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In the view of postmodern constructionists, literature, scientific studies, and other written text are but narratives, nothing more than descriptions that “focus chatter about an unknowable external world; a type of psychobabble”, which is used as confirmation of truth in the struggle over who dominates whom (Soulé 1996).

Introduction

Hardly a day goes by without a news story featuring teenagers being in trouble or causing trouble. They wreck cars, vandalize property, use and abuse drugs and alcohol, get themselves pregnant, spread STDs, drop out of high school, and pressure each other to do stupid and sometimes dangerous things. They are, in a sense, both a tribe apart (Hersch 1998) and an abandoned generation (Giroux 2003), both risk-takers (Bell and Bell 1993) and at risk (Capuzzi and Gross 2008), both rebellious (Lebrun 2011) and perilous (Newton 1995), and we—the grownups—simultaneously fear them and fear for them.

In this chapter, I expose another impediment to adolescent health. The impediment is our functional construct of adolescence as a period of development, and as a social category. I analyze adolescence as a social category to show how the

category itself, along with all its occupants, has turned adolescence into a perpetual social problem. What this means, in practice, is that adolescents—the people who occupy the category—are subject to extensive monitoring and regulation, are the targets of numerous programs and initiatives, and are effectively prevented from leaving the category until they are of age. That is, in order for adolescence to be conceptualized as a social problem it must first be recognized as a distinct period of human development that is different in fundamental ways from both childhood and adulthood. It also means that the category is self-reinforcing both in the sense that it provides an interpretive lens through which to understand youth behavior and in that it propels social arrangements that continuously reconstruct the period.

There is a vast literature addressing both the unique characteristics of adolescents and the unique social arrangements that guide their lives. One of the most recurrent themes in this literature is related to the challenges involved in the transition from the comforts and dependency of childhood to the responsibilities and demands of adult life. This transition, scholars have shown, is marked by confusion, experimentation, mistakes, dangers, and conflict. Designated as a time of “storm and stress” more than a century ago (Hall 1904), the idea of adolescence as a troublesome period and adolescents as constitutionally but temporarily irresponsible is by now firmly rooted in social arrangements, including a compulsory

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educational system designed to simultaneously prepare teens for the future and warehouse them while they are waiting to enter adult life (Buchmann 1989). Additionally, a separate system of criminal justice was built on the assumption that children and teenagers are essentially incapable of adult culpability and hence must be constrained and punished in different ways (Krisberg 2005). Moreover, a maze of rules and regulations confront teenagers wherever they go, telling them what they must and must not do and where they can and cannot go; some of those regulations pull them back toward childhood (e.g., regulation of sexuality), whereas others push them toward adulthood (e.g., being tried as adults). This regulatory framework constitutes a vast landscape of constraints and opportunities that have cemented an image of adolescents as forever teetering on the brink of chaos *because* they are adolescents and also ensures that they have little choice but to reconfirm this image through their actions. In short, then, adolescence is a social problem because we have made it so.

Although conceptualized as a time period that applies to all teenagers and affects all teenagers in the same way, there are good reasons for arguing that the category itself is both raced and gendered in ways that influence how particular teenagers are viewed and experience their teenage years. Moreover, and from a global perspective, although the category is construed as universal from a socio-biological perspective, the realities of teen life across the globe suggest that the conception of adolescence as a distinct phase in the life course is deeply embedded in social and cultural practices of the global north. Nonetheless, the forces of globalization—political, cultural, economic, and social—have begun to put pressure on the nations of the global south to adopt the kinds of practices and regulations regarding teenagers that facilitated the construction of youth as a distinct social category in the global north. In this paper, however, and following much of the scholarship of youth life, I focus on developments in the global north, especially the USA.

Why Are Adolescents the Way They Are?

While there is at least some scholarly agreement about what distinguishing features are characteristic of adolescence, there is extensive disagreement concerning the origins of these features. Here, I first present a brief overview of the socio-biological theories that dominate scholarship in the area and then develop a critique of them with the help of theories that view adolescence as a socially constructed period.

