CONCEPTUALIZING ADOLESCENCE/TS

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is an evolving area of study and curiosity. According to the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (2014) nearly half of the world's population is age 25 or younger, yet across disciplines professionals do not share a consistent definition or approach to adolescence either as a phase of life (adolescence) or as individuals (adolescents). Adult allies within youth-led programs have a wide range of ideas about adolescence as a period of development, as well as varying ideas about adolescents themselves. This is a particular challenge in the field of youth-led programming where youth have the opportunity to be change agents in their community and need adult allies to support them in a consistent manner. As youth-led programs in Ohio continue to develop and expand it is important for all adult allies to be knowledgeable on the foundation of how young people are conceptualized.

Adult allies working with youth may operate based on stereotypes stemming from their type of or level of formal education, or the prevailing theories at their time of entry into the field. Adult allies are also influenced by culture, personal belief systems and experiences. We encourage adult allies who work with young people to examine their personal perception and understanding of adolescence with consideration given to how historical perspectives have helped shape many modern day beliefs. How adult allies conceptualize and approach young people has an impact on adult/youth relationships, youth-led program design and outcomes.

For more information on youth-led programs, please see the following white papers:

Youth-Led Programs: This paper provides an overview of the two frameworks that inform youth-led programs: the Youth Empowerment Conceptual Framework (YECF; Holden et al., 2004) and the Strategic Prevention Framework (SPF; SAMHSA).

Youth Empowerment: This paper explains youth empowerment, the core construct outlined in the Youth Empowerment Conceptual Framework (YECF; Holden et al., 2004), which adult allies use to guide young people in their community change efforts.

Prevention and Promotion: As prevention and promotion are the fundamental approaches utilized by youth-led programs, it is important for adult allies to understand what each is and how they relate to each other.

Positive Youth Development: This paper provide an overarching definition of positive youth development (PYD), details its core principles, and explains how youth-led programs are distinct from other programs that embrace a PYD approach.

By examining how the concept of adolescence has evolved over time, and how perceptions can vary culturally in the U.S., adult allies will deepen their understanding of their own personal approach to adolescence. Knowledge of how adolescence is viewed expands the capacity to apply new approaches and/or enhance already applied skills and methods to youth-led programming. This understanding has the capacity to result in an increase in positive and productive outcomes for youth-led programs.

DEFINING ADOLESCENCE

Adolescence is described as a time of change in a young person's life, or as the transitional stage between childhood and adulthood. Several different definitions of adolescence exist in modern society:

- The World Health Organization (2017) defines adolescence as "the period in human growth and development that occurs after childhood and before adulthood, from ages 10 to 19."

- The Journal of Paediatrics & Child Health (2003) defines adolescence as "...the onset of physiologically normal puberty, and ends when an adult identity and behavior are accepted."

- Current brain science typically refers to adolescent brain development occurring through age 25-26.

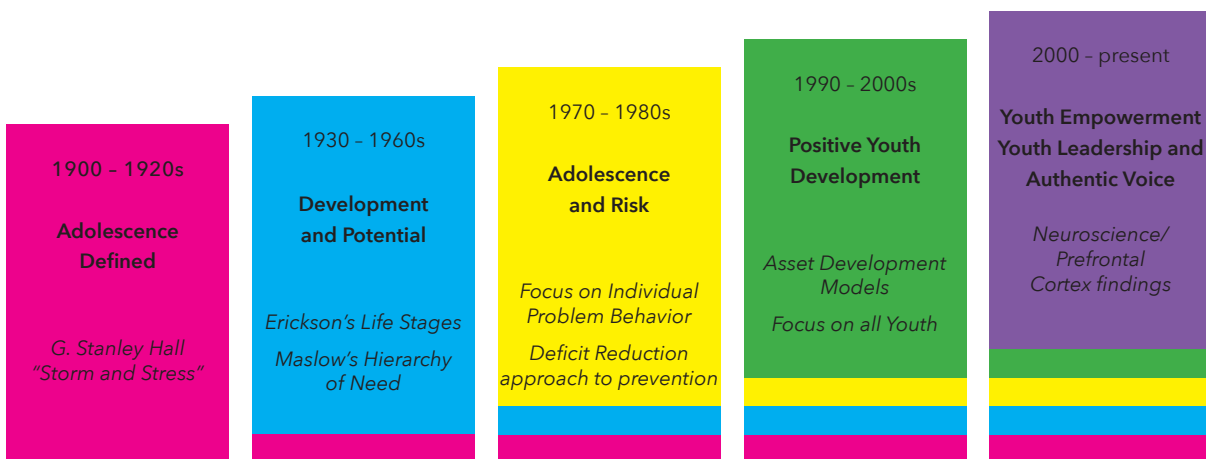- Our legal definition of entering adulthood in the United States is age 18.

