handicrafts are in the same category as reading as an infrequently-mentioned hobby. Perhaps an age of "instant everything" is producing a generation which lacks the patience to pursue an activity whose fulfillment may have to be deferred for weeks or even longer.

A subjective impression gained from the interview material is that adolescents are not particularly interested in collecting things. I wonder if this could be a cyclic phenomenon: the pre-adolescent seems to be an inveterate collector of everything from bottle tops to hockey cards and from stamps to comics; the adolescent is more interested in collecting girls — or boys — and hence bottle tops and stamps become less desirable. This hypothesis may be justified in part at least by the response given by one girl when asked what her hobby was. The answer was clear and unequivocal: "Boy chasing!" The adult, having experienced girls — or boys — now has more energy to devote to earlier interests, and may return to stamps and comics or their equivalents. The reader will realize that this is an entirely unsubstantiated hypothesis and would require some empirical research before a valid generalization could be drawn!

As expected, television watching, movies, and dancing were mentioned as leisure-time activities. Some stated that they did not spend as much time watching television as they had spent when attending elementary school. If true, this might be related to the increased interest in the opposite sex referred to above. More time for, and interest in, girls — or boys; less time for television.

## Drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes

Any examination of the attitudes of present-day adolescents would be incomplete without some reference to the use or non-use of drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes. Some interviewers were hesitant about discussing this subject, but most young people were quite willing to talk about these matters with a non-critical adult and almost without exception they had opinions to express.

Contrary to what some people may believe, the "average" adolescent does not seem to be a drug-crazed ne'er-do-well who exists only from one fix to the next. Certainly this type of individual does exist, but in the present sample there were more students who said they did not use drugs than those who stated that they did. Incidentally, the word "drugs" refers to the so-called soft drugs — the great majority of students said that they had not tried hard drugs and were against their use in theory as well as practice.

The pros and cons of legalizing marijuana were discussed in some of the interviews and, with few exceptions, none of the adolescents felt very strongly about the matter. The point of view was clearly expressed by one 17 year-old girl: "It is up to the individuals to decide whether it is right or wrong for them and they should be aware of what the consequences will be." Virtually all agreed, however, that soft drugs were reasonably easy to obtain and that they were frequently used at parties and on special occasions.

Interesting suggestions were offered when students were asked why young people used drugs. The most frequently-mentioned reason was "to escape from problems". Some students suggested that most heavy users had problems at home or at school and relied upon drugs to provide a temporary escape from these. Peer pressure was another reason for trying — and sometimes staying with — drugs. Other factors cited were curiosity, to be cool, to get a cheap thrill, to show off, boredom, and pressure from drug dealers. Perhaps an important reason why some adolescents take drugs is because they're there. One student expressed this point of view rather clearly when he said: "They (students) do it because their friends do it. They don't think about it. They just do it." Those of us — the older generation — who condemn young people for experimenting with drugs should not be too smug and should remember this: when we were in high school, drugs were *not* there.

The adolescent world reflects that of the adult in respect to the acceptance of alcohol as a part of modern society. Relatively few if any young people in the sample could be classified as alcoholics; relatively few say they have never had a drink; and the majority will drink moderately at parties. Some young people admit that they — or their friends — drink more than they should, and the reasons for excessive use are basically the same as for reliance on drugs. For whatever reason an adolescent may use an outside "crutch," alcohol is more widely used than drugs: it is cheaper, more readily available, and receives less societal and parental condemnation.



The adolescent, as well as the adult, often expresses an ambivalent point of view in respect to drug and alcohol use: he may have a negative attitude toward drugs, but he accepts alcohol with a reasonable degree of equanimity. This pattern of ambivalence is not at all uncommon, and other examples will be given below.

Very few of the interviewers brought up the subject of cigarette smoking and hence it is not possible to estimate the number of smokers and non-smokers in the sample nor to comment upon their attitude toward smoking.

## **Sex**

The interviewers were advised to avoid asking questions which might be construed by the interviewees as an invasion of privacy, and to be especially careful about prying into the adolescent's sexual behaviour or beliefs. As expected, however, most of the young people had opinions about sex and they seemed willing to express them. Many stated that they were reluctant to discuss sexual matters with their parents and hence were pleased to talk to an uninvolved and non-critical older person about sex-related topics.

