

THE INSTITUTE FOR CLINICAL SOCIAL WORK

TRANSCENDING CHILDHOOD: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC
STUDY OF EARLY ADOLESCENCE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

My professional interest in adolescence has been longstanding. My first clinical efforts were with teenagers, before I knew anything about helping them. At that point, I was practically a teenager myself and, therefore, was able to intuitively understand them. I remembered how it felt to be a teenager. That I lost this perspective on adolescence became apparent to me as I continued my work with teenagers and found that, despite my professional growth, I had to work harder to understand them. I realized that somewhere and somehow I had lost the feeling of adolescence; I was inalterably and unmistakably adult.

When my own son reached adolescence, I experienced the changes in him as one experiences an engrossing movie or play; I was an emotionally involved spectator. At the same time, of course, I was his parent and had to adjust to the transformations that were occurring before my eyes. All I could do was witness his growth. I was no longer privy to his experience.

As a doctoral student, I was given a research assignment. I was asked to interview a small number of subjects and gather data according to the principles of qualitative field research. This form of research, generally associated with the fields of anthropology and sociology, was a viable method for conducting research on clinical phenomena.

Confronted with my son's emerging adolescence (and frequently, with a household filled with his friends) I decided to research the experience of becoming adolescent and to ask his friends to participate in the study. They readily agreed and I conducted five interviews with boys asking them the question: "What is it like to be your age?" They were enthusiastic participants, and I was fascinated by their answers. I had not anticipated how well they were able to reflect on the changes in themselves and their lives. When I analyzed the data, I discovered that these boys put the changes that they described into the perspective of their lives; past, present and future. They were excellent narrators of their experience.

My research question was developed from this assignment. This methodology enabled me to study the subjective experience of a nonclinical sample of young adolescents. With little difficulty, I was able to recruit boys and girls between the ages of twelve and fourteen to participate. They were predominantly white, middle- to upper-middle class teenagers who lived in two-parent households in the suburbs of Chicago. I reached beyond this group and interviewed teens from Chicago, a small midwestern town, and a mid-size town in California. I was fortunate enough to interview one girl who had grown up in another country before moving to the United States several years ago. Although each subject had unique experiences, the commonalities were striking.

As I prepared the proposal for this study, I read and reread the psychoanalytic literature on adolescent development. (I am psychoanalytic in my orientation as a psychotherapist.) The literature painted a different picture of adolescence than I was encountering in my

interviewing. The literature purported to represent the unconscious processes at play in adolescent development. While my research was not designed to uncover unconscious processes, it was uncovering the way in which young adolescents experienced themselves, their relationships, and their world. Their descriptions of their experiences were quite different than psychoanalytic developmental theory would suggest.

I discovered that an extensive body of research on normal adolescents existed and that the findings of many of these studies challenged the assumptions of psychoanalytic theory. I grew interested in the possibility that this study would add another dimension to this body of research. By using the methodology described above, theory grounded in empirical data was developed. Because this study was limited and my ambitions were not, I have examined psychoanalytic developmental theory in light of the findings of this study and many others.