

PSYCHO-PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATION OF THE ADOLESCENT'S SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

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Abstract

The developmental period of the human being has been a very critical and sensitive one. Be that as it may, the adolescent stage of development is one that stares in the face; adolescence is greatly characterized with a whole lot of instabilities and changes; consequently, it becomes a problem for the adolescent, their parents/guardian and the society at large. This paper would make an expose of who an adolescent is, the challenges of adolescent and the various significant changes that occur within this developmental stage. It would also bring out the psycho-philosophical implications of this adolescent's search for identity with a recommendation on how to understand and accommodate the adolescent with the various attendant changes he/she is passing through. The adolescent has got some existential facts and the knowledge of this would help us to understand the person when he or she exhibits characters and traits.

Keywords: adolescent, changes, search, identity.

Introduction

There is a universal quest in man to be understood and accepted. It is this same quest that makes him want to be real, to be whom and what he really is and desires to be. This man, however, finds himself in a continuous battle between the oneness of his own being, against the multiplicity of others (the society). It is through his uniqueness, his being an individual, that he finds meaning in his existence and is identified as an individual he is, hence his continuous search for self-identity. Although this search for self-identity spans through life, it is paramount in adolescents because, the process of self- exploration begins at adolescence. As the adolescent searches for self- definition and identity, he also struggles to understand himself and his experience uniquely as they appeal and make their impression on him. He regards, with a pinch of salt, the experience of others especially those of his elders. He believes in doing his own

things, fighting his own fights and having his own experience. He, therefore, questions every authority and tradition outside himself.

Not minding these attitudes of the adolescent, he wishes to know and learn. He has begun to think, consider and fashion an idea personality he would like to be, all things being equal. He hopes to have a particular identity as an adult and not to be perceived in a particular way by his society. Often, many adolescents would like to be conceived as responsible even if they may not have to be gentle, provided they are recognized and respected in their society. This thought of a unique identity and personality guides them towards searching for identity that will give them an acceptable self-concept and self-definition in their society. So the adolescent struggles to structure an identity that will lead and sustain him through adulthood. Moreover, this search for self-identity is not a swift venture. The adolescent finds it difficult to fashion

a unique and authentic self-identity because of the fluctuating waves of emotions and instincts that dominate this stage of development. He always occupies himself with the matters of the moment, questions the tradition of the past and ignores the ideals of the future because they are far and uncertain. He, therefore, ignores the counsel of his parents, teachers and elders as archaic and irrelevant to their present situation. Thus, Shamrock (2005) opines that parents do not understand that teenagers (adolescent) need to find out who they are, which means a lot of experimenting, a lot of mood swings, a lot of emotions and awkwardness.

Unless we take and understand the adolescent in view of what he intends to be, we can always spoil him when left to himself. Thus says Goethe, the German poet, if man is taken as he is, we make him worse but if taken as he ought to be, we help him become and make him the best of his ability. Adolescence is a time of great possibilities. Jersild et al (1978) noted that it is a time when most young people must pay a price for the privilege of growing up. The adolescent is in a search for identity and personification of his world. He itches to assert and define himself as an existential phenomenon worthy of recognition, neither as a group nor as a member in identification of his society, but as an individual he really is. He therefore, finds himself in an existential crisis between his self (ego) and his society.

T H E A D O L E S C E N T PERSONALITY

By "personality", we refer to the compository elements, qualities and attitudes by which an individual is

defined and identified whenever and wherever he/she is. The word "Adolescence" is understood according to Engle (2001) as the period of life change in which the growing individual makes the transition from childhood to adulthood. It is a stage of evolvment and involvement. It is projected to fall within the ages of 10 and 25. It is a period of stress, conflict, questions and various resolves. It is, therefore, a period of uncertainty and fear because; according to Engie (2001), the experiences of adolescence influence adult life. It is also a period when important decisions about oneself must be taken in order to make a meaningful life. The dominant elements in adolescence are instinct and emotions. Adolescence is a self-searching venture. The adolescent often seeks to harmonize his instincts and emotions by trying to understand as was asserted by Pervin (2001) the sum of the patterns of his thinking, feeling and behaving that is characteristic of his person. It is in an attempt to understand his personality that he becomes conscious of his uniqueness- the individual differences, and tends to be egocentric. However, in this lies his search for self-awareness, self-definition and self-identity. Moreover, this personality identification cannot be effective without a proper harmonization of both his inherited qualities and learned characters in relation to his life aspiration. Thus, the adolescent personality is a psychological pattern or trait of development that identifies and distinguishes adolescents from the periods of childhood and adulthood.

