Adolescent Development in Groups

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Abstract

Adolescent development has been a topic of study in psychology which primarily revolves around the evolution and adjustment of the self. Though some talk of young group dynamics has been discussed, the connection between the two can be expounded upon even further when looking specifically at topics of extra-curriculars, in-group biases, peer influence, and technological forums. The Larp Adventure Program can be shown as an example for some of these concepts.

Adolescent Development in Groups

Adolescence is a critical time for the development of and individual's psyche and identity. The personality and path that teenagers choose to take will shape their future development and culminate the psychological achievements they made as children to allow them to separate from the identities of their parents. Erikson's psychosocial stages identify adolescence as a time to develop not only individuality but an understanding of life and integration into a community. Groups become a very important part of this development as teens must learn how they fit within the collective. In addition, peer influence adds yet another dimension to this process.

Psychology of Youth in Group Activities

School begins the process of psychological challenges for children, teaching them competence and then providing a space for them to dabble in different roles as they resolve their confusion about their identities. Friend groups in middle and high school years have a major impact on the identities these youths try out and what actions they deem appropriate in social atmospheres. "In-group norms" (Killen, Rutland, Abrams, Mulvey, & Hitti, 2013) motivate moral and social conventions for members as adolescents begin to relate to group identity. "As with adults, children demonstrate intergroup bias and are motivated to enhance group distinctiveness by favoring their own group" (Killen et. al, 2013). In an attempt to make their group feel more worthwhile and positive, teens experience group prejudice which alongside in-group interaction, dictates an understanding of social politics as groups compete with those outside their immediate sphere. As adolescents evaluate intergroup exchanges, they call upon moral, societal, and psychological reasoning to understand interactions. Group members must

decide whether or not personal choice is acceptable within the group they have chosen, and deal with conflicting issues using various resolution techniques. Depending on circumstances, and factors like age and temperament, the advancement of an individual's identity can strongly influence how group loyalty is assimilated into each member and how rigidly group identity is enforced on changing personalities. The decisions members make in order to address deviations will shape these teenagers' ability to manage conflict in adulthood, whether through avoidance or compromise.

Outside friend groups, adolescents are also impacted by their participation in extra curricular activities. Literature regarding the subject reveals that "how adolescents participate in extra-curricular activities is significantly related to academic achievement" the benefits of which last into adulthood (Farb, & Matjasko, 2012). The cognitive maturation of this time period is easily impacted by social influence and the structure of extra-curricular activities orders this influence to promote achievement and a break from the confusion high-schoolers experience. The choice of outside activities was shown to have an influence on adolescents' impression of "school climate" (Farb et. al, 2012) and the desire to fit within it. Those who are well rounded with their activities- including both school-based and out of school hobbies- were shown to have a more positive perception of the school setting. Studies have also looked at the influence of out-of-school based activities on things like psychological adjustment, alcohol, substance abuse, and sexual activity. Yet another study "investigated the relationship between activity participation and unique physiological developmental outcomes that included the constructs of identity exploration, emotion regulation, and stress" (Farb et. al, 2012). Research points to a connection between school-based and out-of-school interests and the psychosocial changes of adolescence.

Besides just the psychological impacts of extra-curriculars, these activities also act as open forums for providing experiences with attention to detail, morality testing, logistical thinking, socialization, competence, sportsmanship, time-management, and relief from home life. These experiences can play important roles in shaping their transition to young adulthood where they will have new expectations placed on them which require them to be comfortable in justifying and staying loyal to their ideals.

Personal Development

Investigating purpose "through transitions in the formative stage of adolescence" (Malin, Reilly, Quinn, & Moran, 2014) researchers have found that purpose has a major part in "exploring empathy, discovering roles, shifting priorities, and creating pathways" from puberty to young adulthood. By adopting a direction, teenagers are able to view experiences within a certain frame, and in doing so better reason out the meaning behind what has happened. The insights that adolescents gain during this time period are shaped directly by their goals and ambitions and in determining social, cognitive, and physical realities youth discover an idea of the world which can last long into adulthood. In addition to teaching teenagers an understanding of themselves and others, purpose also allows adolescents to experiment with roles and priorities, deciding which best suit their interests and which interests best fit within these roles. In a twofold manner, purpose and self work around each other to solidify identity and decide which behaviors are best suited to achieving one's desires.

As adolescents develop, their journey to find and carry out purpose also changes: "middle school youth desired to be empathic; high school youth focused on finding a role to engage their purpose; high school graduates focused on re-evaluating their priorities through transitions; and college students focused on developing pathways to support their purpose." (Malin et. al 2014).

These various attempts to find accomplishment and create meaning around their own existence runs alongside the evolution of a youth's character. As one changes, the other is also impacted so that the development of purpose and identity work congruently, ideally towards a thriving and stable individual.

Purpose "guides planning, behaviors, and short-term pursuit" (Malin et. al, 2014) to shape life goals and actions in teens and young adults. The search to gain meaning from experiences and the outward expression of the desire to expand beyond the means of the self mix as purpose develops, integrating the adolescent self with the world outside them. Youth must be aware of their own intentions and learn to filter through their ambitions in order to enact the most beneficial actions in the pursuit of their current aim.

