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Chapter 1

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THE NATURE OF ADOLESCENCE

‘I guess young people are more interested in fun whilst they are growing up, but adults have to work and get money for the family, and stuff like that.’
(14-year-old boy)

‘Everyone thinks that teenagers are bad and stuff, when it’s just some bunch of lunatics doing something.’
(16-year-old boy)

‘Yeah, quite moody, quite a lot of the time. Like with parents and stuff, they say just do something and I’d take it a bit too far, and, like, just storm out of the room, slamming doors.’
(15-year-old girl)

Adolescence is a challenge and a delight. It is a time of life when new skills develop, and when a more complex and differentiated social life becomes possible. It is a stage when family relationships are transformed, and when there is opportunity both for greater separation from parents, as well as for more closeness and equality. It is a stage when key questions about values and attitudes come to the fore, and when the individual starts to grapple with some of the biggest questions about identity and about the future. Adolescence is a delight because there is great pleasure to be gained for adults in the idealism and enthusiasm for life apparent in this stage of a young person’s development. It is a challenge, however, because there are undoubtedly many difficulties and obstacles to be overcome if adults and teenagers are to get on well with each other.

What exactly is adolescence? For many people this stage of life is a puzzle. To begin with it is far from clear when the stage starts, and when it ends. Where do the boundaries of adolescence lie? Does it start at puberty, and end at age 20? Is this too simplistic? For some, the age of 13 is a good starting point, yet what might be understood as adolescent behaviour can be seen at an earlier age, and today many believe that young adults who still live at home in their early twenties are to all intents and purposes adolescents.

Next, we know that an individual grows up in the context of social, economic and political change. So how much has the experience of adolescence altered over the past 30 years? There are many different pressures and demands on young people and their parents today, and so it will be obvious that in some important respects adolescence in the twenty-first century is different to what it was in the 1970s or 1980s.

Then there is a debate over how problematic the stage is. How challenging or anti-social are young people likely to be? Should we expect problems and difficulties, or is this a perspective that is over-emphasised by the adult world? As Anne Frank says in one of the most famous of adolescent diaries:

If I talk everyone thinks I am showing off, when I'm silent they think I'm ridiculous: rude if I answer back, sly if I get a good idea, lazy if I'm tired, selfish if I eat a mouthful more than I should, stupid, cowardly, crafty, etc., etc., etc.

(Frank, 1993, p. 57 first published 1947)
Here Anne Frank is describing the way she thinks the adult world views her, believing that there is a fundamental misunderstanding between her and her parents. One of the great conundrums of adolescence is whether adults see young people in an excessively negative light. Some might argue that the adult world exaggerates the more problematic features of adolescence, whilst others believe that the negative perceptions of adolescence are directly caused by their own behaviour. This is one of the questions that will be explored in more detail in the course of this book.

There are also more academic questions which challenge anyone seeking to understand adolescence today. Does it make any sense at all to talk about this as a single life stage? Perhaps it is more complex than that, since adolescence lasts for ten or more years. There has been some suggestion of a new stage, called ‘emerging adulthood’. Are there other stages, such as the ‘pre-teen stage’, that should be incorporated into our overall concept of adolescence? And then there is the question of how different theoretical perspectives can be combined. Clearly it is possible to learn something from each of the academic disciplines that study adolescence, including sociology, psychology, anthropology, the neurosciences, psychoanalysis and criminology at the very least. It is of great importance to find ways of melding these different perspectives together.

This issue links closely with another query that is often posed. Is adolescence a biological phenomenon, or is it socially constructed? In this book an attempt will be made to incorporate both approaches. It is clear that there is a lot to learn by seeking to understand the physical development of the young person, but we would be blind if we did not look too at the way in which society construes this stage of development. Here it should be added that there is a third perspective, illustrated by recent research, which will be explored. This is the idea that in some respects adolescents are constructing their own adolescence. For too long it has been assumed that young people grow up in a world constructed by adults. However, with an increasing focus on notions of agency, and a realisation that young people influence the way adults behave, there may well be an argument for saying that young people themselves play as big a part as any other factor in determining their own development.

Finally there is also a question as to how research findings and academic theories can be brought together with the actual life experiences of adolescents themselves and of their families. This of course links closely with the notion of adolescents constructing their own adolescence. If this idea is to be taken seriously more attention needs to be paid to the ways in which adolescents describe their own development. The voices of young people and their parents should never be too far away in any genuine search for an understanding of the nature of adolescence.

It will be the purpose of this book to provide some answers to these questions. Adolescent development takes place against a backdrop of changing social and political circumstances. This introductory chapter will review some of the major changes that have had an impact on the lives of adolescents. The chapter will also consider adolescence as a transition and review how this has altered over time. The chapter will conclude with an outline of three different theoretical approaches to an understanding of this stage of development.
Social change

‘Today there’s a massive culture of fear, so there’s a lot less freedom. For example when my Mum was little she lived in London and she was allowed to take a tube and bus and go where she wanted. I would never have been allowed to do that, and I’m probably still not allowed to do that. I think there’s less freedom in that respect, but with technology and stuff you can do a lot more without your parents knowing, and so there’s a lot more freedom in relationships probably.’

