

## THE ADOLESCENT IN ETHIOPIA

David R. Cox

Instructing a course in the psychology of adolescence for Ethiopian students was found by the author to be an uncertain and sometimes questionable undertaking. Since no textbooks treating the subject of adolescence in Ethiopia were available, those relating to other cultures were used.

The major topics dealt with in these textbooks as well as the discussion of them often seemed to be inappropriate to the consideration of conditions existing in Ethiopia. For example, dating and heterosexual relationships are emphasized in most textbook treatments of adolescence. Association between girls and boys is discouraged in Ethiopian culture, especially during the period of adolescence. Even casual associations of this kind may bring severe punishment from parents. Dating of course did not exist as an institutionalized practice in traditional Ethiopian culture since marriages were usually arranged. Although some of the traditional patterns are changing, dating at the present time is not widely accepted or practiced openly.

### Problem

The instructor of a course in the psychology of adolescence is continually faced with the problem of deciding what topics in the textbook and supplementary materials are appropriate for study. This task is complicated by the instructor's lack of familiarity with the culture and by the complication of cultural variations resulting from tribal divergencies. Also, rapid social change which has been induced in certain segments of the culture in the drive for modernization has increased the cultural differences which exist in various segments of the population. For example great differences exist between the educated and non-educated or between urban and rural dwellers.

Levine, (1965, p. 96) who studied the Amhara tribal culture, points out some of these changing aspects:

"In Amharic culture, adolescence scarcely exists as a concept, let alone as a problem. While there are Amharic words which signify "young person," there is no word in Amharic that specifically denotes a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood. The goals of a stage of transition to adult status, which to us have become problematic--continuity of the social order and crystallization of personal identity--are customarily attained among the Amhara as a matter of course.

"In Ethiopia's modernizing sector, however, society and the individual have been affected by numerous changes all at once. Adult standards have become confused; available roles have multiplied beyond comprehension; new agents and techniques of secondary socialization have supplemented the old. Overnight, adolescence has become both a category and a challenge."

This study was begun for the purpose of securing information concerning the problems and experiences of adolescents. The results of this study should provide some indication as to the usefulness of the course in general and the value of the conventional topics included.

### Method

A questionnaire was given to 137 sophomore students in Education at Haile Sellassie I University. These students were all males enrolled in a course in adoles-

cent psychology. They came from all parts of the country. The questionnaire was devised to investigate the experience of these students during the adolescent period. The questions were designed to relate to some of the problem areas considered most significant by the writers of textbooks on psychology of adolescence. The questionnaire was completed during a regular class period with the instructor present. The students were asked to express themselves freely and frankly since the results were to be used professionally. They were also informed that they need not sign their names to the papers since names were not needed for the study.

### Results

Several writers of textbooks have indicated that adolescence and the problems attending it are largely a by-product of modern culture (Cole, 1961, p. 3; Malm and Jamison, 1952, p. 21). Levine (1965, p. 96) stated that traditional Amharic society has had few problems relating directly to adolescence. If there are few problems during this period of life in this culture today, then a course of this type would seem to be highly superfluous. The importance of a course in adolescent psychology at this university is directly related to this proposition.

Seventy-two per cent of the students said that adolescence had been a period of "stress and strain" for them. Almost all of these people listed four or five problems which they experienced during adolescence and considered vital in their lives.

Adolescence is often described as a difficult period of life because of its marginal and transitional character. In many societies roles for the adolescent are not well-established or consistent. As a result the treatment accorded to adolescents is variable and often contradictory. Neither the adolescent nor the adult knows whether the person should be considered to be a child or an adult.

TABLE I  
Problems Relating to Adolescence Generally

ITEM	Yes	No	% of Total In Highest Category
Adolescence a period of stress.	97	38	72
Society had definite roles for adolescent. Knew how expected to behave.	90	47	70
Dual standard of behavior for adolescents and adults	115	19	86
If dual standard did you resent it?	60	69	54
Conflict with adults.	72	65	53
Conflict with school authorities.	34	102	75
Conflict with law-enforcement authorities.	16	119	88

Evidently this marginality with respect to role is not a serious problem in Ethiopia, since seventy per cent of the students said definite roles were established and they knew how they were expected to behave. Nevertheless, a distinction was drawn between expected behavior of the adolescent and the adult. Adolescents were not accepted as adults by the people of the community. Eighty-six per cent of the respondents stated that adults expected a different standard of behavior from adolescents than they lived by themselves. Seventy-two per cent believed that they had often been treated as children when they should have been accepted as adults. Half of the students resented this dual standard.