Who is an adolescent?

Wattenberg (1955) defines adolescent as a period of growth towards adulthood. Wehmier (1995) sees it as a general

opinion that adolescence is a time of change. To some, it is a time of turmoil, wholesome also sees it as a period of near insanity, when teenagers lose their rationality, become obnoxious or rebellious and cause parents unrelenting misery. Jersild et al (1978) opined that when considered from the holistic view of life span development, adolescence appears as the time when the surge of life reaches its highest peak. Adolescence is characterized by conflicts and so is the adolescent. It is, however, pertinent to point that, following Berger (1998) that while no period of life is problem free, none including adolescence is defined only by its problems. Consequently, Engle views adolescence as a period when, more than at any other time of life, it is important for young people to establish convictions about their identity. They must, as far as possible, find themselves amidst these conflicts. Although adolescence is classified within the age of 10 and 25, there is no definite designation for adolescence even within the same country since it also deals with genes and environment.

What Characterizes the Adolescent.

Adolescence is a period of change, ranging from physical, intellectual, and emotional changes: increased sexual interest, autonomy or emancipation from parental control, increased social responsibility and career planning or life goals. It is through these changes that the adolescent models and shapes his life into the pattern and personality with which he wishes to be identified and accepted.

Physical Changes

The most obvious sign of adolescence is the physical change. Adolescence is mainly defined and marked by puberty. Engle (2001) stipulated that physically, adolescence is considered to begin at the onset of puberty when one's reproductive organs become capable of functioning and ends when an individual has matured sexually and has reached his full height. Jersild (1978) stated that for some psychologists, adolescence begins "roughly when young people begin to show signs of puberty and continuing until most of them are sexually mature, have reached their maximum growth in height, and have, approximately, reached their full mental growth

Puberty, then, is the time when an individual begins to develop and reach sexual maturation as well as growing some hairs around the reproductive organs and pubic regions. Some of these changes in puberty include development of reproductive organs, growth of the genitals (the secondary sex characteristics), growth spurt, voice change, etc. These visible changes give the pubertian adolescents adult looks. Wattenberg (1995) submitted that with these changes, the physical barriers separating adolescents from the adults begin to wane and there is a demand that they (adolescents) act like adults.

Emotional Change

Jersild et al (1978) posited that the ability to give and receive affection to and from others, respectively, is a characteristic feature of adolescents. However, Berger (1998) advised that the fluctuations in emotional tides of adolescents are often consequent of their raging hormones, visible change of puberty, values and

expectations of the family and society, the peer group and culture.

Through the means of some television programmes, movies, books, magazines and conversations, the adolescent is brought into the necessity and importance of friendship, in the words of Engle (2001) desirability of falling in love; to love and be loved become extremely important. In his step to emotional maturity, the adolescent finds it difficult to draw a distinction between giving and taking. He, therefore seeks close friendship with his peers first with those of the same sex, before going into heterosexual relationships. This often leads him into intimacy and the world of affection. Because he feels uncertain and socially insecure about the things that go around him, his being accepted, understood and loved, the younger adolescent often derives a great deal of satisfaction from these close friendships. Note should be made that the adolescent's feeling of insecurity outside the peers and friends should not be understood in terms of physical harm or violence but with whom and where he is comfortable, at ease, satisfied and free to live and act.

Increased Sexual Interest

One characteristic of adolescents is their increasing sexual interest. The physiological changes of puberty arouse the adolescent's consciousness of sex and his body image.

With the growing body changes, the adolescent often occupies himself with thoughts of his outlook. He spends more time in the consideration of how he looks and is presented to the public. With these physiological changes, the adolescent struggles with the fact of accepting his

body physiognomy. While doing this, many spend hours concentrating on their physical appearance. At this juncture, any remark about their physical appearance be it their facial outlook, general physique, dressing (including combinations made) and their hairstyle is not taken lightly. This is often what some psychologists call 'self-absorption'. This self-absorption is mostly done in order to accept and appreciate their body image. But in the case of any negative remark referring to his appearance, the adolescent is likely to develop a poor self-esteem and self-concept when this is done constantly. Thus, Berger (1998) says, this self-appraisal can have a major impact on the adolescent's over-all sense of self-esteem. This is because a teenager's assessment of his physical appearance is the most important determinant of positive or negative self-esteem.