(17-year-old girl)

For those young people growing up in the developed world at the beginning of the twenty-first century it could be argued that they have been lucky to experience relative political stability. Nonetheless a moment’s thought tells us that there are a wide range of social changes that impact directly on the lives of adolescents. Indeed Mortimer and Larson wrote a book entitled The changing adolescent experience (2002), and much of what they had to say at that point in time remains pertinent a decade later. There are a number of topics that deserve attention under the heading of social change affecting young people. Perhaps the two most obvious areas for discussion are the family and the transition from education to work. In addition, however, attention needs to be paid to the stage of emerging adulthood, to globalisation and the greater diversity of cultures in all Western societies today, to information technologies and their influence on the lives of young people, and to changing concerns in the health field. All these topics will be reviewed here, although many will have greater coverage in their respective chapters. 

Looking first at the family, a considerable number of issues should be mentioned as being relevant to this discussion. Alterations in the structure of the family have had a major influence on the way adolescents grow up today. As is well known, the divorce rate increased steadily during the 1970s and 1980s, not just in the USA but in European countries as well. Today the divorce rate has levelled out, but other changes have become apparent, in particular the growth of single parent families and the fact that more and more children are born outside marriage. It is especially among young adults that this trend is most marked, and recent evidence shows that in Britain more than three-quarters of children born to parents under the age of 20 are born outside marriage (Coleman and Brooks, 2009). The increase in families headed by a lone parent is thus not only as a result of divorce, but stems also from changes in attitudes to marriage and partnership in relation to child-bearing. The proportions of children born outside marriage are shown in Figure 1.1.

In terms of those affected by divorce, today in some European countries nearly 25 per cent of young people experience the divorce of their parents by the time they are 16. In the USA the figure is closer to 33 per cent. Changes in family structure of this sort have repercussions in a wide range of areas. In the first place a significant proportion of children and young people have to cope with family breakdown, and with the loss of one parent from the family home. This may well lead to an increase in stress levels, and the need for greater support from outside the family. There will be a fuller discussion of this in Chapter 5.
A further point to consider is that a range of new family arrangements are being experienced by young people, with step-parents, live-in partners, remarriage, step-siblings and so on. Of course it is not just those adolescents whose parents divorce who are affected by this. In practice everyone is affected, because everyone has a friend, a neighbour or a relative in whose family there is a divorce or some form of reconstituted family. Attitudes to marriage are changing, and everyone’s experiences encompass a much wider range of family types than was the case for previous generations.

Apart from the potential stress of family reorganisation, changing family structures have two other possible implications for young people. In the first place it is probable that values and beliefs about marriage, family and parenting are shifting as adolescents grow up in family circumstances that are, relatively speaking, less stable than was the case for their parents and grandparents. It is still not entirely clear how this will affect young people’s own family histories, but at present it appears that marriage is still highly valued, but that there is more caution about this state. There is also a gradually increasing separation between marriage and parenthood, so that getting married is no longer a prerequisite for having children. Just as sex and procreation became disconnected in the 1950s and 1960s, so marriage and parenthood are becoming disconnected today.

The second implication of changing family structures is that the parenting of teenagers is more problematic. The parenting roles of lone parents, step-parents and new partners are hard to define, as is the role of the divorced or separated

\[\text{Figure 1.1} \text{ Births outside marriage, by age of mother, in England and Wales, 1971–2006.}\]

Data from: Population Trends 132, Summer 2008. ONS.
non-residential parent. Uncertainty about parenting practices is not good for adolescents or for parents. Adolescence is the time, more than any other in the life of the family, when parenting confidence is at a premium. Again this will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

The world of employment, and the transition from education to work, is almost certainly the second major social change of significance here. Taking a historical view, youth unemployment rose dramatically in European countries in the 1980s. This was exemplified by the fact that, in Britain, unemployment rates for young men between the ages of 16 and 24 rose from 5 per cent to 25 per cent in the decade 1974–1984 (Coleman, 2000). Similar but less marked increases were also seen for young women. An even more startling trend was the decrease in the number of young people in the labour market. From the mid-1980s onwards the numbers of those under 25 in the labour market in Britain shrunk by more than a quarter. These historical shifts in the labour market have been widely discussed, and apply to all developed countries, as Mortimer (2009) indicates. The implications are numerous. In the first place more young people remain in education or training for longer periods, leading to a growth in further education for those between the ages of 16 and 18. This is true of Britain, where in the past a significant number left school at 16. However, in most countries the school-leaving age tends to be at 18, and so a second consequence of the changing labour market has been far greater numbers going on to higher education. The trend in the UK is illustrated in Figure 1.2. Government policy in Britain has been to aim for having 50 per cent of the relevant age group in higher education. In 2008 the figure was 45 per cent (Coleman and Brooks, 2009).

Figure 1.2 Students in higher education in the UK, by gender, 1970/71 to 2005/06. Data from: Social Trends 38: 2008 edition. ONS.
It is clear that entry into the labour market is more difficult for those under the age of 25 than was the case in previous generations. However, it is not only the fact that there are fewer opportunities for employment that is important. Another factor of equal significance is that the composition of the labour market is changing, with a reduction in manufacturing industry and a growth in service industries. This has opened up greater opportunities for young women, but has reduced the pool of jobs suitable for young men. It has also meant that jobs tend to be of a short-term nature, with employers unwilling to take on long-term responsibilities for their employees. As a result young people have to accept temporary contracts, and to see work as something that is less stable and dependable than was the case for their parents. These trends will be accentuated by the banking crisis of 2008 and the economic upheavals which are being experienced by all Western countries in the years following these events.