Relationships between adults and young people in the school situation or in society in general tend to be formal and authoritative in nature. The young have been trained to accept this, and as a rule do not expect permissiveness or very extensive social interaction with adults. Rebellion against authority has not been characteristic of the adolescent in this culture. In recent years however there have been indications in the schools and elsewhere of increasing rebellion against authority. Fifty-three per cent of those answering this questionnaire admitted that they had experienced conflict of some type with adults besides their parents during adolescence. Twenty-five per cent experienced conflict with school authorities and about twelve per cent with law-enforcement authorities.

Family relationships are considered by most writers as a very significant aspect of human development. There is much evidence to support the position that parent-child relationships are of extreme importance in the emergence of personality. It is evident that most writers at the present time favor more permissive parent-child relationships with provision for the gradual emancipation of the child from parental authority and control as he grows older. Thus by the time the individual becomes an adolescent he should have much freedom of action in making decisions concerning his own behavior.

In Ethiopia strict authoritarian control is common in the home. Adolescents are often subject to rather severe restrictions and punishments. Sixty-five per cent

TABLE 2  
Problems Relating to Home & Family Relationships

ITEM	Yes	No	% of Total In Highest Category
Treated as child when should have been treated as adult.	98	39	72
Parents too authoritarian	88	48	65
Arguments or conflict with parents	68	65	51

of the respondents believed that their parents had been too strict and had not allowed them enough freedom. Among those problems listed by these individuals as most vital during this time in their lives, severe authoritarian control in the home was one of those most often noted. However, only fifty-one per cent indicated that they had arguments or other types of conflict with their parents which might be expected during adolescence. Evidently half of them accepted parental regulation without argument.

Wattenberg (1955, p. 123) states that "The most striking condition accompanying development between ten and twenty is the change in the body itself..." Bodily changes as well as differences in size, weight and strength may exert marked influence upon the child's personality. Sometimes the adolescent does not understand that physical changes are temporary or that they are natural and normal. Therefore he may worry unduly or develop feelings of inferiority and incompetence.

Evidence seems to indicate that there are problems concerning physical growth in Ethiopia just as in other cultural settings. Young people are concerned with having

**TABLE 3**  
**Problems Relating to Physical Development**

ITEM	Yes	No	% of Total In Highest Category
Adequate understanding of physical changes in adolescence.	64	71	52
Personality problems because of size or other physical characteristics.	80	56	60
Sensitive or worried about sex changes.	77	59	57

✓ a good complexion and pleasing physical appearance. Physical ability in games is an important consideration. Fifty-two per cent of the respondents stated that their understanding of physical changes during adolescence had been inadequate. Sixty per cent had personality problems because of size or other physical characteristics. Having inferiority feelings because of physical traits was one of the problems most commonly listed by students in their list of most vital problems.

Sex problems, often because of early maturation, were listed among the more vital problems of many of these students. As noted above, adolescent associations between the sexes have been very limited in Ethiopia. In addition, information concerning sex is not readily available to young people and parents are often evasive. Fifty-seven per cent of those replying reported that they had been sensitive or worried about sex changes during the period of adolescence.

Social adjustments are usually considered to be particularly necessary and extensive among adolescents. The desire to improve their social techniques as well as a general feeling of social inadequacy is often present in people of this age group particularly. Many young people wish for more popularity and acceptance in the peer group.

In Ethiopia social relationships are significant and at times very complex. Difficulties encountered in social relationships appear to be important, since problems of social adjustment were among those most often mentioned by students as being vital during adolescence. Fifty-four per cent stated that they had problems of social adjustment in school or elsewhere during this time, while seventy-nine per cent had experienced the need to improve social relations. In spite of the importance of the family as a directing and controlling force in the lives of these individuals, fifty-four per cent said that their behavior had been more in harmony with the advice and example of friends than that of parents. Twelve people did not answer on this item.

