



VARIATIONS IN ADOLESCENCE

Rashi Mukhopadhyay

Ph.D Scholar, Faculty of Education,
University of Delhi

Vishakha Kumar

Ph.D Scholar, Faculty of Education,
University of Delhi

Abstract

The study broadly explores the thesis developed by Prof. T.S. Saraswathi that contests the conception of adolescents as a single universal cohort. This study was aimed at exploring adolescence at the micro level by interviewing participants in the age group of 13 to 20 year. The study attempts to understand individuals as situated in their contexts. We found that adolescence is experienced in some way or the other by people of all classes and gender. However, the manifestation and concerns of adolescence may vary.

Introduction

Adolescence as a psycho-social construct was first described by Erik Erikson(1968) who divides the entire life span of a human being in eight stages. It is during adolescence, the stage of identity versus identity diffusion, that quest for identity becomes the key developmental task. Peter Blos (1962) describes adolescence as second step in individuation. He says that this stage is typified by a weak ego and a strong id. Studies conducted in Asian and African context also indicate similar trends that the social context interacts with the process of development. Hence, adolescence should not be viewed in the same way across cultures. Cross-cultural psychologists like A. Bame Nsamenang (2002), B. Brandford Brown, Reed W. Larson (2002) and T.S. Saraswathi (1999, 2002) have challenged western construction of adolescence.

T.S. Saraswathi, an eminent cultural Psychologist, has extensively studied adolescents in the Indian context. We have based our study primarily on her framework. She has raised several questions about continuity between childhood and adulthood. The purpose of our study was to understand adolescence in a context following the framework of T.S. Saraswathi.

METHOD

To begin with, the focus of the study was on class as a factor influencing adolescence. We tried to ensure that we include people from diverse social strata's. The participants represent broadly three social classes – Lower, Middle and Upper. The participants of this study were persons between 13- 20 years of age. They were school and college students, street children, vendors, rickshaw pullers and hawkers. The study was conducted in and around North Delhi, especially the area around the University of Delhi. The study comprised of a total of fifty participants. The first phase of data collection comprised of incidental sampling. We started by taking a walk within North Campus asking people to participate in our study. After stating the purpose and taking their consent, the purpose of the study was explained.

In the second phase we also went to some schools and colleges of University of Delhi to interview students from class XI-XII and first year students respectively. There were a mix of middle class and upper class adolescents that we found in schools and colleges. After initial identification we started spending time with the participants and formed rapport with them. For the study we conducted unstructured interview, based on the following key themes:

- Who am I?
- Aspirations and dreams
- Body Image
- Friendship and relationship

Mostly we used verbal interviews but in schools and colleges we also gave the freedom to students to write their responses. The written responses also helped to initiate the interview. In the interview the participant had the freedom to steer the interview in any direction. These interviews and written responses were extremely significant as they unfolded some of the layers of their context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The data collected was subjected to narrative analysis. Verbatim statements of the respondents have been included since they add to the lucidity of data. The responses were first categorised according to the themes and then according to the social classes. Some of the responses of various classes are illustrated as exemplars to understand the variations in adolescence.

A. Who am I?

Verbatim from lower class:

Boy: Mera naam kamlesh hai. Main yahan chulla wagarah bechta hoon. Bas yehi hai (My name is Kamlesh. I sell cooking gas etc. That is all I have to say about myself)

Girl: Yeh main kaise bataon. Yeh toh aur log hi bata sakta hai. Khud mein toh main achi hi hoon? (How can I tell this? Only other can tell this about me. According to me I am good)

Verbatim from middle class:

Girl: Mera naam jyoti hai. Main Xth class mein padhti hoon. (My name is Jyoti. I study in class Xth.

Boy: Main auron se different hoon. Jahan logo ki soch kahatam hoti hai mere soch wahan se shuru hoti hai. (I am different from others. My thinking begins from that point where most people stop thinking.)

Girl (visually challenged): Main DU mein padh rahi hoon. Maine issie saal graduation khatam kiya hai. Main bahut emotional type ki hoon. Doosron ki takleef dekh ke mujhe bahut jaldee feel hota hai. (I study in DU. I have finished my graduation this year. I am a very emotional person. I can feel others problems very easily.

Verbatim from upper class:

Girl: I want to do better in life and be a good person.

Girl: I am studying in second year of college. I am doing political science honours from DU. My hobbies are dancing, readings sometimes and just talking sometimes.

Girl: I am fun loving person and I don't show a lot of emotions going inside me.

Girl: I am Antara raghavan. I am pursuing English honours from DU. I am a second year student.