For young people without doubt the most far-reaching implication of the changing labour market is that economic independence – a tangible sign of maturity – is delayed. As a result the very nature of the adolescent transition is altered. In the years between 16 and 20, when traditionally young people were considered to be entering adulthood, they now continue to depend financially on their parents or the state. Thus adolescence lasts longer, relationships with parents and partners have to be renegotiated, independent housing is more difficult to access, and many new psychological issues have to be resolved. It is for this reason that the term ‘emerging adulthood’ has been coined by Arnett (Arnett, 2004; Tanner and Arnett, 2009).

The notion of a stage somewhere between adolescence and adulthood has obvious attractions, since it is evident that individuals who continue in education into their twenties, and remain living in the family home cannot be said to have reached adulthood in the sense in which that stage has been understood. For Arnett the stage of emerging adulthood is one of opportunity and freedom. Young people can explore different types of work, lifestyles and relationships. They have few responsibilities, and are therefore able to travel, and to experiment with different ways of living before settling down. However, not all writers see this as a positive stage of development. Numerous commentators note that the long transition to adulthood can be painful and challenging. Many individual young adults may experience restricted choice rather than freedom and experimentation. The postponement of economic independence can have serious consequences, leading to poor housing, fractured relationships and conflict with parents. The two different views of the stage of early adulthood may both have merit, since clearly there will be a great diversity of experiences and opportunities available at this stage. Further thought will be given to the question of diversity in the next section, which looks at transitions.

Besides family and employment there are other social changes that have significance for young people. One of these has to do with globalisation, immigration and the greater movement of ethnic groups. The numbers of adolescents from minority groups in the UK has grown substantially in recent years, and this is true of other European countries as well (Webster, 2009). There are both positive and negative features of this picture. On the one hand there is a greater awareness among young people of different cultures and lifestyles. Those from other countries and backgrounds bring a rich mix of skills and interests to the world of adolescence, with different styles of music being a good example of this. However, there are some
The rapid and extensive growth of information technologies should also be mentioned here. As will be apparent to everyone, there has been a profound change over the past decade in the part digital technology plays in our lives, and for no group is this of more relevance than for adolescents. Again, as with all change, there are both
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good and bad aspects of this development, and there has been wide-ranging debate in all countries over the benefits or otherwise of new technologies for young people (e.g. Livingstone, 2009). The topic will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 9, but for the moment it may be noted that easier access to information, rapid communication with friends and family, greater opportunities for creativity, and increased control over some aspects of their lives are all obviously positive features of digital technology for adolescents. However, adult fears over the dangers of the internet, especially to do with cyber bullying, pornography and paedophile behaviour, are all of importance and not to be ignored. Perhaps of greatest significance is the fact that the internet and other media provide new avenues through which young people can develop their skills and capabilities. They need support to be able to use these avenues productively and safely, but this is surely the responsibility of the adult world.

The final topic to be noted in this section is globalisation, since it is essential to recognise that there are many ways in which global changes have impacted on young people growing up in the West. Two major factors are increased mobility of peoples across the world, and greater connectedness between those living in different countries (Brown et al., 2002). As far as mobility is concerned, this has led to substantial immigration in European countries from Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Most European countries have large immigrant populations today, a situation that was unheard of twenty years ago. In addition in Britain there are significant numbers of people from Eastern Europe, so that all in all it is now common to talk of a multi-cultural society. Clearly this has an impact on adolescence, introducing young people to new cultures and norms, and creating a much more mixed society. As for greater connectedness, this can be seen in every aspect of life. Because of new technologies it is possible for adolescents in one country to share the experiences of others living thousands of miles away. Larson and Wilson (2004) argue that, across the world, there are major changes taking place which all contribute to globalisation. They point out the following as being significant:

- a demographic transition (longer lifespan, reduced birth rates and so on)
- changes in national economies (e.g. a shift away from agriculture, more consumerism)
- urbanisation (move from the country to the city in search of work)
- the spread of technology
- the development of an information society.

These are all important, but seen through the eyes of a young person in Britain, for example, probably the most obvious effects of globalisation will be a greater awareness of different cultures and a sense that other countries, previously far beyond the limits of everyday knowledge, are now close by and easy to access. As one example, following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, young people in England were able to talk to young people who had experienced the trauma of the earthquake, and broadcast the discussion, courtesy of communication technologies and the BBC. In the past much of the study of adolescence was centred within Western societies, and there was little focus on other cultures and communities. This is no longer the case, and greater awareness of what it is like to grow up in different cultures should be celebrated and endorsed at every opportunity.
The nature of the transition

‘We’ve got less responsibility I’d say, than adults. Like they’ve been there and done stuff, like jobs, careers and stuff, but we’ve not done stuff yet, so it’s like we’re a bit freer, we haven’t had to do that. So in a way they’re more trapped, and we’re a bit, not stupider, like easy-going, sillier, like not worrying so much about things. If we went and made a mistake it wouldn’t mean that we’d lose a job, or not have money for a house or something. The worst that could happen is that you’d get kicked out of school, and then you go and do something else. It’s like you’re freer in a way to make mistakes and I suppose to take risks.’