**TABLE 4**  
**Problems Relating to Social Development**

ITEM	Yes	No	% of Total In Highest Category
Behaved more in accordance with peers than with parents.	68	57	54
Problems of social adjustment in school or elsewhere.	74	63	54
Felt need to improve social relations.	108	29	79

The teen years are considered to be years of crisis in personality adjustments. Inner conflicts seem to become particularly acute at this time and many young people are not able to cope with them. Most authors place particular emphasis upon personality problems of the adolescent.

TABLE 5  
Problems Relating to Emotional Development

ITEM	Yes	No	% of Total In Highest Category
Unhappy much of the time.	60	75	56
Worry and feel anxious much of the time.	76	60	56
Too emotional or excitable.	66	68	51
Feelings of inferiority.	68	69	50
Dissatisfied with personality.	70	66	51

Responses in this study indicate that the Ethiopian adolescent also experiences personality problems. Forty-four per cent stated that they had been unhappy much of the time during adolescence. Fifty-six per cent said that they had experienced anxiety much of the time. Forty-nine per cent indicated that they had been too emotional and excitable. Fifty per cent of the respondents had suffered from feelings of inferiority and fifty-one per cent had been dissatisfied with their personalities as adolescents.

Young men and women often have great concern and bewilderment with reference to religious beliefs and standards for living. They are seeking acceptable creeds as satisfactory guides for behavior.

TABLE 6  
Problems Related to Beliefs & Standards of Behavior.

ITEM	Yes	No	% of Total In Highest Category
Confused on religious or moral beliefs	73	64	53
Confused as to proper standards of behavior.	65	71	52

In Ethiopia the church has traditionally played an important role in the lives of the people. In this role it has influenced almost all aspects of Ethiopian life and thought. However, at the present time traditional roles are being altered and there are changes occurring here as in other phases of life in this country. The educated person especially, seems to experience conflicts with reference to the role of religion in his life. Fifty-three per cent of the students in this study indicated that they had experienced uncertainty with regard to religious and moral beliefs during adolescence. Forty-eight per cent had been confused as to proper standards of behavior.

## Discussion

The young men participating in this study came from all sections of Ethiopia and are representative of the adolescents of the country. Of course they belong to the more capable and educated segment of the society. However, their experiences are probably similar to those students in the schools of Ethiopia who would have contact with teachers and administrators being trained at the University. The inclusion of replies from women would have increased the usefulness of the results. However, there are relatively few women enrolled at the University.

The results of this investigation indicated that adolescence was a time of "stress and strain" for many of the respondents. It seems likely that this period of human development requires emphasis and special consideration in teacher training programs in Ethiopia. The course in psychology of adolescence for teachers is justifiable and useful.

The majority of general topics included in the conventional course have applicability to the Ethiopian scene. Nevertheless, much more study is needed to adapt the discussion of these topics to the cultural setting.

Family relationships seemed to be a source of many problems and should be treated in the course in human development or other psychology courses offered. Additional study is needed to ascertain what type of family influences and controls are most workable and beneficial in this milieu. More data is needed concerning the role of the adolescent in the family and in the community.

Much more information is needed by teachers, parents, and young people concerning factors relating to physical growth and physical changes associated with the period of adolescence. Attitudes and emotions which arise as a result of such physical developments are not understood or appreciated.

Social relationships and peer-group associations should receive emphasis. Dating and boy-girl relationships before marriage are not pertinent topics at this time. However, the appearance of larger numbers of women in schools and various vocations will necessitate a study of the social interaction of the sexes in these activities.

Emotional adjustment should be studied by teachers in training so that they can better understand the student and be aware of danger signals in his behavior. Additional understanding must be secured concerning behavioral characteristics of the emotionally mature person in this society. More knowledge of acceptable personal goals and characteristics of personality which are considered valuable in making satisfactory life adjustments would be helpful to the teacher of courses in psychology.

Attitudes and information relating to preparation for a vocation is a needed topic. Factors relating to good vocational adjustment should be understood by teachers in the nation's schools.

The role of the school in meeting the needs of the Ethiopian adolescent should be examined. There is evidence that in many instances an attempt is made to force the student into a preconceived program unrelated to his needs. The value of the school in the life of the student should be carefully studied. Student attitudes and teacher attitudes as they interact in the classroom learning process need to be better understood.

Courses in educational psychology can be made more valuable in the training of teachers for Ethiopia if they can be more specifically directed toward the problems and needs of the people of the country. Too often training is based upon preconceived problems which may not exist at all.

#### References

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