Adolescence as a Natural Stage in the Life Course

Drawing on the works of Hall (1904) and Erikson (1968), developmental psychologists view adolescence as a natural stage in the life course, beginning at puberty and ending at maturity, characterized by physiological and psychological development. Inspired by evolutionary theories, early students of adolescence theorized that life course development could be understood as a form of recapitulation, where each stage in the development of an individual recapitulates the development of the species as a whole (Lesko 2001). Building on Freud, Erikson (1968) elaborated the notion of developmental psychosocial stages to include the entire life course, even though his theorizing focused primarily on adolescence. Later theorists have further developed adult stages, with a special emphasis on the midlife crisis (Levinson 1978). From a developmental perspective, in other words, the urge to develop is built into the body itself. The question of exactly where the developmental urge sits in the body has been subject to intense scholarly scrutiny, and tentative answers have ranged from hormones to DNA. Less tentative is the conclusion that it is chronological age that triggers the developmental stages. This does not mean that social factors have no role in developmental theories, only that they are viewed as facilitators or hindrances of an otherwise natural process. In

so far as development is tied to chronological age, in other words, deviations from the normal path are viewed as potentially problematic.

The primary developmental task or challenge associated with the adolescent period is the establishment of an identity. As all developmental tasks, this one too is characterized by crisis. The assumption is that the establishment of an adult identity is preceded by an intense period of confusion and experimentation that compels the adolescent to shed the vestiges of childhood and assemble an identity that will take him/her into adulthood (Lesko 2001). And, it is precisely the assumptions about this developmental stage that have given rise to both the social arrangements that organize teen life and the perceptions of teenagers that accompany these arrangements. The conflation of risk and development in socio-biological theories, in other words, serves to simultaneously naturalize adolescent confusion and justify the social control measures that organize teen life. If it is developmentally necessary for adolescents to engage in some risk-taking behaviors (Irwin 1993), then it follows that we ought to arrange social life in such a way that young people can work through their developmental crisis in as safe and protected a way as possible. In contrast, social constructionist theories maintain, as I discuss below, that the troubles of adolescence are essentially caused by the social arrangements designed to protect them from their own confusion and the adult world from the fallout of adolescent risk-taking. From this perspective, the problems ascribed to adolescents lose much of their assumed naturalness and instead demand that a new approach, which abandons the assumption that the trouble of adolescents is inherent in their development age—rather than a result of the social arrangements that organize their lives (Gaines 1998; Vadeboncoeur 2005).

Adolescence as a Social Construction

Sociologists and anthropologists, drawing on cross-cultural and historical theories of youth, for the most part reject the biological underpinnings

of stage theories and instead view adolescence as a social stage (Coleman 1974), a social construction (Lesko 2001), or an invention (Baxter 2008; Berger 1965; Chinn 2009; Fasick 1994). What these and other scholars argue is that adolescence, far from being a natural stage in the life course, represents a social period during which those who occupy it are essentially sequestered from adult life and held in abeyance in institutionally designated places—primary among them the school system—until the adult world deems them ready to move on with their lives. Although there have obviously always been young people, the recognition of youth as a distinct species and the designation of adolescence as a separate stage in the life course are a fairly recent phenomenon (Buchmann 1989; Côté and Allahar 1996; Hine 1999), its emergence facilitated by a number of social, cultural, and institutional changes beginning in the late nineteenth and taking root in the twentieth century, including changes related to the institutions of family, work, science, and, especially, education. Perhaps the most important impact of compulsory education on social life in general, and on the emergence of adolescence as a social problem particularly, is the institutional separation of young people from much of the adult world. The school system is not only a social space carved out for young people, but also an age-graded set of material structures that channel the movements of adolescents and guide their activities in both positive (do this, go there) and negative (do not do this, do not go there) ways. In this sense, the system of education itself is part of the explanation for why adolescence has become a social problem (Crosnoe 2011).

From a sociological perspective, then, meanings associated with age are viewed as socially constructed and the accumulation of meanings around particular age categories is approached as a social process that varies extensively across time and place (Ariés 1962; Karp and Yoels 1982; Lesko 2001; Sommerville 1990). From this perspective, the emergence of age-specific and sequential meaning bundles is both a cause and a consequence of age-grading practices (Coleman 1974). And the very idea of a biologically driven

life course development is a particularly important part of the process whereby life stages have become naturalized. It is for this reason that some observers insist that we abandon the notion of adolescence, a term that designates socio-biological development, and instead adopt the term teenager-hood, which designates a socially constructed period (Danesi 1994).