However, within this self-absorption and acceptance of body image, the adolescent wishes to draw and attract attention to him. He begins to consider how attractive is his appearance (physique), dressing and possibly his movement (steps). This is found in both sexes but prevalent in girls. The adolescent male begins to consider features of his macho-muscular bodies and tries out its development via weight lifting and some strenuous exercises. And some females indulge in making some applications to help them have attractive breasts and hips. Some of them also prefer to go on weight loss drugs and edibles so as to appear lanky and attractive not just to the opposite sex but also to the entire populace. They want to be admired. It is this preoccupation, concentration and adoration of the self that often lures him to the thoughts and

issues of sex. He now has and receives from the society the criteria of attraction. There is then a sexual attraction to the opposite sex. Girls excite for boys and boys for girls. Everybody now goes out in search of the attractive and better attractive person. In this case, then, the less and unattractive ones tend to have fewer and lesser friends. Boys tend to value girls with good-looks, sexy, easy-going and then some virtues as important features of an ideal woman. For most boys, a girl's facial appearance and good physique are the primary factors for friendship and marriage. Girls, on the other hand, value more a boy's kindness, honesty, gentility, popularity, status and easy-going way of life and facial outlook. Both boys and girls wish to identify and be identified with the beautiful, and as dating the most beautiful/handsome guy/babe in town and campus.

Emancipation from Parental Control

Amidst all these changes, the adolescent is still in his search of the self. 'Who am I?' 'Who do I want to be?' In reaction to these self-addressed questions and in his feeling of having come of age, he seeks to free himself of all influential authorities and control, in order to posit and project himself. In this freedom from authorities and power lies also his readiness to extricate himself from the 'shackles' of parental control and influence. He seeks to do his own things and play active role in issues that concern him. He no longer wishes to be controlled and ordered about by any authority each time he wants to act. He wants to have a direct and personal touch of whatever affects his life.

Increased Social Responsibility

The period of adolescence is often the period of association and involvement. It falls within the time of secondary school and undergraduate studies. The adolescent is also into some peer-group clubs and associations he is related to. In any of these situations, one or more of them have to take control and lead other members of the group. At school, some of them are appointed heads in certain sections of the school's life. The greatest pain of most adolescents is defeat. No adolescent wishes to be tagged and identified as a failure. And in the bid to keep and meet the role-expectations, he acquires a new attitude and approach to life and issues. He takes decisions for the group he represents, as and when due. He strives to perform and reach the required standard of the organization or club in order to maintain its identity and objectives. Consequently, once a member has gained a reputation for playing a particular part, the group seems to expect him to continue along the same line. To preserve his social ties, he is likely to oblige. This is why often they make giant strides to keep high their heads in manning the roles entrusted to them. As those assigned with the task and responsibilities of leadership explore their leadership capacities, others are being trained in the areas of followership, as co-operate workers and supporters.

Intellectual Change

Thus far, the adolescent's brain is at its best. His mental capacity is very flexible and elastic. It reaches its highest capacity to grasp in exploration. The adolescent, therefore, thinks and considers oneself in a wide range of possibilities. There is now a sharp distinction between the way he reasoned as a child and the way he now

reasons as an adolescent. Thus, Berger (1998) opined that the most distinguishing feature of the adolescent's thought is the capacity to think more in terms of possibilities rather than only in terms of realities.

Through this mental approach of thinking in possibilities, the adolescent questions and seeks convictions of all existing phenomena. Life now for him is that of possibilities and experimenting. If he devises a workable contradiction to an already existing concept and authority, the latter is instantly disproved and dropped. He now develops a logical mind, a mind for abstraction. He cares not in the manner and extent his disapproval is correct. This way, any tradition or authority that is not concrete and rational enough is rejected.

The Adolescent World

Generally, the adolescent world has a wealth of controversies. It is a world of experimenting, excitements, challenges, and growth. The adolescent is ever focused on the discovery of the self, an expedition to find the self- a self that is unique and acceptable to both himself and his society. The world of the adolescent, therefore, is the totality of who he is, how he perceives himself and the society around, and how he wishes to be regarded by his society.

The World of Identification

The major concern of adolescents is the problem of self-definition or self-identification. He constantly asks the question 'Who Am I?' Adolescents are very much preoccupied with the thought of self, in the bid to know, discover and understand them self -gross anonymity. Having come of age and in his aspiration

to be a fruitful adult, he feels the necessity of self-awareness and self-definition. He/she, therefore, becomes conscious of his uniqueness as an effect of an awareness of his distinctiveness. In this consciousness, he seeks a definition of the self that is personal and real.

Most often, in his search for identification he becomes very egocentric and brackets every other reality outside himself. For the adolescent, identity formation lies in the exclusion of one's society and environment. It does not however occur to him, according to Berger (1998) that sailing the changing seas of development is never done **alone**. **Alphonse (2005) noted** that developing a fuller personality demands what others know about me and how much they understand me. He should, therefore, know that the process of self-definition is the ability of one, according to Berger (1998) to maintain some connection with the meaningful elements of the past and accepting the values of a group.