Groups expand these ideas, adding to the mix the task of integrating purpose into group identity and shifting group interactions to best suit the needs of its members' newly found priorities. As adolescents discover and expand upon a sense of purpose, they must evaluate not only their own actions but those of their groups to decided if their social spheres allow them to pursue their aims. This can add to in-group conflict, shifting relationships and changing out member, or it can allow groups to evaluate their roles and adjust group norms to the new interest of its individuals.

Modern development

Beyond individual improvements, this time period also involves a great amount of interpersonal growth. In order to keep in contact with friends, communities, and sometimes even teachers, adolescents increasingly turn to the digital platform in order to present themselves and develop relationships. "Since the advent of SNS technologies, adolescents' use of these technologies has expanded and is now a primary way of communicating with and acquiring

information about others in their social network" (Shapiro & Margolin, 2014). Studies of this use has pointed psychologists in the direction of looking at "identity and formation of friendships and peer relationships" (Shapiro et. al, 2014) as the major points of interests in discussing the impact of social networking sites on teenage development. The typical needs for support and communication are assimilated into adolescent's experiences online, these forums able to relate the events and interests of oneself to those who view them in one's accepted circle of people. "Adolescents have the option of choosing what self-identifying information to provide" (Shapiro et. al, 2014) and are able to receive validation and critique over this display. When in need of help, or encountering inexperience, teenagers can turn to various online forums to receive the guidance of others, both known and unknown to them. This open access can create an overly dependent individual or it can match the needs of the youth depending on the situation. While adolescents are able to portray their self to the world using online sites, these networks can be just as impactful on how the individual develops their sense of self and what exactly they choose to experiment with.

The desires of social networking sites can also interfere with young development as teenagers and prepubescents find themselves interacting on phones and computers over in-person exchanges. Internet addiction can take teenagers out of the physical world and place them in a simulated one which while still productive in teaching them certain life skills, can deprive them of necessary experiences to advance to adulthood well developed. These sites can also interfere with sleep and academia, impacting teenagers in a more direct way than the psychosocial implications of an online existence (Shapiro et. al, 2014).

The desire to fit in brings up a new topic to consider with 'linked-in' teens. Sites like facebook can provide immediate validation to various levels of self-esteem and increase and

individual's view of their "social capital" (Shapiro et. al, 2014). Beyond this initial gratification, online sites provide a sense of anonymity which can provide a forum for adolescent's to feel safe to express behaviors and ideas which they aren't confident to do in person. Being connected to a community like Facebook, teenagers are also likely to find themselves more aware of trends which are rotating through their schools or friend groups. The consequences of this are that the generation of actively online teenagers are developing around a structure of ideas which is influential on their sense of self and their relation to their peers. This structure is arguably more open to outside influences and creates a greater opportunity for a sense of rejection should expectations for approval not be met, however it also provides the connections a teenager needs to "develop a sense of themselves through their relationships with others" (Shapiro et. al, 2014). The expansion of an adolescent's mind outside themselves can provide "feedback that may alter their own self-perceptions" and adjust harmful misconceptions.

The Audience and the Teenage Self

Peer influence is truly one of the greater sensitivities of this time period. Expanding beyond the studies on the "effects of the presence of another person on performance" (Wolf, Bazargani, Kilford, Dumontheil, & Blakemore, S. J., 2015), research has recently been done looking at the audience effect in development, particularly of adolescents. The complexities of relationships in youth make peer influence even more relevant for adolescent social environments, with younger students more sensitive to exclusion and older teens resistant to peer influence but afraid of social evaluation (Wolf et. al, 2015). This study suggested that "audience effects on relational reasoning are critically dependent on task difficulty, the identity of the audience and the age of the participants" (Wolf et. al, 2015). In a school environment where

peers are constantly present, adolescents must learn how to move beyond anxieties regarding

outside judgment and develop a sense of competence in their selves.

Peer influence also has various influences on the formation of one's identity and their

sense of self-esteem and self-confidence. Adolescence is a critical time for self development and

environment is extremely important in determining this.

Larp Adventure Program

Live action role playing introduces a medium for all of these factors. As an extra-

curricular for middle-schoolers and high-schoolers, the activity of creating characters and

learning strategic and crafting skills can be a mechanism for adolescents to try out roles,

experience group dynamics, and gain a sense of competence.

The Larp Adventure Program demonstrates this type of community, integrating the

interest of live action role play into an after-school program. Learning from peer mentorship,

students acquire skills in prop creation, martial arts, strategic games, story-telling, and

personality creation. With both same-age and older-aged peers observing them, students must

master these skills and learn to get used to the audience effect. The communal standards shape

individual development and different groups of students establish various group identities within

the program.

Through the creation of characters to play, students are given the opportunity to try out

characteristics and develop their own personalities through shared experiences with the fictional

ones they play. Students gain a temporary sense of purpose as they participate in the community,

each given some level of responsibility and tasks for the duration of their time in the program

and again as they participate in story lines at events. Students also must constantly develop self-

regulation and social skills to meet the physical, social, intellectual, and emotional needs of

larping, giving them major opportunity to advance these aspects of their development.

Conclusion

      Adolescence is a critical time for the development of psychosocial abilities and sense of

self. Through various activities, teens must learn how to reason out the world around them, and

come to terms with their own place within it. As youth work to understand their identity,

purpose, hobbies, and relationships guide their experience and help them resolve personality

questions. Groups, peers, and social networking play a big part in this development, opening

opportunities for self-expression, validation, and criticism.

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