Although a distinct period in and of itself, teenager-hood is also a transition period that captures, and is meant to bridge, “the distinction between mature, rational adults and immature, irrational children” (Heywood 2010, p. 359). In this sense, young people are somehow “unfinished” (Vadeboncoeur and Stevens 2005). As I discuss further below, this means that the lives of adolescents are circumscribed in such a way that it is difficult for them to avoid getting into trouble. Moreover, because they are more or less expected to mess up, when they do, their status as teenagers provides a readily available explanation; that is, the adult world assumes that teens mess up *because* they are teens. In this way, adolescence is a distinct lens through which teenagers are viewed, understood, and judged. And yet, even though it provides a distinct and fairly narrow view that impacts all teenagers, it is nonetheless a lens that is deeply entangled in other social statuses, including especially gender, race, and class (Cohen 1999). In other words, while all teens are affected by age-related expectations, constraints, and opportunities, understandings and consequences of their actions are inevitably filtered through the other social locations they inhabit.

No Longer Children, Not Yet Adults

Teens are distinguished from both children and adults in numerous ways, including legally, institutionally, and culturally. However, insofar as adolescence serves as a bridge of sorts between childhood and adulthood, the two heads of that bridge are neither firmly nor stably anchored in social life. Although chronological age is used across the institutional landscape as a marker of progress toward adulthood, taken as a

whole the markers provide inconsistent cues. That is, teens encounter numerous mixed signals as they go about their daily lives and the period itself is stretching both downwards into childhood—the notion of tweens (Cook and Kaiser 2004) captures this development—and upwards into adulthood, which is captured by concepts such as “emergent” adulthood (Arnett and Taber 1994; Arnett 2000) and “arrested” adulthood (Calcutt 1998; Côté 2000).

The institutional landscape in the USA and elsewhere is filled with age-related laws and regulations concerning any number of social practices, including voting, working, driving, buying alcohol and cigarettes, having sex, getting married, schooling, access to particular spaces, being outside at particular times a day, being executed. Not only do such laws and regulations give inconsistent cues to teens concerning the progress they are making toward adulthood, but they can also vary from time to time and place to place. Take voting, for example; this is perhaps the clearest marker of the transition to adulthood in that the right to vote signals adult citizenship. In the USA, a Constitutional Amendment (the 26th) lowered the voting age from 21 to 18 in 1971. This change was driven in large part by the conflicts surrounding the war in Vietnam, where young men deemed too young to vote but old enough to die for their country perished by the thousands. A similar debate drove the Supreme Court’s ruling in 2005 (*Roper v. Simmons*) that held that people who were minors (persons under 18) when they committed a crime were not eligible for the death penalty. In other social domains, however, people who are officially adults (18) are still prevented from doing what older adults can do (buying alcohol and tobacco, for example) and can also be legally discriminated against in various settings (required to pay a higher price for car insurance, for example). Regulations regarding sexual activity, similarly, have changed quite drastically since the nineteenth century, with the age of consent steadily moving upwards (from 10–13 years to 16–18 years). Not only does age of consent vary from state to state, but the conditions under which minor can have sex with each other, or

non-minors can have sex with minors, also vary, which means that a relationship that is legal in one state can be illegal in another. Patterns such as these both contribute to and are affected by the image of adolescence as a treacherous period characterized by confusion and contradictory expectations. At the core of this treachery is an insoluble tension between images of youths as, on the one hand, needing help and protection as they move through the period (teens are troubled) and, on the other hand, as causing so much trouble along the way that the adult world needs protection from them (teens as troublesome).

Contradictory Expectations: Troubled and Troublesome

Regardless of theoretical perspective, scholars from a range of disciplines agree that the transition between childhood and adulthood is particularly precarious and this is so because the psychological, social, and legal demands on children and adults are so vastly different. During the transition period between these two major life stages young people are supposed to shed the dependency of childhood and emerge as fully responsible adults at the other end. In some respects, the surrounding social arrangements facilitate the transition, but in other cases they complicate and confuse it.

The notion of “youth at risk” perfectly captures the precariousness of the transition from childhood to adulthood. Although some youths are clearly more “at risk” than others, the concept nonetheless rests on the assumption that all young people are potentially vulnerable to the pitfalls of adolescence (Dryfoos 2000; Lerner and O’Hannessian 1999; Wolfe et al. 2006). As long as the focus remains on the young people themselves; however, the structural arrangements that are responsible for much of the confusion recede into the background (Davis 1999). That is, as long as young people are viewed as inherently prone to risky behavior, the simple observation that they do engage in risky behavior requires no explanation at all; rather, it is excessive and self-destructive risk-taking that becomes the

target of both scholarly studies and policy interventions (Irwin 1993).