Undoubtedly, the discourse surrounding the concept of adolescence is widely varied in respects to age, physiological development, cognitive development and even social development. The variance in our society's conceptualization of adolescence has led to a disconnected approach to youth across disciplines, cultures, and among adult allies. Consequently, a definition of adolescence alone is not enough to effectively execute best practices when working with young people.

HISTORICAL ERAS IN ADOLESCENCE

Conceptualization of the stage of adolescence has a long and evolving history. As we revisit this history, it is evident that as theories, research and understanding has developed so have programs and approaches to youth. For the purpose of this discussion, we synthesized the study of adolescence and identified five eras through which American culture has advanced. These eras each mark distinct conceptual changes and feature a myriad of approaches and programs that have had varied impact on youth development as well as era specific social problems.

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Each era reflects novel concepts, important research, and important programs and initiatives of the time. However, the timeline is not necessarily fixed when it comes to the application of work with youth; that is, not all professionals have altered their thinking or approach as new eras have arisen. Adult allies can move in concept and practice from one era to another, based on several factors, such as experiences from one's own adolescence , time of formal education, period of professional and skill development, and development of personal values and attitudes. Examination of the timeline and eras can assist in raising awareness of where adult allies fall in their approach to youth and the potential impact on youth-led programs.

The understanding of adolescence has moved from G. Stanley Hall's "storm and stress" perspective to one of youth empowerment, which views youth as viable contributors to society, marking "a shifting conception of the role of youths in the field of prevention from a risk factor paradigm to an empowerment paradigm" (Holden, 2004).

1900 – 1920s

Adolescence Defined

G. Stanley Hall "Storm and Stress"

1930 – 1960s

Development and Potential

Erickson's Life Stages

Maslow's Hierarchy of Need

1970 – 1980s

Adolescence and Risk

Focus on Individual Problem Behavior

Deficit Reduction approach to prevention

1990 – 2000s

Positive Youth Development

Asset Development Models

Focus on all Youth

2000 – present

Youth Empowerment Youth Leadership and Authentic Voice

Neuroscience/ Prefrontal Cortex findings

ADOLESCENCE DEFINED (1900 – 1920S)

G. Stanley Hall (1904) was the pioneering theorist that first defined adolescence in the United States. Hall identified adolescence as a unique stage of development and characterized it as a period of heightened 'storm and stress', involving frequent conflict, mood changes and risk-taking behavior. He indicated that adolescence had the "tendency to question and contradict their parents, in their mood disruptions and in their propensity for reckless and antisocial behavior" (Arnett 1999, p. 318). Hall surmised that this stage, and the behaviors associated with it were universal, meaning they were experienced, to a large degree, the same by all youth across cultures and demographics. This prompted years of study and debate.

DEVELOPMENT AND POTENTIAL (CIRCA 1930 – 1960S)

This era featured the realization that children and adolescents are unique in their needs and development. Theorists such as Maslow and Erikson took a more Humanistic approach

to their research, focusing on human potential. Each of these models of growth and development are utilized today, holding to the principle that all humans go through such stages universally and consistently. This era furthered the debate of biological versus cultural etiology of adolescence.

ADOLESCENCE AND RISK (CIRCA 1970 – 1980S)

Despite ongoing challenges to Hall's depiction of adolescence and a closer look at how both biology and culture influence human development, research continued to focus on problem behavior and risk taking in adolescence. Practice revolved around how to reduce risk and prevention of behaviors leading to such issues as teen pregnancy, drug use, or violence. Study in this era asked the question, "how do we stop kids from…?" with research of the day guiding professionals to fill in the blank. Theorists defined and identified risk factors in a youth's environment that increased their chances of participating in at risk behavior. This perpetuated deficit reduction models that studied what at-risk youth were missing, such as strong role models, positive family relationships, opportunities, and social skills.