Making Sense of the World

Next in the mind of the adolescent is the search for meaning. This is mostly reflected in their inquisitiveness towards any authority and tradition. 'The adolescent makes this search in order to find convictions and reasons in things and the world around him. And he tries this often by means of questioning. As he questions, he does not often consider who said but questions all authority and traditions in a continuous evaluation. And once any authority or tradition does not survive his test of reason, he downplays and has less regard for it. For the adolescent, this is the primal stage towards self-discovery and

identification. And unless he dissects and makes sense of all authorities and activities around him, he stands the chance of finding it difficult to identify himself uniquely in disassociation of all visible influences.

Exploring Possibilities

Adolescents often find themselves swinging in the world of possibilities and imaginations. They often interpret the biblical injunction of Ecclesiastes (11-9-10) "man, enjoy your youth", as man trying out one's capabilities, when one is still young. In response to this one tends to throw oneself in a disposition to grasp and make real one's thoughts. And this often lures them to fantasy and imagination because they wish to make real every of their thought. They dream about the possibilities to be realized, when in essence they may not be realizable. This is the effect of the wide-range of possibility working in their fantasy and imagination.

Acting-out In Experimentation

Having been exposed to the world of possibilities, adolescents seek to act-out all these imaginations by way of experimentation. Experimentation, therefore, forms the basis for their accepting anything as impossible- if it is not proved to be possible by practice then it is impossible. Most often this desire for experimenting knows no bound and cuts across every aspect of life. And once tried and found not pleasurable, the act or idea is likely to lose fascination. They do not close doors on experimenting and acting out their instincts and emotions. This latter aspect often brings out a distinctive feature of adolescents, namely, they tend to be too emotional. Their world is fully packed. It is a world filled with desire and

challenges- the challenges of self-identification, self-conviction and the desire to try out all possible possibilities. It is a world so interesting and enjoyable but, if care is not taken on how the adolescent passes, spends and develops his life, he shall always live to regret this stage of life.

PHILOSOPHICAL RELEVANCE OF ADOLESCENT'S SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

It has been the task of philosophy to search, discover and uncover the basic structure of all reality, man inclusive. Contemporary philosophy has taken the responsibility of finding who man is, the nature of man with the belief that through his means, man will realize himself, his essence, his true nature and his role in universe. The quest for identity is all about personification and making sense of all that happens and affects us. It interests us to seek a philosophical system of thought – existentialism, whose interest lies in helping man to live meaningfully and authentically in his world.

Existentialism can be literally described as the philosophy of existence. Barret (2004) sees it as a philosophy that confronts human situation in its totality, to ask what the basic conditions of human existence are and how man can establish his own meaning out of this condition. Existentialist philosophers are concerned with human existence. It stresses individuality, authenticity, anxiety and freedom. Stan-Williams (2005) opined that freedom is an essential quality of nature of man. Consequently, they see man as the product of his own freedom and choices. Barret (2004) quoting

Ajayi, interpreted man, in J.P. Satre, as nothing but what he makes of himself. A man by being free to choose the type of life he would like to live is in control of his destiny. To exist presupposes that one is committed to a chosen way of life conscious of human problems and directs and lives a life, which he freely chooses. It follows then that in our search for self-identity and self-definition, it is we who decide what we become, how we become and where we become. No matter what the situation, circumstance, event, place or time, it is our duty and responsibility to realize ourselves because no human act is determined in as much as consciousness itself is determined by its choice of project or ends. Consequently, whatever action one decides to take, is the exercise of one's freedom. Freedom is indispensable for the realization of authentic existence; it is the very core of, and the door to authentic existence.

Conclusion

Identity transcends our usual concept as something fixed in a permanent way, something that could be got once and for all. Identity is a life-long challenge which starts intensely in adolescence. It is not only the task and acuity of adolescents but of man throughout life till death: man can only achieve fullness of his identity in death. Our perception and search for identity and self-definition vary conspicuously from adolescence to adulthood. To be conscious of this existential fact will help us to understand adolescents when they exhibit certain characters and traits. Ability to achieve identity and authentic selfhood depends on our disposition to open ourselves to the world around us, to be affected and known. We should seek to understand why we are and why we indulge in certain

activities. Moreover, being in the shadow of the anonymous crowd is not authenticity and identity. Identity lies in our ability to consciously evaluate our life activities to find meaning and make sense of our environment in view to personify and experience the world around us uniquely.

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