Even in the best of circumstances, youth as a social transition period is typically viewed as treacherous. There is by now extensive evidence that the organization of youth life facilitates the kind of risk-taking and self-destructive behavior that has spurned the notion of youth at risk (Lerner and O’Hannessian 1999; Wolfe et al. 2006). Moreover, scholars who focus on the organization of youth life point to the many ways in which society itself generates risks for the young by hindering rather than facilitating the transition to adulthood (Dryfoos 2000) and/or not supporting young people enough (Mortimer and Larson 2002). More critical observers refer to an outright abandonment of the young (Giroux 2003) and point to the many ways in which the adult world uses the young as scapegoats for its own failures to solve the problems of society (Males 1996). Taken together, then, observers differ in terms of where they locate the risk—in precarious development or in precarious social arrangements—but they typically share the conclusion that youth is a particularly treacherous time.

Yet, there is also evidence to suggest that the particular perils we have come to identify with youth are more likely to affect the children of the white middle-class than poor children of color (Currie 2005; Kenny 2000). In this sense, the trouble of adolescence is like a malaise of modern privileged life. This does not mean, however, that less privileged teenagers are somehow exempt from the dilemmas of youth. On the contrary, they have fewer opportunities to take advantage of the freedoms, privileges, and exemptions that come with adolescence and hence are at greater risk of carrying the burdens acquired during adolescence into adulthood. From this perspective, then, the children of the disadvantaged are doubly at risk; they are more vulnerable to the dangers of youth but also less protected by their youth. Yet, no matter how serious the liabilities facing youth in the wealthy nations of the global north, they pale in comparison with the difficulties of growing up amidst poverty, environmental depletion, and violent

conflict. The recent efforts by global forces—economic, cultural, health, governmental—to extend the western notion of adolescence to all parts of the world, therefore, have brought particular challenges to youth of the global south. As of yet, however, we know relatively little about these developments (Jensen and Arnett 2012; Larson 2002).

Adolescence as a Social Problem

In a book published almost 20 years ago, Mike Males addressed a series of myths concerning the troublesomeness of adolescents and concluded that adults were waging a war on its young people (Males 1996). Focusing on one problem area at a time, Males used available statistics to demonstrate not only that adults were worse than kids in most categories of analysis—they drink more, use more drugs, and are more violent—but also that it is poverty, not genetic makeup, that explains variations in youth exposure to and engagement with risky and deviant behaviors. Over the past 20 years, youth involvement in criminal behavior has fairly drastically declined. According to data from the FBI Uniform Crime Reports, teenage arrests for violent crimes dropped more than 50 % from the early 1990s to the early 2010s. Overall, teenagers were less likely than the two youngest adult groups (18–24 and 25–34) to be arrested for violent crimes, a pattern that has held for the past half century (https://www.youthfacts.org/?attachment_id=224). Data on drug arrests, also from the FBI Uniform Crime Reports, show a similar pattern: There has been a sharp decline in teen arrests since the early 1990s, but not in adult arrests, and teenagers are arrested at a much lower rate than the two youngest adult age groups (18–24 and 25–34). (https://www.youthfacts.org/?attachment_id=228). The decline in youth crime, alongside crime for everyone, is evident in all areas, but the distinction between teenagers and adults is not always as clear as in the above examples. What is clear, however, is that it is in the youngest *adult* category (18–24) that crime rates are the highest, even though the rates in that age group too have

declined markedly. This group of adults is now routinely referred to as “emerging adults” in the vast literature on adolescence and youth that is grounded in a developmental perspective (Arnett 2000). Objectively speaking, then, it would seem that adolescents (those under 18) are less of a problem today than they were 20 years ago. But such a conclusion does not fit the evidence concerning increased regulation and monitoring of young people; in a sense, “to be a child is to be under surveillance” (Steeves and Jones 2010, p. 187).

