A Cross-Cultural Study of Self-Image: Indian, American, Australian, and Irish Adolescents

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Planning for research and youth welfare programs in every developed and developing country is essential if man envisages the normalization of sick adolescents. Adolescent unit programs are needed in India, as in all parts of the United States, and should be an integral part of medical institutes in every university. Actually, the problem of generation gap, ego identity, and subcultures (i.e., peer group pressure) creating negative attitudes in youth is one of the most explosive problems that behavioral scientists face in the modern era. The present project is an attempt to study the self-image, ego strength, self-esteem, or level of psychological well-being of a normal adolescent group of Indians and to compare this with youth of three other nationalities – American, Irish, and Australian. To measure the self-esteem of an individual, 11 areas of conflict including impulse control, emotional tone, body and self-image, social attitudes, morals, sexual attitudes, family relations, external mastery, vocational and educational goals, psychopathology, and superior adjustment have been examined. The Hindi version of the Offer Self-Image Questionnaire has been used. The sample consists of 400 boys and 400 girls, ages 14 to 18, of middle class socioeconomic status; the educational level is high school/intermediate. It is concluded that American and Australian adolescents, in general, have higher self-esteem or ego strength than do Indian and Irish adolescents, respectively.

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INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is the critical phase for the psychosocial maturation of an individual. The psychologist evaluates adolescence as the period in which one is striving for emotional maturity. The adolescent is a victim of psychological strain, occasioned by feelings of personal inadequacy and disability caused by multifarious social pressures and demands. He has a weak ego with fragile, vulnerable ideas, high expectancies, and is in constant search of identity (Erikson, 1950). The strength of the ego is tested by the quality of defenses observed in behavioral reactions to encounters with different situations. Sociologists, on the other hand, consider adolescence as a period of striving towards social maturity. Sociologically, it is the period in the life of an individual when society ceases to regard him as a child and yet does not accord him full adult status. The greater the disparity between adolescence and adulthood, the greater will be the traumatic experiences of the former period. The adolescent’s role, as a part of the social structure, is defined and youth recognizes its limitations and reacts with revolt.

It has been observed that this age group has its subculture within a broader spectrum of social life, and its own cultural milieu, with its own biases, values, jargons, feelings of psychological involvement or distance, ego reinforcements, and cultural sanctions. Usually, adolescents have a subculture of negation in which the positive valence of prevailing culture is distorted to a philosophy of youthful dissidence and protest — sometimes to the point of extreme radicalism. Actually in this period, solidification of ego processing is done and new identifications are formed. Broadly speaking, a study of this developmental phase is intensely needed and behavioral scientists have been duly drawn to this age group. Much theorizing has already been done. For instance, Freud (1958) referred to “infantile ego” (p. 13), Offer (1962) to the “sponginess of the personality organization during adolescence,” and Erikson (1950) brought forth “ego-identity.” It is evident that more theoretical formulations and assumptions about the psychological structuring and functionings of this phase are required by researchers. Man is, without saying, dynamic and in a continual process of development; he is exposed to a variety of stimuli that have sufficiently explosive effects.

The objective of the present empirical study is to compare cross-cultural variations in self-image of adolescent populations of different nationalities. The data on Indian adolescents, male and female, have been collected with this end in view and compared with studies of American, Irish and Australian adolescent populations. This comparison requires a brief reference to relevant research and a description of the cultural background in India.

Most Indian studies referenced are broadly related to (a) personal and educational adjustment problems, (b) socioeconomic factors in cultural conditioning, (c) moral and religious beliefs, and (d) personality dimensions. In spite of the expectations of social change and the effects of modernization, the