(17-year-old boy)

In much of the writing about adolescence, beginning with G. Stanley Hall’s major work published in the first decade of the twentieth century, it has been customary to describe this stage as a transition. In many ways this has seemed the best way to encapsulate the nature of the adolescent experience, and, as will become apparent, there are many characteristics of transitions that can be ascribed to this stage of development. However, there have always been concerns over the fact that adolescence, no matter how it is described, covers a number of years. Is it realistic to describe a stage lasting nine or ten years as a transition? This problem has led some writers to talk of sub-stages, such as early, middle and late adolescence, and reference has already been made to ‘emerging adulthood’ as another stage. To many the attempt to identify sub-stages remains unsatisfactory, primarily because there is no agreement about the definitions of ages which apply to each sub-stage.

The situation has become even more complex in recent years, as has been outlined in the previous section. The stage of adolescence has lengthened, both at the beginning and at the end. As far as the later stages are concerned, delayed entry into the labour market and longer periods of living in the parental home have already been described here. In relation to the beginning of adolescence, it is apparent that puberty is continuing to occur earlier and earlier, and young people are maturing at a younger age. There is an earlier awareness of sexuality, dating and other adolescent behaviours commence at a younger age, and interest in clothes, music and other teenage concerns can be seen to preoccupy those who might in previous decades have been described as pre-pubertal. Thus the adolescent stage now begins for some at around 9 or 10, and continues for many until well after their twenty-first birthday. How then can this stage be best understood?

There are two ways of dealing with this dilemma. For some social scientists adolescence consists of a number of different transitions, each of which has to be researched and understood as a different event. Thus it could be that puberty should be considered in this category. It can be argued that the two years or so of biological change and maturation at the beginning of adolescence represent a major life transition, deserving attention in its own right. Many of those who have studied puberty, as for example Alsaker and Flammer (2006), would subscribe to this view. Apart from puberty one could look at other transitions in a similar way, such as the transition from one school to another (e.g. Eccles and Roeser, 2003).
However, the most popular focus for writers wishing to look at a discrete aspect of the adolescent period is to consider the transition out of adolescence and into adulthood.

In recent years there has been a stream of publications considering the changing characteristics of transition for young people as they move towards adulthood (Catan, 2004; Roche et al., 2004; Furlong, 2009). Some, such as Montgomery and Cote (2003), look at the transition from school to university, whilst others focus specifically on education and training (Tucker and Walker, 2004) or the labour market (Mortimer, 2009). Many writers have considered this question from a European perspective, as for example Heinz (2009), who looks at the different pathways to be found in different countries in Western Europe. Others, such as Malmberg and Trempala (1997), compared transitions in two different contexts. They considered a country in which there was economic depression (Finland) with a country changing from socialism to a market economy (Poland). Interestingly, there were fewer differences between countries than between young men and young women, or between those at different educational levels. All the publications on this topic make the point that the stage of youth has been extended in all countries, and that the process of transition has become increasingly pluralised and fragmented.

The point that commentators make – namely that the transition to adulthood is being increasingly delayed – has concerned a wide variety of writers in the recent past. Indeed a number of years ago now Arnett and Taber (1994) wrote a paper entitled ‘Adolescence terminable and interminable: when does adolescence end?’ to underline the fact that there is no longer any clear or well-defined moment when an individual reaches adulthood. This has enormous implications for adolescents themselves, as well as for society as a whole. It has also led many writers to try to identify markers of the transition out of adolescence, and look at how these operate for those from different backgrounds. In the 1990s writers such as Jones (1995) and Coles (1996) noted three main status transitions:

- the school to work transition, where an individual leaves school and enters the labour market;
- the domestic transition, in which a young person attains independence from the family of origin;
- the housing transition, involving a permanent move away from the parental home.

It is striking to consider these transitions in 2010, and to recognise how much has changed. Few today move directly from school to work, with the great majority continuing in some form of training or higher education and, as already noted, having to accept temporary positions before any permanent employment may become available. Similarly the domestic and housing transitions are fraught with difficulties for many young adults (Heinz, 2009; Bois-Reymond, 2009). It will be apparent, therefore, that the transition has not only elongated, but has also become more problematic, especially for those who experience disadvantage. The discourse today is about the navigation of alternative routes through the late adolescent stage (e.g. Bois-Reymond, 2009), or about the social exclusion of
particular groups, including those living in poverty or deprivation, those with a disability, or those living in substitute care (MacDonald, 2007). Many writers fear that the prolonged transition and the difficulties of entering the labour market may lead to some groups becoming permanently marginalised, and thus to a generation of unemployed adults (Julkunen, 2009).

This then – to focus on one aspect of the adolescent period – is the first possible approach to understanding the adolescent transition. A second, alternative, approach is that described in a seminal paper by Graber and Brooks-Gunn (1996). In this paper the authors argue for retaining the term ‘transition’ to describe the adolescent period, but using the notion of turning points to refer to the key moments, such as a move from one school to another. This is helpful, although as they indicate, there remains the problem of deciding which turning points are important, and which to study:

The premise underlying integrating notions of transitions and turning points is that transitional periods are characterised by developmental challenges that are relatively universal; that is, most individuals navigate transitional periods, and these periods require new modes of adaptation to biological, psychological, or social change. By definition, then, turning points occurring in the context of transitional periods may be particularly salient to individuals or subsets of individuals. These turning points may be more likely to result in behavioural change, or in larger or more long-lasting changes than turning points that do not occur in the context of a transitional period.