The analysis below is designed to illustrate these points and is organized around a series of recurrent themes in both the debate over and the literature on the problems of youth: the criminalization of children and youth, sex and pregnancy, drugs and alcohol, and the commercialization of youth identity. These themes capture in various ways how it is that young people have ended up as social problems. They describe the kinds of activities youth engage in and bring to the forefront the particular kind of adult anxiety that results in mixed signals for young people—these signals simultaneously push teenagers in the direction of adulthood and pull them back toward childhood. Taken together, they point to what Coté and Allahar (1996) refer to as the “liabilities of youth.” And yet, as endemic as they are, these and other problems remain construed as fixable at the individual or group level; that is, all sorts of interventions to alleviate the troubles of youth target the immediate circumstances of their lives and involve giving teens the tools to leave those circumstances behind. As a result, the structural features that shape and organize the period we call adolescence recede into the background and remain largely unaffected by policy initiatives designed to help individual youths overcome obstacles in their way and get on the right path toward adulthood. Moreover, and more importantly for the purposes of this paper, this also means that the links between the social period itself and the problems it generates for those who occupy it are effectively concealed. In short, if the root cause of the many problems associated with adolescence is caused by the period itself, then the

ambition to eliminate the problems of youth without changing the contours of adolescent life is doomed to fail.

The Criminalization of Children and Youth

The organization of youth life in contemporary society rests on the assumption that young people are not ready for adult responsibilities. We keep them in school to train and prepare them for adult life; we try to protect them from danger by various age regulations pertaining to work, sex, drugs, etc., and we typically exempt them from full adult responsibility in their encounters with the legal system. In so doing, we not only construct the social circumstances that propel so many young people in the direction of crime, delinquency, and violence—even though adult perceptions of youth violence are greatly exaggerated (Males 1999; Zimring 1998)—but we also subject youth to extensive monitoring. And this monitoring keeps generating the data that inform evaluations of how well or poorly young people manage the transition to adulthood. However, as long as there is no generally agreed upon threshold for what constitutes a non-problematic pattern of youth transgressions, any data, even data showing that teens are less destructive than adults, can be brought to bear on the problem of youth. It is for this reason that concerns over youth delinquency play such an important part in the construction of adolescence as a social problem (Spencer 2011).

Most young people break the law at some point during their adolescent years, but only relatively few get entangled in the criminal justice system (Cullen and Wright 2002). More recently, however, scholars have noted a trend toward a more punitive and preventative approach to juvenile transgressions (Stevens and Morash 2015). To some observers, this new trend amounts to the criminalization of childhood (Hirschfield and Celinska 2011; Parker et al. 2014). What this means most obviously is that behaviors, which in the past were viewed as minor infractions are now treated as criminal

conduct. More important for the purpose of this paper is to take note of the increased monitoring and surveillance that is part of the criminalization of youth (Irwin et al. 2013; Simmons 2009). More and more children have to go through metal detectors to get to school, are met by armed guards as they enter the school grounds, are subject to video surveillance wherever they go, and are faced with a growing number of rules and regulations concerning the kinds of clothes they can wear to school (prohibitions ranging from long black trench coats to bare midriffs), what kind of bags they can transport their books in (e.g., requirement that bags are see-through), what kind of hair styles they can sport, and so on. Although the surveillance of the young is especially pronounced in schools (Kupchik 2010; Monahan and Torres 2010), it also spills over into other institutional contexts and spaces (Fine et al. 2003; Fisk 2014; Rich 2012; Steeves and Jones 2010). More generally, the relentless monitoring of youth life in contemporary times both confirms and contributes to the notion of adolescence as a social problem. In this sense, the monitoring itself produces the very problems that it keeps generating evidence of (Kamp 2005; Foucault 1977).

Nonetheless, although affecting all young people at some level, the consequences of these processes for teenagers are vastly different depending on social location—poor, black and brown children are at much higher risks of getting entangled in the criminal justice system which in turn hampers their chances of living satisfying and productive adult lives (Simmons 2009). As William Chambliss (1973) demonstrated more than 40 years ago in his famous essay, *The Saints and the Roughnecks*, it is *perceptions* of youth delinquents, not the quality of the delinquency, that determine adult responses. Such perceptions, research has demonstrated, are deeply affected by not only age but also the various other social statuses people occupy, primary among them class, gender, and race (Beckett et al. 2006; Farmer 2010). This means that similar activities are understood differently depending on who engages in them. And research has consistently shown that brown and

black youth, both inside and outside school, are much more likely to be perceived as dangerous and hence subject to more monitoring and policing, more surveillance, more arrests, harsher punishments, and any number of other justice-related disparities (Davenport et al. 2011; Pettit and Western 2004; Simmons 2009; Wakefield and Uggen 2010).

