Influence of the Developmental Schedule of Puberty on Learning and Ego Functioning

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Received June 19, 1973

Developmental schedules refer to temporal factors of pubertal processes as they might bear on ego development. The longitudinal research reviewed here from the 30-year archives of the Guidance Study of the Institute of Human Development pertains to the effects of varying lengths of the prepubertal and pubertal period on the short-term and enduring integration of drive states initiated at puberty. The personality correlates of varying lengths of these periods serve as vehicle for establishing properties of these stages as well as of the transition between them. The different ways the sexes respond to the early onset of puberty, as reported here, may provide an important microcosm for understanding normative sex differences in the general regulation of drive states.

INTRODUCTION

The new stimulations of a maturing soma can be nutriment or detriment to learning. The biological and psychosocial factors disposing the growing child to manage or mismanage the rapid sensory inputs of his maturation comprise much of the study of adolescence and much that is child development itself. Within this broad enterprise, our theoretical systems build remarkably different bridges from the human soma to human intelligence and sensibility. The research in this

This research was supported by Grant MH 06238-02 from the U.S. Public Health Service, grants from the Ford Foundation, and a grant to the author from the Foundations' Fund for Research in Psychiatry.

1Presented at the Seventh Annual Adolescent Medicine Seminar, George Washington University Medical Center, March 15, 1971.

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paper on the psychological concomitants and aftermaths of developmental schedules in puberty has availed itself of two prominent models in human socialization: the social-learning and the psychoanalytic. Each theory leans, of course, toward remaking the human body in its own image. But such parsimony comes at a price of projecting an exceedingly robot-like body image of the adolescent: the psychoanalytic see-through robot enslaved to the level of androgens in the blood; the opaque social-learning robot bestirred only when nurture calls, programmed by gender-role assignments made to the measure of what an adolescent is supposed to become as an adult.

Our haste to seek out the one best explanation delays our better sense that the normal adolescent lives both in the inside and in the outside of his body, in rough correspondence to the depth of psychoanalysis and to the surface of social-learning. For the hormonal and related maturational processes of puberty alter the surface no less than the depth of experience. The adolescent literally turns a new face and body to the world around him and, through his appearance to others, recognizes himself as one who approaches, for better or worse, the physical stature and psychosocial status of adulthood.

Thus the same maturational processes promote psychological states with contrasting organizations: the internal drive state as ambiguous, private, and episodic; the outer state as palpable, foreseeable, consensual, and, perhaps above all, socialized to the prevailing cultural notions of adult responsibility and competence. How does the adolescent begin to assimilate the indefiniteness of pubertal impulses (regardless of the culture in which he finds himself) with the more certain sense of his upcoming physical membership in the adult social order where he does, in fact, find himself?

First, on the social side: how much does the cultural experience regulate the depth of the internal experience? Does the culture so quickly enlist the adolescent who is willing into a straightaway run to a ready-made adult calling that he is effectively drawn away from adolescence as an internal experience? This is the youth who stays shielded from both the intrinsic stimulations of puberty and the learning that comes from organizing and articulating them. Or, alternately, is the adolescent's debut into the social order so delayed that the internal state of puberty and its potential affective and cognitive resources are more easily approached and more fully accessible?

Next, on the side of the soma: Approaching or withdrawing from the internal experience will depend on how manageable the adolescent feels the intensification of pubertal drive to be. We suppose this factor of control to be essentially a psychological issue, to be formulated not from an absolute quantity of biochemical changes but from the effective amount of the drive state which the particular individual in question can learn to hold in suspension, sublimate, or make direct use of (Freud, 1958). Developmental schedules refer to temporal factors of pubertal processes as they might bear on such learning. Three relevant