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EDITORIAL: We Can Do Better than "Adolescence"

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We can do better than “adolescence”

Post-structuralist thought has long argued that discourse shapes experience and is then reinforced by the material conditions of that experience. Put differently, the way we think and talk about phenomena lead us to see the phenomena precisely as we’ve been thinking about them. Over time, the resulting constructions – of the Other, of history, and more – become reified; they take on material lives of their own. We treat our own constructions as though they are inevitable and immutable truths. This is, of course, a problem in many ways not least because as we forget that the reifications are constructed, not natural, we consequently accept them as factual and stop ourselves from envisioning possible alternative constructions.

Through this journal, we invite deep investigation of these issues. We look for manuscripts that interrogate the taken for granted and through that interrogation move forward our thinking about the lives of children, youth, their families, and their communities. And perhaps no single reification is more central to academic and practice considerations of youth than the concept of adolescence. Adolescence, and therefore adolescents, is so widely accepted as a biological imperative, a developmental mandate, and an explanation for young people’s behavior that it appears in the academic and practice literature in unquestioned and fundamentally uncomplicated ways. It – and these characterizations - has become synonymous with “youth” or “young person” in its usage, despite its conflicted history and reliance on psychological and developmental paradigms that position youth as not-yet and less-than adults.

But this has not always been the case. While the social category of youth or young person has been central to many societies around the world for centuries if not millennia, adolescence is a much newer construction. Responding to the social and economic pressures introduced by industrialization in the global North and West, young people in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries found their social status shifting dramatically (and along fundamentally raced, classed, and gendered lines). As the fundamentals of labor shifted from largely agrarian to predominantly industrial forms and populations began moving from small communities to urban centers, scarce waged (and often piecemeal, relatively low-skilled) employment became competitive. Former rites of passage such as apprenticeship and other forms of social training, in which young people learned adult roles and responsibilities and were largely considered adults based on their mastery of these roles, gradually disintegrated. The resulting vacuum of purpose and social contribution left young people with unparalleled leisure time and a similarly unprecedented period of social rolelessness. These processes and their raced, classed, and gendered implications are well

documented in the critical youth studies literature (Finders, 1998; Finn, 2009; Lesko, 1996; Lesko, 2012; Macleod, 2003; Males, 1996; Sercombe, 2016; Wyn & White, 1997).

Among these implications was the 1904 naming of adolescence as a distinct life stage in the human experience (Hall, 1904), characterized by rolelessness, moodiness, conflict with adults, and engagement in risky behavior: it is a period of storm and stress between childhood and adulthood. While Hall clearly did not invent adolescence – its birth was a long time coming as social and economic conditions changed over the nineteenth-century – nevertheless his interpretations of young people form the foundation of contemporary adolescent theory. By the middle of the twentieth-century, Erik Erikson's developmental stages ensconced adolescence as a period of conflict and struggle. Largely gone from dominant discourses were conceptions of youth as creative, powerful, co-producers of their social contexts. These developmental and psychological constructions of young people are now so widely taken for granted that in the academic and practice literatures, adolescence is the default starting point for most adult interactions with youth.

Returning to the previous discussion of post-structuralism, this construction of adolescence is far from neutral. Today, saying “adolescent” is not the same as saying “young person,” in that the former carries with it a host of assumptions and implications the latter does not – assumptions far more likely to pathologize young people than celebrate them. Through the adolescent lens, young people are assumed in our research questions and our practice orientations to lack identity, to believe themselves to be invincible, to be incapable of discerning cause and effect or right from wrong, are in conflict with parents and resistant to adult authority, and the list goes on. Our research and practice too often starts from this vantage point, and our findings or interventions (often inadvertently and unintentionally) either seek to validate or interrupt these constructions. The assumptions are accepted a priori, in spite of our own lived and practice experiences that may contradict them. These interpretations have even made their way into the hard sciences, with conventional wisdom now arguing that they are biologically imperative given the deficiency of “the adolescent brain.” It can be argued that this research is biodeterministic – most interpretations of brain research take adolescent theory as a starting point and seek validation through observation. One could effectively use the same research to conclude not that the young brain is underdeveloped but that brains older than, say, 24 have begun to atrophy as they lose plasticity and as neural pathways become increasingly hard-wired (Males, 2009; Males, 2010; Sercombe, 2010).

Nevertheless, these dominant constructions of adolescence are so widely accepted that they have become depoliticized, framed as ahistorical and naturally occurring. In fact, we assume most scholars researching youth and practitioners working alongside them approach youth from these reifications without even knowing the harm they can wreak on young people's lives. Borrowing a phrase from Ridgeway's (2009) discussion of gender and social relations, young people have been “framed before [they] know it,” and the implications are vast.

Interrogating these taken for granted assumptions is countercultural work. The deep inquiry required in framing our scholarship more critically, with greater attention to the histories and implications of our starting points and the ways in which we frame our subjects, is as daunting as it is exciting. And we believe it is necessary. As long as young people are framed in adolescent

terms, with all their associated pathology and deficiency), young people will continue to be treated by adults as deficient and problematic. They will continue to internalize these messages as well, seeing themselves as not-yet, as outside, as roleless.

But by engaging in more critical scholarship, taking up the challenge of interrogating and ultimately destabilizing some of our fields' most central and unexamined Truths, we have the potential to interrupt these reifications and envision new possibilities – for youth, for their families, and for youth-adult relationships in all contexts. We therefore invite submissions to *Child & Youth Services* that take up new constructions of young people, that complicate adolescent reifications, and that engage deeply and theoretically with how young people (and by association, the adults present in their lives) have been framed.

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