(Graber and Brooks-Gunn, 1996, p. 769)

These authors then go on to identify circumstances in which turning points within transitional periods may be more problematic for particular individuals. They see these situations as being:

- when the timing of turning points within transitional periods creates additional stress, as, for example, with delayed puberty;
- when cumulative or simultaneous events occur, so that an individual has too many things to deal with all at one time;
- when mental health issues arise at the same time as the turning points are required to be negotiated;
- when there is a lack of ‘goodness of fit’ between context and behaviour during transition, as, for example, a poor school environment for an academic young person.

Such ideas will be especially helpful when theories of adolescence are considered in the next section of this chapter. Both the emphasis on the context of development, as well as recognition of the timing of events as a key determinant of adjustment, are particularly important in this regard. One excellent illustration of the relevance of turning points can be found in Drapeau et al. (2007). These authors consider the situation of young people brought up in foster care, and use the notion of turning points to identify those who do well and those who do badly when faced with the transition of leaving foster care.
There are many ways of looking at the concept of transition. For Graber and Brooks-Gunn the very fact that adolescence is a universal experience leads to the position that it may reasonably be called a transition. There is some strength in this argument. Transitions can be said to have a number of characteristics. They include:

- an eager anticipation of the future;
- a sense of regret for the stage that has been lost;
- a feeling of anxiety in relation to the future;
- a major psychological readjustment;
- a degree of ambiguity of status during the transition.

As will be apparent, all these characteristics are strikingly true of adolescence. Adulthood beckons, and with it freedom and opportunity, which appear very attractive. Yet there is also sadness for what has gone before – it is often said that inside every adolescent there is a child struggling to get out! Young people do worry about what is to come – more so perhaps than ever before. When jobs, housing and relationships all seem uncertain it is hardly surprising that adolescents have anxieties about the future. As will be described during the course of the book, a substantial psychological readjustment is required during the course of the adolescent years, and this is true in all spheres – in the family, with friends, with adults outside the family, and of course in relation to the individual’s sense of identity. Lastly a number of themes run throughout the adolescent period, including an intensified concern with status and a realignment of roles. Thus it makes sense to consider adolescence as a transition, while at the same time acknowledging that within this stage there are many turning points which have significance for later adaptation.

Theories of adolescence

‘Like you’re going through that time, you don’t know what you want to do, it’s really indecisive, and it’s like one big learning curve. And you obviously need people to bounce off and compare with, because you’re never going to develop in this time if you don’t interact with other people and see what’s right and wrong, and sort things out. And all the crap you get into, so you need someone to go and bitch to, or like cry to, or whatever.’

(16-year-old girl)

In attempting to understand adolescence as a transition it is obvious that theory has an important part to play, and attention will now be paid to three different theoretical positions:
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- the storm and stress viewpoint
- developmental contextualism
- the focal model.

Looking first at ‘storm and stress’, writers since the time of the Greeks have described adolescence as a problem period. It is often assumed that young people only began to be seen as troubled and troubling in the 1950s, when the word ‘teenager’ came into fashion (Savage, 2007). Different styles of clothing, musicians such as Buddy Holly and Elvis Presley, and films such as Rebel Without a Cause, appeared to capture a new mood among the young, and to mark the arrival of a generation that was ‘all shook up’. Yet in 340 BC Aristotle wrote: ‘Young men have strong desires, and tend to satisfy them indiscriminately. Of the bodily desires it is the sexual by which they are most easily swayed, and in which they show absence of self-control.’ He went on to write: ‘They are changeable and fickle in their desires, which are violent while they last. Their impulses are keen but not deep-rooted’ (Rhetorica. In ‘The basic works of Aristotle’, quoted in Muuss, 1996). In later centuries a similar view prevailed. Shakespeare wrote in a number of his plays about the problems of youth, and the poet John Keats, writing in 1815, said:

The imagination of a boy is healthy, and the mature imagination of a man is healthy, but there is a space of life between, in which the soul is in ferment; the character undecided, the way of life uncertain, the ambition thick-sighted: thence proceeds mawkishness.

(Andrews, 1987, p. 3)

In modern times it was undoubtedly the publication in 1904 of G. Stanley Hall’s monumental work on adolescence that set the tone for much of what was written in the subsequent half-century. Hall’s two-volume, exhaustive study ushered in a new approach to the understanding of adolescence. He described it as a period of ‘storm and stress’, a phrase he took from the Romantic writers of the nineteenth century such as Schiller and Goethe. This was a literary movement which embraced idealism, passion and suffering, but also believed in revolution and the rejection of the old order. Hall argued that the adolescent passed through a turbulent, transitional stage, and that this was necessary for the ‘higher and more completely human traits’ to be accepted.

Hall’s view of adolescence was given added weight by the fact that well-known psychoanalytic writers, such as Sigmund and Anna Freud, took a similar view of this stage of life. The psychoanalytic view of adolescence took as its starting point the upsurge of instincts which was believed to occur as a result of puberty. This increase in instinctual life, it was suggested, upsets the psychic balance which has been achieved by the end of childhood, and causes internal upheaval. This in turn leads to a greatly increased vulnerability of the personality (Freud, 1937).