Girl from school: I am studying in class XIth. I like reading, thinking and having discussions. I like to think about intellectual things and then have discussions on them. I love reading Psychology and when I read something in school I go back home and google it.

B. Aspirations and dreams

Verbatim from lower class:

Girl 1: (from a slum who goes to school), 'Kissi tarah XII th pass kar lo wahi bahut hai. (I wish I can somehow manage to complete class XIIth. That would be enough.)

Boy1 : Main toh Delhi ya Mumbai mein rehna chahta hoon. aur paisa hi banana chahta hoon. Paisa hi hai sab kuch. (i want to live in either Delhi or Mumbai and earn money. Money is everything.)

Boy 2: (is a vendor who stands outside Education department. He sells roasted shakarkandi chaat. He is 17 years old) Paisa ho jaye, ghar ho jaye lekin ho nahi pata na. (If I have money then I can have a home but so far it does not happen like that.)

Boy 3 (a group of 4-5 boys living in slums and distributing pamphlets near their slum): 5 saal mein toh hum budha jayenge (I will grow old in next five years)

Verbatim from middle class:

Boy1: I see myself in MNC on the top position

Boy 2 (college student, middle class): kissi company mein supervisor ki post pe hong

Boy 3 (boy who was pursuing a course of mobile repair): Government job chahiye. Life ke saath bhi rehti hai aur baad bhi (Want a government job. It lives with life and beyond life too)

Boy 4: Abhi main itna bada toh nahi hua hoon ki apni life ke bare mein sab soch loon. Haan par yeh socha hai ki apne mom aur dad ko khush rakh sakoon (Now I am not that big that I can take my decision of my life Yes but have thought of keeping my mother and father happy)

Girl 1: Main apne ko singing ki top level pe dekhna chahti hoon. Jo meri kismet mein hoga wohi banoongi. Kismet se upar sochogi toh kya pata gir hi jaon. (I want to see myself at top level of singing. Otherwise what is in my destiny I will become that. If I will think beyond my destiny I will fall)

Verbatim from upper class:

Girl 1 (upper class): I don't know what I will do. I always wanted to dance. I was in choreo in my college but now I am not a part of it because of some reasons. So I may continue dancing. I also thought of photography. So I am really confused. I have also thought of a course in Australia which also I may pursue.

Girl 2: I have not thought so far. I think I want to become an IAS officer

Girl 3 (school student): I will be studying at that time most probably. I want to become a successful businesswoman. I know it is tough but still

Girl 4 (studying in a elite school. Both parents are researchers) I want to study. I don't want to do a desk job or anything. I want to study my entire life. May be I will do researches

Boy 1: I want to do hotel management and become a chef.

C. Body image

Verbatim from lower class:

Boy (vendor): Hum chahte hai ki hum aur tandarust ho. Chehra sahi hona chahiye. (I want to be more healthy. Face should be right)

Boy (working on a store): Main thoda mota hona chata hoon. Health honi chahiye. Main bahut patla dubla kamzor hoon. (I want to grow little fat. Should be healthy. I am very thin and weak)

Boy (rickshaw puller): main lamba hona chata hoon. Kareeb 6 foot lamba. (I want to grow tall. Nearly 6feet tall)

Girl: Mujhe achi height chahiye.. (I want a good height.)

Verbatim from middle class:

Boy1: Body strong karna chahta hoon. (body should be strong)

Boy1: Main apne teeth lagwana chata hoon. Mera accident hua tha tab mere papa ne bahut paise lagaye the par who itne nahi lagwa sakte the. Jab main kissi layak ban jaonga tab main zaroor lagwaonga. (I want to put my teeth. I met with an accident earlier, my father put lot of money, but couldn't put more. When I will be something in life, I will definitely put)

Girl (visually challenged): I want to have my eyes. Main apna face aur height badalna chahti hoon. Face kyunki jo mujhe dekhte hai who kehte hai ki bahut chota sa hai. Lagta nahi ki B.Ed karne wali ladki ka hai. (I want to change my face and height. Face because those who see me say it is very small. They say it doesn't seem you are doing B.Ed.)

Verbatim from upper class:

Girl: I am too thin. I want to gain some weight especially on my hands.

Girl: I think I am good the way I am. I like blue eyes but it is not that I want to have them because for blue eyes I will have to change my entire physique.

Girl: I wish my hair could be straight without conditioner. But that is not possible.

Girl: I want to work on my weight, weight and weight. That is it

Girl: I have a mole on my left side of nose so I want to reduce that.. I don't want to be size zero but I want a curvy body. So I want to lose some weight.