Despite the fact that the educational system in many ways serves as the antidote to the criminal justice system—education is the way out of crime—the analysis in this section has pointed to the entanglement of the two institutions. Not only do they rely on similar surveillance technology and increasingly operate on the same principles (e.g., zero tolerance), but they also collude in the production of educational failures that feeds the prison industry (Simmons 2009).

In short, it is difficult to arrive at a conclusion other than that the system that produces failures as predictably as it produces successes is designed to do just this (Kozol 1967, 1991). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2014), the overall US high school graduation rate in 2012 surpassed 80 %, but the rates varied extensively across social groups, with Asians/Pacific Islanders at the top (93 %), followed by whites (85 %), Latinos (76 %) and African Americans (68 %). These numbers capture one of the most entrenched dilemmas associated with the educational system: It keeps generating an underclass of high school dropouts (Fordham 1996).

Given the structural features of the educational system, in other words, it quite effectively reproduces larger patterns of inequality and, in so doing, ensures the continued presence of sufficient numbers of poorly educated people to, on the one hand, fill the growing number of precarious jobs and, on the other hand, ensure a steady stream of bodies to sustain the prison-industrial complex (Davis 2003; Wilson 2014). In this way, the criminalization of childhood has effectively shored up adolescence as a social problem even as teen criminality has declined, and it has done so in a way that subjects all adolescents to measures of social control but

only get a fairly small portion of teens overall into serious trouble.

Too Much (Unsafe and Unmarried) Sex

Adult anxiety over teenage sexuality is of long standing. As with other aspects of the adolescent problem, the issue is filled with tensions and contradictions. At the same time as teenage sexuality is discouraged, even criminalized, young people, especially girls, are commercially sexualized. At the same time as fewer and fewer children and young people are exposed to comprehensive sex education, they are increasingly compelled in the direction of sexual experimentation by the culture they partake in. The result is a landscape filled with mixed signals, opportunities, and pitfalls that teens for the most part have to navigate on their own (Thompson 1996). The adult world has essentially abdicated its responsibility by insisting that the best solution to the problems of teenage sexuality is that young people refrain from sex altogether even as it bombards them with sexual messages and makes it difficult for them to avoid some of the pitfalls associated with sex.

The sexual component of the social problem of adolescence comprises a bundle of different practices and experiences related to sex, including poor contraceptive practices, pregnancy, teenage parenting, sexually transmitted diseases, and sexual violence. It is not so, however, that teenagers have more sex than adults or are engaged in more risky sex than adults (Males 1996); rather, their sexuality receive more public attention, more scrutiny, and engender more anxiety. At the heart of the matter is the simple fact that teenagers are sexual beings that both engage in sex themselves and provoke sexual desire in others.

Of the sex-related problems, teenage pregnancy occupies a special position as a social problem in its own right (Murcott 1980). According to the Office of Adolescent Health, the teenage birth rate in the USA has steadily

declined for the past two decades, from more than 60 (in 1991) to under 30 (in 2013) births for every 1000 adolescent girls (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services 2015). Despite this marked decline, the US teen birth rate is still significantly higher than in all other nations in the global north. There is extensive variation across different social groups, however, with the rate in 2010 ranging from about 24 for white girls, to just over 50 for black girls, and more than 55 for Hispanic girls (Kost and Henshaw 2014). Such variations point to the many ways in which the circumstances of teen life impact both the choices teens have and the decisions they make regarding sex and pregnancy (Garcia 2012; Thompson 1996). Yet, as a social problem, teenage pregnancy ensnares all teens in adult concerns over their sexual lives.

What is it about teenagers' getting pregnant and giving birth that warrants a social problem designation? Research has shown that the problem has less to do with pregnancy and more to do with the fact that so many teenagers are unmarried/single when they give birth (Luker 1996; Davis 1989; Vinovskis 1988). And unmarried teen parents are considered problematic for any number of reasons, ranging from moral concerns around teen sexuality to claims that single under-educated young women are dooming both themselves and their children to a life of poverty (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Linders and Bogard 2014). Because it is only women who can get pregnant, they are the primary targets for social interventions, with the result that girls' sexuality is controlled much more stringently than boys' (Nathanson 1991). Taken together, both scholarship and policy making share the basic assumption that teenage sexuality is a source of concern and hence an appropriate target for adult intervention and monitoring. When it comes to actual adolescent sexual activity, however, it appears less affected by adult efforts at managing it than one might think, at least in some respects—in both Europe and North America the average age at which young people start sexual activity has remained fairly stable—at around 17 years—for the past half century (Dillon and Cherry 2014).