As might be expected, later psychoanalytic writers, such as Erik Erikson (1968), have elaborated on these early theories. In so doing they have also moved beyond the notion of ‘storm and stress’, and have worked to explore the contribution of psychoanalysis to different aspects of adolescent development such as identity and family relationships. In addition more recent writers, such as Richard Frankel
(1998), have discussed the ways in which culture interacts with personality, and have added new perspectives to our understanding of adolescence, derived from the works of Jung and Winnicott. Nonetheless much of psychoanalytic writing does focus on the troubled and the turbulent, and there seems little doubt that such theorising has given impetus to a general view that there is somehow more upheaval in adolescence than in other stages of development.

This view began to be seriously challenged in the 1960s and 1970s when the results of empirical studies of adolescence started to appear in the scientific literature. Many writers reported findings showing the majority of young people getting on well with their parents, and coping adequately with the challenges of adolescence. Most agreed that there are a number who experience social and emotional difficulties, but that this group is a small minority of the total population of young people. Among numerous studies that have reported generally good adjustment among the majority of young people, we can consider the following as representative of many similar conclusions:

In this study some 33.5% of the adolescents surveyed reported no symptoms of psychological distress, and another 39% reported five or fewer symptoms (a mild level of distress). On the other hand a significant 27.5% reported higher levels of psychological distress. For the majority the adolescent transition may be relatively smooth: however, for a minority it does indeed appear to be a period of stress and turmoil. . . . The large majority of adolescents appear to get on well with adults and are able to cope effectively with demands from school and peer groups. They use their resources to make adjustments with environmental stressors with hardly visible signs of psychological distress.

(Siddique and D’Arcy, 1984, p. 471)

In spite of this and many other similar research findings, there still remains a powerful belief among the general public that the adolescent years bring with them trouble and strife for most families. Of all the ‘popular’ views of adolescence, it is undoubtedly the storm and stress model that is most familiar and most widely accepted among the general public. What are the possible reasons for this state of affairs? It could be that society has always needed a group to blame, and young people represent a useful scapegoat. The media may play their part, concentrating on the unacceptable behaviour of the few, and thereby implying that this applies to all adolescents. Teenagers themselves might contribute, as they are likely to challenge adults, and to display what seems like puzzling or even outrageous behaviour. Finally the self-fulfilling prophecy may be a factor, so that adolescents end up behaving just as adults expect them to do. Nonetheless it remains one of the puzzles about this stage of development that, in spite of clear evidence of the positive features of adolescence, the problem elements remain in the forefront of everyone’s mind. The two theoretical approaches to be considered next highlight a different viewpoint, one stressing the context of development, and the other considering how young people cope with the challenges of adolescence.

The ideas outlined in the previous section relating to transitions and turning points are close to what is called the life course perspective. This implies a belief that
human development can only be understood by taking into account the historical
time and place of the individual's life, as well as the actual timing within any one
person’s life of transitions and major events (see Goossens, 2006a). The life course
perspective is similar to and associated with what has come to be known as develop-
mental contextualism, and it is to this set of theoretical beliefs that we will now
turn. The key figures in the history of this viewpoint are Urie Bronfenbrenner,
Paul Baltes and Richard Lerner. Each has made his own personal contribution,
and here these ideas will be drawn together with the help of some recent reviews
(e.g. Goossens, 2006a; Steinberg, 2008). The main elements of developmental
contextualism are as follows.

**The context, or ecology, of human development is essential to its understanding.** The
intention here is to underline the importance of the environment in the widest
sense, including not only the family, but the geographical, political, social and
historical context or setting in which the child or young person is situated. Elder
(1998) put it like this: ‘The life course of individuals is embedded in and shaped
by the historical times and places they experience over their life-time’ (p. 2).

**Timing is critical.** This principle has already been outlined as part of the Graber
and Brooks-Gunn (1996) approach to transitions. In essence this implies that when
events happen is as important as what these events are. Elder phrases it as follows:
‘The developmental impact of a succession of life transitions or events is contingent
on when they occur in a person’s life’ (1998, p. 3).

**There is a continuity to human development.** This principle is important in two
respects. In the first place it draws attention to similarities and differences between
stages, so that consideration of the transition of adolescence can be compared with
other transitions, as for example the transition from employment to retirement.
The principle is significant also in that it points up the fact that the adolescent
stage does not suddenly arrive out of the blue, but is a continuation of development
in childhood. Too often writers treat adolescence as a stage unconnected to other
life experiences. This principle highlights the inter-relationship between childhood
and adolescence.

**Individuals and their families reciprocally influence each other.** This principle
makes reference to the fact that neither a child nor a parent is an isolated entity.
Each grows, develops and changes, and most importantly, in so doing influences
the others at all times. The young person’s maturation produces changes in the
family, but at the same time alterations in parental behaviour and family function-
ing have effects on the adolescent’s development.

**Individuals are agents of their own development.** This is one of the key principles
of developmental contextualism. Attention is drawn here to the part that all
individuals, irrespective of age, play in shaping their own development. This
innovative principle has wide-ranging implications for social science research
and for translating empirical evidence into policy and practice. While it may be
generally accepted that child and adolescent development results from an interplay
of a variety of causes, the idea that the individual young person is an 'active agent' in shaping or determining his or her own development has not generally been part of the thinking of researchers in this field. The principle is now, however, having a significant effect on those studying human development. The idea that adolescents may in some senses construct their own adolescence has already been mentioned, and this has close links with a theoretical approach known as the focal model which will be discussed further below.