Of those who expressed an opinion about the pros and cons of living together before marriage, approximately 75% indicated that they had no objection to this practice. (I should emphasize that they were commenting upon their reaction to a general principle, not upon their own experience.) The freedom of choice response referred to earlier was evident here, since "it's up to the individual" was a common reaction.

It should be stressed that acceptance of pre-marital cohabitation was usually qualified. It is O.K. if no one is hurt; there should be no children; the relationship, if satisfactory, should lead to marriage and *then* there could be children; and the participants should have a genuine respect and love for each other. The interviewers did not press for a clearer definition of "love," but most adolescents — as well as most adults — would probably agree that it is a good thing even if they are not quite sure what it is.

The value of sex education courses in school was talked about in some of the interviews and no clear-cut generalizations emerged. Of those involved in such courses, some students felt they were useless and that nothing new was learned; others believed that a sex education course should be part of the school curriculum, but that in practice it was frequently presented in an unsatisfactory manner by unqualified or uninterested teachers.

## **Abortion**

This topic was discussed in only a relatively small number of cases. The freedom of choice position was advanced by some respondents, and others ap-

proved of abortion — especially if performed early in pregnancy, in cases of rape, or if the mother's life was endangered. On the whole, however, an anti-abortion stand was taken by most of the adolescents who expressed an opinion on this topic. A few were very negative in their reaction to abortion and the word "murder" was used. I suspect that a survey on attitude-toward-abortion conducted among a random sample of adults would show similar variations in response.

It might be appropriate here to comment upon the seeming inconsistencies in attitudes which some of the young people revealed. On some topics their responses indicated a conservative position; on others, liberal. For example, an adolescent might have liberal ideas about sexual permissiveness and experimentation and yet be very anti-abortion. Another might be liberal about sexual matters and conservative about drug use. Many look upon alcohol as acceptable but are anti-drugs. Some have a cynical attitude toward religion and yet subscribe to a rather strict code of morality.

At any rate, it would seem that relatively few have strong theoretical beliefs which colour their attitudes toward all of life's experiences. Is this simply a part of growing up or is it also characteristic of the adult world?

## Religion

It is generally believed that today's young people are not particularly interested in religion; this study of adolescent attitudes would tend to confirm that impression. Of the interviewees who expressed an opinion about religious matters, approximately 40% stated that they had no religious interests or affiliations whatsoever. They were not for or against, but were merely indifferent to the whole idea of religious theory and practice. This point of view was rather clearly expressed by one student when he said: "Religion is a subject taught in school, but it isn't part of everyday life." Approximately 10% expressed a strongly pro-religious attitude, indicated that they were willingly involved in church matters, and felt that their religion was an important part of their life. The remaining students represent an interesting group. They say they believe in a God (many interviewers asked the direct question: Do you believe in God?), but they have no interest in any organized religion nor do they normally attend any religious services. Only very infrequently did the discussion involve an analysis of the nature of God, but a few younger people felt there must be some sort of supreme power which manages the universe. I would suspect that they have given this matter no more thought than has the average adult.

Some respondents who were indifferent to religion stated that they went to church on special occasions in order to please their parents or because the parents insisted that they do so. Those who expressed an active interest in religion invariably came from homes in which the parents were active church- or synagogue-goers.

Attention has been drawn to an apparent increase in adolescent interest in various cults and esoteric "religions". The increase may or may not be fact, but the present study can neither confirm nor deny the impression since the topic was very infrequently referred to during the interviews. Two or three students expressed an interest in E.S.P, but the topic was not pursued and no conclusions can be drawn.

### **Politics and current events**

Relatively few of the sample indicated that they had any interest in politics either municipal, provincial, or federal. One 17 year-old girl expressed her point of view as follows: "I don't know much about politics, and from what I've heard people say about politics and politicians I don't want to know any more." All seemed to be aware of the independence movement in Quebec, however, and virtually all were opposed to separatism. Considering the background of the students in the sample, this reaction is to be expected. One student had an interesting reason for opposing separatism: if Quebec separated from Canada, the Expos and the Alouettes would leave Quebec and Canada! A few expressed a rather lukewarm sympathy for the separatist cause.