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT (CIRCA 1990 – 2000)

Although there are a multitude of evidence-based programs that prevent specific behaviors, this era moved to a more holistic and positive approach to adolescent development. Theorists reframed research questions from what causes risk-taking behavior, to what leads to healthy adolescent development. The focus shifted to building the strengths, competence, and potential of all youth. Youth community engagement was also a hallmark of this era. The whole child and comprehensive approach to youth development became more common. Youth were viewed as functioning across multiple settings and environments that had an array of connections impacting their development. The overall goal of this time period was to produce happy and healthy adults based on the idea that problem free does not mean well prepared.

YOUTH EMPOWERMENT (CIRCA 2000-PRESENT)

Youth empowerment builds on positive youth development models and community participation approaches with a very important paradigm shift. Youth empowerment shifts from viewing youth as participants in their own environment to being actual change agents, or individuals who, if given an authentic and unique voice, can influence events and decisions on topics of importance to them (Holden, 2004). Further, these topics of importance and interactions are amenable by context and culture. This era features growth in youth-led programming, and tools for youth empowerment such as the Youth Empowerment Conceptual Framework (YECF). This change in perspective toward youth as active citizens is a pivotal and necessary idea for adult allies.

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BIAS AND INFLUENCE

In addition to being aware of the historical context of our approaches, it is crucial that adult allies working with youth also consider the variance in the experience of adolescence in a cultural construct as it applies to youth of race and ethnicity. According to the American Psychological Association (2002), "the population of adolescents in the United States is becoming increasingly racially and ethnically diverse, with 37% of adolescents ages 10 to 19 today being Hispanic or members of non-White racial groups," (p. 4). While there are a variety of studies and scientific research on the topic of adolescence, much of this research is conducted through a white middle-class adolescent lens. Research regarding "normal adolescent development for minority youth is still lacking" (American Psychological Association, 2002, p.4). By generalizing the definition of what is depicted as the "normal" adolescent experience, there is little consideration to the unequal distribution of how adolescents of different races or ethnicities are viewed and approached. As Groenke (2015) states, "some youth get to 'act like teenagers' and others don't" (p. 37). While young people are often depicted as rebelling against the status quo, this rebellion is frequently viewed as more acceptable for white youths. Groenke et al. (2015) point out, "when youth of color 'resist' or 'rebel against' the status quo in or outside of school, they become criminals. [....] And youth of color don't have peer groups or caring adults in their lives: they have gangs" (p. 36). This is but one example of the bias that can be held toward youth based on a particular race or ethnic group. This added layer of potential bias further impacts how young people are approached, and engaged in, youth-led programs and communities.

An additional influence to consider in our view of adolescence is adultism, which is the tendency to believe that all adults are superior in skills and virtues to all children (Flasher, 1978). According to Fletcher (2016), all adults can fall into patterns of adultism, even the most highly trained and well-meaning individuals. Thoughts and behaviors toward adultism often stem from ruts in thinking, stereotypes, past experience, and misinformation. When adultism occurs, youth ideas, opinions and attempted contributions are dismissed. Often unaware and through habit, adults do not realize their bias toward adult ways in their treatment of youth. Young people who feel dismissed easily drop out of prevention activities and miss opportunities for youth-led programming success.

Through continued education and personal reflection into the understanding of adolescence, adult allies can decrease patterned stereotypes and adultist behaviors that potentially limit their work with adolescents. Through ongoing reflection, we will be able to better engage young people and embrace them as change agents capable of positively impacting their communities.. As Solnosky (2016) stated, "Because youth aren't just the leaders of tomorrow, they're the leaders of today" (p. 2).

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CONCLUSION

Reflection on adultist tendencies, cultural and ethnic biases and historic conceptualizations of adolescence is critical to assist the adult ally in strengthening his/her connection with young people in the here and now of today's world. When adult allies are empowered with an environment and culture conducive with a current day concept of adolescence they can create a space where youth are leaders and partners of positive change in their own surroundings. Increasing knowledge and awareness about the conceptualization of adolescence as a phase of life and about the individuals in this phase, expands the capacity of adult allies to apply new practices, or enhance existing skills and methods to youth-led programming that will result in more positive and productive outcomes for young people. The review of this concept is particularly important to the further development and expansion of youth-led programs in Ohio as adult allies strive to increase opportunities to fully engage with youth and impact communities in ways that are beneficial to all.

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