The point I want to make here is not to deny that sexuality is a treacherous field for teenagers, but instead to emphasize the ways in which the problems of teenage sexuality are linked at a fundamental level to the very notion of adolescence itself. In short, it is precisely because of the assumptions and institutional arrangements that have given rise to a separate social location for teenagers that *teenage* sexuality as a distinct social problem apart from adult sexuality has taken shape. What this means, in essence, is that although aspects of teenage sexuality can be tweaked with policy making, the problem of teenage sexuality itself is insoluble.

Drugs and Alcohol

Alongside sexuality, consumption of drugs and alcohol is one of the greatest concerns that adults have for youths. Just like with sexuality, the rate at which young people consume drugs and alcohol, even though much lower than adult rates (Males 1996), stands as unequivocal evidence of the failure of prohibition (Danesi 2003). Nonetheless, adolescent drug and alcohol use is carefully monitored and school-aged children are subject to any number of anti-drug initiatives and messages. In addition to the risks associated directly with the abuse of drugs and alcohol, adolescent drug and alcohol use is also linked to a number of other concerns; in this sense drugs and alcohol are proxies of other problematic teen behavior, such as sex, violence, and school failure (Wolfe et al. 2006).

As with other aspects of the adolescent problem, however, adult concerns have less to do with the magnitude of actual use/abuse than with the fact that the risk is ever-present. After all, the use of drugs among teenagers has declined steadily over the past decade and an increasing number of adolescents do not use any drugs at all. According to the National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA), adolescent alcohol and drug use is on the decline. From 2009 to 2014, the proportion of high school students who used alcohol decline significantly in each age category by about 5–6 % points (NIDA 2015). Use of illegal

drugs, similarly, has declined from its peak in the late 1990s, but more recently the use of some drugs, especially marijuana, has stabilized (Ibid). Taken together, though, the vast majority of high school students do not report using drugs on a regular basis. So, from an objective position, the problem seems overdrawn. And yet, it remains a major preoccupation of adult caretakers. For example, Ohio has just adopted a new law that requires schools in the state to “teach children about the dangers of prescription painkillers, a leading gateway drug to heroin abuse” (Recovery Society 2015).

I am not suggesting that drugs are not dangerous or that we should stop worrying about teenagers who get caught up in a cycle of dangerous drug use. There can be no doubt that drugs can cause serious damage, not only to individual teens and their families, but also to entire communities devastated by drugs like heroin. Rather, it is to observe how both the underlying conditions of the problem—the contours of youth drug use—and the conceptions of the problem—as a particular youth problem—are caught up in the very organization of adolescent life. Despite the assumption that youth is a period consumed by the preparations for adult life, it is in many ways a period of abeyance, a waiting period during which young people are locked out from adulthood and corralled into age-segregated environments. In short, we have placed a “generation on hold” (Côté and Allahar 1996). It is not surprising therefore that one of the responses by youth is to seek excitements and distractions in drugs and alcohol (Currie 2005). And when they do, it is also not surprising that adult observers filter adolescent use of drugs and alcohol through the conception of youth as a period of confusion marked by bad choices (Griffin 1993). In this sense, adolescent abuse of drugs and alcohol come to confirm the conception of youth that justify keeping young people sequestered rather than encouraging questions about how the very organization of youth life not only might facilitate irresponsible youth behavior but also keep generating adult concerns for the well-being of the young. Moreover, the conceptualization of drug use as a particular risk for

youth discourages analyses of the *similarities* between youth and adult behaviors.

Identity for Sale: Subcultures and the Commodification of Teenagers

When Marcel Danesi (2003) titled his book about today’s youth, *My Son is an Alien*, he captured a widespread adult anxiety around teenagers and the life they lead; they dress oddly, they listen to incomprehensible music, they have strange friends, they develop a bad attitude, they spend an inordinate amount of time in front of their computers/tablets/phones, they acquire new (bad) habits and (questionable) tastes, and they no longer tell their parents where they go or what they do. It is like they wake up one day and start acting like completely different persons than the ones their parents/siblings/neighbors/relatives/teachers thought they knew. Insofar as these trends take on an organized character among teenagers, they sometimes give rise to more widespread moral panics about youth life (Cohen 1993; Springhall 1998; Thiel-Stern 2014). The problem here does not primarily originate in the kinds of physical dangers that accompany some of the other adult concerns around youth—associated with drugs and violence, for example—but instead is linked to what adults perceive as the fragility and susceptibility of adolescent identity. Primary targets of these concerns are peer groups, media and advertising, popular culture, and various other purveyors of youth identity (Quart 2003; Sternheimer 2003). From an adult perspective, it can seem as if young people are pressured into taking on new identities by the nonstop onslaught of popular culture (cf. Moje and van Helden 2005; Oliker and Krolikowski 2001), which now, in the context of internet and social media, never let up its potential influence (Thiel-Stern 2014).