When studying the interaction between person and context attention should be paid to the concept of 'goodness of fit'. The 'goodness of fit' concept takes into account the relationship between the individual and the environment in the widest sense, and asks to what extent the needs and goals of the individual are congruent with the context. Thus whether a developmental outcome is adaptive or not does not just depend on the characteristics of the individual, or on the nature of the physical or social environment. Rather, the outcome depends on whether these two systems fit together. The emphasis in research must therefore be to look at both elements and consider the extent to which they are congruent.

Numerous examples can be given of research programmes which have been conceptualized using the framework of developmental contextualism. The work of Eccles and her colleagues (Eccles and Roeser, 2003) on school transitions depends on the notion of 'goodness of fit', whilst Kerr et al. (2008) have drawn upon ideas of agency to show that monitoring and supervision by parents only has an effect if the young person is willing to cooperate. A recent study of parenting and mental health (Reitz et al., 2006) showed the importance of reciprocity in understanding the factors that produce and maintain disturbed adolescent behaviour in the family. Developmental contextualism draws together many strands of thought. As Bronfenbrenner (1979) acknowledged, his theoretical notions were themselves based on those of earlier thinkers such as Lewin and Vygotsky. Today, however, those interested in designing high quality studies to explore various aspects of adolescent development will be remiss if they do not pay attention to the principles outlined here. No longer is it acceptable to consider only one side of the picture; the person and the context are inseparable. In addition it is no longer possible to ignore the fact that the individual adolescent shapes his or her own world, a notion that links closely to the focal model which will be explored next.

Both developmental contextualism and the focal model are rooted in the belief that it is essential for any theory to be able to take account of individual differences in development. These two approaches also give recognition to the adolescent’s resources and potential for resilience. Theories of adolescence must do justice to the strengths and capacities demonstrated by young people, and must reflect the positive contribution they make both to their own development as well as to the communities in which they live. However, it is also important for a theory to identify the possible circumstances in which an individual may become vulnerable, and both approaches outlined here satisfy these criteria.

The focal model grew out of the results of a study of normal adolescent development (Coleman, 1974). Briefly, large groups of boys and girls at the ages of 11, 13, 15 and 17 were given sets of identical tests which elicited from them...
attitudes and opinions about a wide range of relationships. Material was included on self-image, being alone, heterosexual relationships, parental relationships, friendships and large group situations. The material was analysed in terms of the positive and negative elements present in these relationship situations and in terms of the common themes expressed by the young people involved in the study. Findings showed that attitudes to all relationships differed as a function of age, but more importantly the results also indicated that concerns about various issues reached a peak at different stages in the adolescent process.

It was this finding that led to the formulation of the focal model. The model suggests that at different ages particular sorts of relationship patterns come into focus, in the sense of being most prominent, but that no pattern is specific to one age only. Thus the patterns overlap, different issues come into focus at different times, but simply because an issue is not the most prominent feature of a specific age does not mean that it may not be critical for some individuals of that age. A symbolic representation of the model is illustrated in Figure 1.4.

In many ways such a notion is not dissimilar from any traditional stage theory. However, it carries with it a much more flexible view of development, and therefore differs from stage theory in three important respects. First, the resolution of one issue is not seen as essential for tackling the next. In fact it is clearly envisaged that a minority of individuals will find themselves facing more than one issue at the same time. Second, the model does not assume the existence of fixed boundaries between stages and, therefore, issues are not necessarily linked with a particular age or developmental level. Finally there is nothing immutable about the sequence involved. In the culture in which the research was first carried out, it appeared that individuals were more likely to face certain issues in the early stages of adolescence and different issues at other stages, but the focal model is not centred on a fixed sequence. It will be of interest to consider additional research by Kloep (1999) and Goossens and Marcoen (1999) which looks at the sequence of issues in different cultures.

In a previous publication (Coleman, 1978) the question was asked as to how it was possible for young people to face a wide range of transitions during the adolescent period and yet appear to cope without undue stress or difficulty. One possible explanation for the successful adaptation of so many young people to

![Figure 1.4 Focal theory. Each curve represents a different issue or relationship. Source: Coleman (1974).]
the developmental demands of the adolescent transition is provided by the focal model. The answer suggested by this model is that they cope by dealing with one issue at a time. They spread the process of adaptation over a span of years, attempting to deal with first one issue and then the next. Different problems, different relationship issues come into focus and are tackled at different stages, so that the various stresses resulting from the need to adapt to new modes of behaviour are rarely concentrated at one time.

It follows from this that it is precisely among those who, for whatever reason, do have more than one issue to cope with at a time that problems are most likely to occur. Thus, for example, where puberty and the growth spurt occur at the normal time individuals are able to adjust to these changes before other pressures, such as those from teachers or peers, are brought to bear. For the late matures, however, pressures are more likely to occur simultaneously, inevitably requiring adjustments over a wider area. As Goossens (2006a, p. 21) puts it:

Most adolescents deal with one issue at a time when working through their relationships with their parents, same-sex friends, opposite-sex friends, groups of age-mates, and authority figures. Only a small group (about 20 per cent of all adolescents) are forced by the circumstances to deal with several or all issues at the same time and evidence the signs of adolescent 'storm and stress' because they are overwhelmed by their problems.

