An Approach to the Study of Psychosocial Maturity

The Development of a Cross-National Scale for Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

We seek to establish the cross-cultural applicability of a concept of adolescent "maturity," understood as readiness to assume competently the roles typical for men and women in a modern industrial society. We measure six psychosocial qualities: efficacy, perseverance, planfulness, responsibility, individualism, and cooperativeness. Each is explored in five domains: school, family, peer group, work, and community. A summary score across all 111 items in the questionnaire yields values from 1 to 5, expressing the assessed overall maturity of each subject. The questionnaire was administered to 60 youths in the U.S. and 44 in Chile, selected to provide an even distribution of males and females, and a wide diversity of socioeconomic and ethnic status in each sample. We succeeded in constructing a scale with the exact same content and virtually identical internal structure in both countries, with alpha at .90 for the U.S. and .92 for Chile. Clearly, adolescents from these two distinctive cultural milieus share a common core of attitudes, values, and self-reported behaviors, inter-related in the same basic structure. Initial results indicating the validity of the scale are also presented.

IN RECENT YEARS there has been a great deal of public concern that our youth are "at risk"—of drug addiction, falling into criminal behavior, teen-age pregnancy, dropping out of school, and of drunk or otherwise careless driving which leads to serious accidents. (National Research Council, 1993; Hamburg, 1992; Heckinger, 1994). The popular press also expresses these concerns, which are widespread in

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the population at large, often referring to contemporary youth as "a lost generation" which is "armed, young and dangerous." Despite the hyperbole, only a modest proportion of young people run the more dramatic risks noted in the press.

There is another risk to which a great many adolescents, including a significant proportion of those in the "mainstream," are exposed. That risk, as we see it, is the risk of failure to develop in adolescence the qualities which will make it possible for the youth to function adequately in the roles which, inevitably, they will be obliged to play when they move from adolescence into adult status. The adolescent developmental phase is particularly critical for study because it provides not only a base-line summary of the child's and youth's previous experience, but also permits insight into the adaptive psychological and social capacities involved in the transition to adult status and mature functioning. Among the various developmental tasks involved in the transition from adolescence to adulthood are the acquisition of adaptive social and psychological capacities, skills, values and habits which facilitate the adolescent's movement into, and adequate performance in, culturally appropriate adult roles.

We have set as our research agenda to conceptualize what some of these adaptive qualities might be; to develop measures of the extent to which they are manifested in different individuals and groups approached cross-culturally and cross-nationally; to identify the socio-psychological antecedents and the behavioral consequences of more and less adaptive "transitions to adulthood;" and ultimately to suggest interventions at the individual and group level which might facilitate more rapid and effective maturity in adolescents. Of these goals, only the first two, of conceptualization and initial measurement are addressed in this article.

One of the first challenges any such effort must expect to meet is that which comes from the idea that social roles are so diverse, and so specific to particular ethnic, social, class, and national groups and contexts that no meaningful specification of role demands in general can meaningfully be made. We did not accept this judgement, and our research may be interpreted as an empirical test of the soundness of the argument that generalization of adaptive qualities across a set of roles is not possible.

Even if one assumes that there are common elements in the demands on the individual made by certain roles, there remains a choice of approaches to identifying what those common elements might be. One way to identify them is to make a list of specific roles and the behaviors associated with them. For example, in modern nations each adult is expected to develop some occupational identity, train to attain it, and meet the standards of performance which are characteristic of it. Keeping this aspect of being adult in mind, we might then study how far adolescents were beginning to think of an occupation, and whether they were in any way systematically preparing themselves to meet its formal requirements. A different way of approaching the problem would be to abstract certain qualities which are assumed