D. Characteristics of friend and your life partner

Verbatim from lower class:

Boy1: aisa koi dost nahi hai jo apne farz nibha de. (have no friend who will do his duty)

Boy2: Aisa jo mere museebat ke samay mein kaam aaye. Jo mere saath khada ho. (someone who will be there in my time of need)

Boy3: Jo humare kaam aa sake aur hum uske (someone who will be there in my time of need and I will be there in his)

Girl: dosti woh hai jo do dil milte hai (friend is someone with whom your heart matches)

Boy: vendor: yaar dost toh tab tak hote hai jab tak maal hota hai. Baki toh maa baap hi hote hai. (friends are there till you have money. Otherwise only your parents are there)

Verbatim from middle class:

Girl: Bahut acha na ho par mere jaise hi hona chahiye. Kyunki main bhi zyada achai nahi hoon. Uske andar mere liye understanding achi honi chahiye.

Boy: Who sundar ho. Mere height ki ho aur ekdum smart honi chahiye.

Boy: jo mujhse jud jaat hai wohi mera dost ho jata hai

Girl: rishte bahut zaroori hai. Unke bina hum aage nahi badh sakte. Khushi ke pal ke liye bhi koi chahiye hota hai toh bhi koi celebrate karne ko chahiye hota hai aur dukh ke pal mein bhi.

Verbatim from upper class:

Boy: entertaining and trustworthy.

Girl: Honesty, humour, clean faced and trust.

Girl: person should be genuine and very genuine. Person should be frank and even if he wants to abuse me should do it on my face.

Girl: person has unconditional love for me. Genuine and honesty. I Can't tolerate backstabbing.

Girl: Everyone seems to be in a relationship but it is too screwed up. If you are in a relationship you tend to be ignoring a lot of other priorities in life. Relationships can be good also because they can fill up the void in your life but mostly they are screwed up.

LOWER SOCIO ECONOMIC CLASS

In response to the first question which required people to describe themselves most people were speechless for some time. They found this question extremely awkward. Those who had never been to school in particular found it difficult to answer this question and mainly described themselves in terms of the profession they were pursuing or place they came from. This could be because most people who we found in slums were immigrants. Those who have had some experience of school can speak more about themselves.

In response to the question that what would they like to change about themselves we found that most people from lower social class were conscious about their appearance (body Image consciousness) but some of them felt that they don't have the means to improve it even if they wanted to. From the interview it can be inferred that the Hindi films may be a major source of information about trends in clothes and latest fashion. The key concerns regarding body image were related to the color of skin, hair and physique (especially for men).

The dreams and aspirations of persons from lower class were constrained by their need to earn money. Even though some mentioned that whenever they get time they engage in something that interests them like music but a majority of responses had a caveat attached to them that indicated the significance of money in their lives '... I will marry only if I will be able to support a wife'.

The idea of love was related to the fulfillment of their monetary needs. They felt that only after they have adequate money, the space for love and marriage can be created. When asked about their idea of love, they responded that it was essentially associated as connection between two people it was akin to friendship, it was the want of being loved by someone and an auspicious thing that binds whole humanity. The concept of friendship and relationship was centered on the notions of care, affection and understanding someone. They also felt that friendship was something that is the strength of every relationship and in it there was no place for ego.

MIDDLE SOCIO ECONOMIC SECTION

Adolescents belonging to middle class gave varied responses when asked to describe themselves. Some of them strived to maintain good boy/girl image and while others dawn a completely different identity. They described themselves as "Good daughter" and "Good friend", while others questioned the authority. They were more articulate in expressing their ideas. This seemed to be the impact of the educational environment. They used various

adjectives to describe themselves such as naughty, friendly, reserve, shy, talkative, lonely, fun loving, kind humble, cannot stand for myself etc. The role of family and peers was quite evident. Peers played a very important role in the life of adolescent.

Adolescents from middle class had very high body image consciousness. They were in touch with the latest fashion and trends and were ready to experiment. Gaining attention from opposite sex was of utmost importance. This was evident from the responses that indicated that there was awareness of body weight and desire to be thin. Channels like V and MTV were popular thereby indicating that a strong influence of mass media on developing brand awareness.

Professional security was significant aspect when talking about their dreams and aspirations. It was seen that aspirations were influenced by the profession of the parents, like parents who are researchers, doctors and engineers their children wanted to do research, medicine and engineering respectively. Adolescents tried to balance parental values with the peer pressure as evident from the response of one of the girl who said that when peers go out for drinks and smoke or go out for a date sometimes she gives in but has to make sure that parents do not get to know about it. The idea of love was essentially associated with heterosexual relationships. But a few adolescents also said that it can be with parents, siblings, friends or someone special. They also spoke in lofty terms about ideals of love such as eternal, affection between two beings. It was apparent that these ideas were generally inspired from fiction, literature or films. Most people that we interviewed were with friends and from their conversation as well as during the course of the interview it appeared that friends held the center stage in their life. Most people said that they shared almost all things with their friends. They glorified the idea of friendship thereby assigning a very high value to it.