As will be apparent the focal model draws on very similar assumptions to those implicit in the concept of ‘timing’ in developmental contextualism, and relates closely to Graber and Brooks-Gunn’s (1996) perspective on transitions and turning points. The focal model also addresses directly the apparent contradiction between the amount of adaptation required during the transitional process and the ability of most young people to cope successfully with the pressures inherent in this process. Since the model was first proposed there has been some encouraging research which bears on the validity of this approach. Thus Kroger (1985) and Goossens and Marcoen (1999) have both studied the sequence of relationship concerns in different cultures. Kroger compared young people in New Zealand and the USA, while Goossens and Marcoen carried out their research in Belgium. Results from these studies support the notion of different issues coming to the fore at different times. As Goossens and Marcoen state:

The general pattern of peak ages for adolescents’ interpersonal concerns provided support for the focal model. Negative feelings about being alone, relationships with parents, heterosexual relationships, small groups and rejection from large groups do not all emerge all at once, but young people seem to deal with one issue at a time.

(1999, p. 66)

In another study carried out in Norway (Kloep, 1999) similar results were reported, with adolescents, where possible, dealing with one interpersonal issue at a time. There has also been support for the notion of timing, with many studies indicating that adjustment is poorer where issues come all at once rather than one at a time. One well-known example is that of Simmons and Blyth (1987), whose
research on school transitions illustrated clearly that the greater number of life
transitions that a young person had to deal with, the greater likelihood of low
self-esteem and poor academic performance. Lastly empirical support for the focal
model has also come from research identifying what are known as ‘arenas of
comfort’ (Call and Mortimer, 2001). In this research it is shown that where young
people have at least one source of support they are better able to deal with
stresses in other areas.

There is one further key aspect of the focal model that needs to be emphasised.
This is the notion of agency, one already mentioned in the outline of develop-
mental contextualism. The focal model argues that the young person is an agent in his or
her own development, managing the adolescent transition – where possible – by
dealing with one issue at a time. While at first sight this idea may be difficult to grasp,
a little thought will indicate that the idea is not so far fetched as might at first
appear. Consider for a moment the range of choices available to a young person
in their current relationships. In any one day an adolescent may choose to confront
a parent over the breakfast table, to argue with a sibling, to accept the suggestion
of a good friend, to stand up to a teacher, to conform to pressure from the peer group,
and so on. Every one of these situations offers the young person a choice, and
all may have a bearing on the interpersonal issues with which the focal model is
concerned. It is quite realistic to suggest that most young people pace themselves
through the adolescent transition. Most will hold back on one issue while they are
grappling with another. Most sense what they can and cannot cope with and will,
in the clearest sense of the term, be an active agent in their own development.

It has to be recognised, however, that not all young people will have the
same freedom to shape and manage their development. As has already been noted,
when many events occur at one time it will be more difficult for the individual to
manage the transitional process. In addition, those who grow up in deprived circum-
stances, or who face adversity because of illness, disability or family disadvantage,
will inevitably experience constraints in terms of options and choices for their life
course. Nonetheless the idea of an adolescent-centred perspective contains within
it the belief that, no matter what circumstances surround an individual’s develop-
ment, there remains a sense in which it can be said that the young person is
constructing their own adolescence. Imagine, in the most adverse situations, a
young person talking to a youth worker, or a prison officer. Is it not the case that
the adolescent is still choosing how to respond, what to disclose and what to hold
back, how to shape the interaction? It is in this sense that agency plays such a
key role in human development.

In the last few years a number of strands of thinking have given support to
the idea of the adolescent as a constructor of his or her own development. Within
studies of gene–environment interaction there have been suggestions of what
is known as ‘niche-picking’, where individuals select the environments that best
suit their developmental needs (Schaffer, 2006). In studies of family relationships
researchers have looked at what is known as information management, identifying
the process whereby young people actively select which information they com-
municate to their parents (Marshall et al., 2005; Keijsers and Laird, 2010). When
investigating problem behaviour researchers have shown how the behaviour of
young people both predicts and moderates parental behaviour (Reitz et al., 2006).
In terms of the voices of young people many of the quotes used throughout this book illustrate graphically how adolescents are actively working to organise and shape their own developmental pathways. More will be said about this process in Chapter 5 on the family and in the final chapter.

To conclude, both developmental contextualism and the focal model have contributions to make to a more realistic conceptual structure within which to understand adolescent development. A central question which faces researchers in this field has to do, not with how many young people face difficulties in adjustment, but with the process of successful and adaptive coping. Both theoretical approaches encourage an exploration of the factors that assist adolescents in the transitional process, and this is greatly to be welcomed. Throughout this book there will be a consideration of how context impacts on development, and of the various dimensions of adolescent development. Once these have been explored, the final chapter will review what is known of risk, resilience and coping.

Further reading

In spite of the title this is a valuable book, written from a sympathetic and adolescent-centred perspective. The author is a psychiatrist, and there are good chapters on topics such as education, moods, eating behaviour, sex, alcohol and drugs.

One of the few books that presents research on adolescence from a European perspective. A good chapter on theories of adolescence, followed by coverage of all the main topics concerning young people’s development.

One of the best books charting the history of our understanding of the teenage years, written by a British author who specialises in the history of music and popular culture.

This is a useful book which discusses and defines all the key ideas relevant to an understanding of adolescence as a developmental stage. The author is one of the major figures in British child psychology.

One of the best of the American textbooks on adolescence. Very thorough coverage, with good examples of innovative research and boxes with interesting and challenging questions.