There are numerous reasons why popular culture directed at youth causes adult concerns, but primary among them are worries that the development of identity somehow gets thwarted by the manipulation of the pop culture industry that has grown up around teenagers (cf. Chin 2001). Although teenagers by and large are poor

compared to adults, whatever disposable resources they have are usually much more discretionary than those possessed by adults (who have fixed bills and recurrent financial obligations). One consequence of this is that teenagers have become a serious target of marketers who produce an endless number of goods and services with the purchasing power of teens in mind. Marketers not only draw on youth culture to sell their products but also infiltrate youth life to stir up demand, by giving popular kids clothes and other products to wear and display, for example (Quart 2003). They also find ingenious ways of penetrating the social media environment with product endorsements and thinly veiled marketing pitches. From a parental perspective, this can result in seemingly incomprehensible and forever fleeting demands for particular products. But the problem I am getting at here is deeper than the mere materialism of youth life—which still pales in comparison with adult life—in that it reveals deep seated adult anxiety over the very instability of youth life which can translate into possibilities of major challenges to the status quo (Giroux 2003).

The social structure of school and other institutions dominated by adolescents is not quite following the social structure of adult life. In this sense, the spaces dominated by teens allow for—encourage—the development of unique youth cultures (Milner 2004; Haenfler 2010; Larkin 1979). These cultures—or subcultures—are unique not simply in terms of content but also, and more importantly, in the ways in which they stretch and cross, and sometimes violate, the social boundaries that characterize and guide adult life. These boundary crossings—across economic, racial, religious, cultural, and residential lines—are in themselves cause for worry among adults and, especially when coupled with more or less dangerous activities (e.g., drugs, alcohol), provide insights into adult anxieties over teen life. Moreover, although teen institutions, especially education, are deeply entangled in the social processes that reproduce patterns of advantage and disadvantage, it is still so that teenagers are not quite yet as implicated in the larger systems of rewards and penalties that

affect adult life. This means most obviously that young people are in a position to establish their own status systems and to decide on what basis to confer and withhold respect. It also means that young people because they are less committed to and/or less entangled in adult life are considerably more volatile from a sociopolitical perspective. And that can be very frightening to adults (Giroux 2003). The main point I am making here, though, is that this very volatility can be productively understood as a consequence of the organization of youth life without recourse to theories of psychosocial development.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to, first, demonstrate that adolescence has emerged as a social problem in contemporary life and, second, to identify some of the key components of that problem. My argument overall is that the problematic aspects of adolescence are not fixable with programs, interventions, and tweaks to individual lives. Rather, they are built into the very DNA of teenage life. Hence, the only way to solve the problem of adolescence is to get rid of it as we know it.

This is obviously not a feasible policy option. The period we call youth is deeply engrained in the fabric of social life and therefore cannot easily be dissolved or even majorly elaborated. Nonetheless, it is possible to ease the transition between childhood and adulthood, both individually and collectively. To do so effectively requires that we abandon the fiction that young people, en masse, are incapable of taking responsibility for their own lives. There is quite a bit of evidence to back up the claim that teenagers not only can but also want to take a more active part in social life; that is, young people have a much better understanding of the conditions of their lives than adults usually give them credit for (Chin 2001; Loeb 1995; Sternheimer 2003; Vaedeboncoeur and Stevens 2005). This is extremely important if the goal is to improve adolescent health. This analysis suggests, at the very least, that young people must be consulted

in a meaningful way about how their lives are organized. At a more fundamental level, however, we must come to terms with and confront the many ways in which the structuring of adolescence both inspire and stifle challenges to the healthcare sector and status quo. This means, in the end, that the solution to improving adolescence health does not start with adolescents but instead with adults. They have the power and resources to reorganize adolescent life, but perhaps not the political will.

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