UPPER SOCIO ECONOMIC SECTION

Adolescents belonging to this class gave varied descriptions about themselves. They wanted to do and achieve several things. Sometimes it appears to take the form of confusion, like, 'I want to dance and be a choreographer but I also love photography; Dad thinks that I must do some degree in business management and also pursue any one hobby so I am really confused as of now'. In some cases they were very clear of what they want to become even if it is out of beaten track such as to be a chef in the best Hotel of the world or wanting to go to Switzerland for training or to be a political analyst. They were very articulate in conversation and some of them answered questions in poetic language. The self-concept reflected the opinion that they hear frequently in their context (school, home, and mass media) and also related to what they wanted to see in their country in future.

They were very conscious of their body image. Most of them had experimented with different looks especially hairstyles, hair colour- even in the school. Tattoo and body

piercing was popular among them and they also visited the beauty parlor regularly. They were very brand conscious and wanted to dress in designer outfits. They also have means to access them. In terms of body image most people from upper class seem to be extremely conscious of the way they looked. Desire for a very thin body was paramount. Some of them also expressed the need to look curvy but slim. Health seemed to be secondary for them. They wanted to be the center of attention and wanted desired changes in the body which will make them look better.

They assigned very high value to love (heterosexual) and expressed that it is a very 'special', 'awesome' and 'mind blowing feeling'. Some of them had already experienced and some were eagerly waiting for it to happen. Love also gave them assurance that they have someone to talk to. Similarly friends held a very important place in their lives. Most adolescents cannot imagine their lives without their friends. They described their friends as someone with whom they can have fun, hang out, and share a special bond. They depended on friends for practically everything and hoped that they will stand by them.

CONCLUSION

After analyzing the data we found that the adult child continuity which T.S. Saraswati (1999) found in the rural and lower middle class context was also evident in our sample. This section of society had to begin earning for themselves much early in life as compared to their counterparts from upper and middle classes. They expressed that the pressure to fend for their living and enter into matrimonial alliance was very high. However, our data also indicated that even those who belonged to the lower socio-economic level experienced some characteristics of adolescence. They also had dreams despite the awareness that they may never achieve them. They also sought love and friendship despite the apprehension that dearth of money may not allow them to make and sustain new relationships. Most boys and girls of this age group had heightened body image consciousness and tried in their own ways to look attractive. The adult child continuity was not evident among middle and upper economic class.

This adult child continuity was more prominently punctuated by an intermediate phase, due to extended period of school, college and delayed marriage, in the middle and upper class. It appeared that the philosophical questions like who am I? The matters of career choice rest more with individuals of the middle and upper class. In this regard adolescence as a psychosocial stage as propounded by Erik Erikson and Peter Blos appears to be experienced only by these classes.

Our study raises question on use of the word adolescence as a universal cohort. Even though we did not find a clear continuity between childhood and adulthood as clearly as

T.S. Saraswati (1999) claims however, we found that social class limits the exposure and the opportunities for exploration. Our key finding is that the manifestation of adolescence varies across social classes even though it was evident in some form or the other in most people who participated in our study. There was ebullience, excitement and joy for life in upper and middle class where as there was a lot of pessimism and despondency among lower social class however, most people in the age bracket of 14-21 years had dreams, wishes and desire to explore. It was evident that lower class was burdened with additional responsibilities and demands to fend for their living but it did not mean that they could not think about themselves. They could define themselves in terms of what they felt was missing in their lives as compared to others and hoped for a better life.

Secondly, we found that if we use the western notion of autonomy as a framework for analysis we may find that even the upper class boys are dependent and lacking autonomy but if we redefine autonomy in a collectivist culture we can redefine adolescence. The limits of freedom are set by the familial context and choices appeared to expand as one move from lower to upper class. The contrast between girls and boys was more evident among lower social class. Boys seemed to have greater freedom of movement and decision making as compared to girls who had to follow the strict dictum of the parents. In matters of marriage and other such decisions girls had little say as compared to boys even though instances of transgression were only few. We found one girl and two boys in lower class who decided to go against their families and marry according to their wishes. Finally, we can say that it would be interesting to further explore variations within different social classes because other factors such as gender, educational opportunities, occupation of the parents and region also seem to be interacting with the process of development.

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