Perhaps my generalization regarding the apparent apolitical nature of today's adolescent has been too sweeping. One interviewer conducted a group discussion with four students aged 16, 17, 17, and 18, and she concluded: "The world of adolescent politics is a microcosm of society. My four subjects represent a range of attitudes apparent in society at large. There are those who are simply not interested and there are those who enjoy serious discussion, even active participation."

### **Vocational plans**

It would appear that the "typical" adolescent has done very little real vocational planning. "Go to college", "Get a job", "Get married and have a family", "Don't know yet"; these were typical responses to the "What do you plan to do after you leave school?" question. Some students gave the usual nurse, lawyer, teacher, doctor, engineer, social worker reply, but it was apparent that few had given much serious thought to the long-range future. Some of the "I don't know yet" group were not really concerned about the vagueness of their vocational plans. They tended to be optimistic and believed that something would turn up. At any rate, they weren't going to worry about the future now.

Extreme advocates of the women's liberation movement would get little satisfaction from these interviews. Many of the girls said that they wanted to marry and have a family. Some would work for a while before marriage and return to outside work after the children were able to be on their own, but the "marriage and family" theme came through loud and clear. Very few of the subjects stated that they expected to work for or with their fathers or other close relatives. The tradition of the family business seems to have gone the same way as the three-generation home.

This is not the place to comment upon the role of the school in helping students choose and prepare for a vocation, but it appears that in practice at least the school does not contribute a great deal in this respect. Certainly, relatively few students felt that the school guidance department was particularly helpful.

### **“Idealism”**

Writers of text books on adolescent psychology sometimes refer to adolescence as the age of idealism and of devotion to a cause. There is evidence that the adolescent is influenced by group pressure — especially from his peers — and this characteristic may be used by manipulators, sometimes unscrupulous, to gain adherents to some social, political, or religious movement.

This survey, however, revealed very few idealists and many pragmatists. The adolescents in the sample tended to be “here and now” oriented, and to be preoccupied with self and with matters which affected them directly. The “freedom of choice” and “do your own thing” point of view, which has been mentioned several times earlier in this report, seems to be the current theme. Perhaps the adolescent does not see a cause with which he is strongly motivated to identify. The following quotation from an interviewer provides a fitting conclusion to this section: “She (a rather mature 16 year-old girl) sees adolescents as basically optimistic and present-oriented, in the sense of being concerned about the dance that night rather than thinking long term or being concerned about social issues to any great extent.”

### **Conclusion**

In the introduction to this paper, I referred to the danger of generalizations and suggested that generalizing about adolescents was a dangerous policy. In spite of this admonition to myself, I shall make one rather sweeping generalization: contrary to the current tendency to look upon adolescents as a race apart or as a sort of sub-species, it is abundantly clear that they are like human beings and should be considered as such. They exhibit the same range of attitudes and behavioral patterns as do adults. Common sense as well as sociological studies indicate that adolescence is largely a modern invention and that earlier cultures did not consider the “teen age” period as one deserving any special recognition. I wonder if all the text-books, studies, courses in adolescent psychology, public lectures, and so on have contributed to this separation of the adolescent from the rest of mankind. Perhaps we should declare a moratorium on the production of these examples of adolescentomania — even on the writing of papers entitled, “A Study of Adolescent Attitudes”!

I will end this paper by quoting from the reports submitted by three of the interviewers. One of them emphasized the point I made above when she said: “Adolescents are as diversified as the whole human race.” And another: “This interview cleared up a lot of the misconceptions I had about the adolescent of to-

day. You cannot categorize them as a bunch of feather-brains who think that every adult is their enemy. As they would put it, most of them are straight.” Finally: “The interview permitted me to enter, even if momentarily, into the thoughts of one of today’s adolescent generation, and what was revealed is far from the exaggerated beliefs held by many of the older generation.” *Quod erat demonstrandum.*

