
The Adolescent Experience

EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN
ADOLESCENTS IN THE 1990s

Françoise D. Alsaker
August Flammer

EURONET



The Adolescent Experience
European and American
Adolescents in the 1990s

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The Adolescent Experience

European and American Adolescents in the 1990s

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Series Editors' Foreword

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Nearly 4 years ago, when we were first approached with the idea of a monograph based on the research of 12 research teams from different nations (the European Network project, or EURONET), we were excited by the prospect of publishing such a work. Perhaps never before in the history of research on adolescence had there been such a massive, collaborative, long-term undertaking. This project was conceived and carried out successfully despite the following: The research teams were from nations differing in sociopolitical, economic, and historical contexts; the collaborators spoke different first languages; and the teams came to the project with differing backgrounds in and perspectives on research and adolescent development. It is manifestly evident in this monograph that the contributors overcame the multiple barriers that stood in their way and that they found common ground for gaining important knowledge about the adolescent experience in the modern world. This product of their cross-national collaboration is a model of the process and value of such an endeavor.

The timing for the appearance of this monograph is just right, as we stand at the edge of new directions in the study of adolescence. Scholars increasingly have recognized that adolescent development is best understood by acknowledging and examining the cultural, social, historical, and political contexts in which adolescents live. The participation of 12 research teams from different nations in a common project exploring adolescent experiences is an explicit attempt to accomplish the goal of understanding young people in their differing contexts. This collaboration also reflects the way that “doing” science is changing, with more emphasis on the establishment of partnerships among multiple research teams located at different geographic sites. Both directions—the exploration of adolescents in context, and multisite research collaborations—are necessary to forge a better understanding of adolescent development.

Our hats go off to the coordinators of this project, Franchise Alsaker and August Flammer, who put their hearts, their heads, and their energies into this large research venture. They showed patience, wisdom, and vision in

approaching this collaboration. The individual research teams who conducted studies within their nations and who wrote chapters in this monograph also deserve a great deal of acknowledgment for the thoughtfulness with which they approached their studies and for their willingness to put common goals of the collaborative group at the forefront of their work. All of their efforts have been rewarded, for they—and we—now know infinitely more about adolescence in Europe and the United States than we did prior to the start of this worthwhile project.

Preface

In 1989, a new Europe was born: The iron curtain was lifted and people started to travel from West to East as well as from East to West, eager to see their respective countries, to meet with others, and possibly to learn from one another.

Curiously, the Euronet scientists met in the United States. With the support of the Johann Jacobs Foundation, located in Zürich, Switzerland, Richard M. Lerner set up a postdoctoral training workshop on adolescent psychology for 10 selected American participants and 10 selected European participants. The training staff was also recruited from the United States and Europe. August Flammer was on this training staff and the European participants came up with the idea to extend his study on the perception of adolescents' control in different life domains to their respective countries. Further discussions among this group laid the groundwork for new friendships and the plan to run a simple pilot study in order to become acquainted with international collaboration.

Thus, the Euronet for Research on Adolescence in the Context of Social Change was conceived as a basic description of the perceived living conditions in different countries and cultures, partly using measurement instruments that had already been used by one of the participants or that were at least inspired by their former work and actual interests. One important question was new to all of us—the question of time use by the adolescents. It seemed clear to all of us that we should not go into more theoretical work before having a closer look at the everyday life of the adolescents in each country. We also decided to have our national samples of 14- and 16-year-olds stratified according to the respective country's population in different educational tracks (excluding handicapped adolescents), but not stratified with respect to geographic distribution. The main reason for this was that it was clear that the data collection was to be prepared and conducted without any extra project funding and our first purpose was to exercise intercultural exchange among researchers.

We were indeed a very heterogeneous group. The following countries were represented from the beginning: Bulgaria (Luba Botcheva, then in Sofia), Czechoslovak! an Federal Republic (Petr Macek, Brno; at the time, Czechia and Slovakia were not yet separated), Finland (Jari-Erik Nurmi, then in Helsinki), France (Colette Sabatier, then in Rennes), Germany (Peter Noack, then in Mannheim), Hungary (Benő Csapó, Szeged), Poland (Hanna Liberska, Poznan), Russia (Nina Gootkina, Moscow), Switzerland

(August Flammer, Berne) and the United States (Connie Flanagan, then in Michigan). Some colleagues in other countries were approached, resulting in a few additional country members, that is, Norway (Franchise D. Alsaker, Bergen) and Romania (Aurora Liiceanu, Bucuresti). In some countries, important collaborators were associated, for instance, Erzsébet Czachesz (Hungary) and Alexander Grob and Nancy Bodmer (both Switzerland). The coordination of the entire study was done in Switzerland (Alsaker, Grob, and Flammer).

Those who have experienced cross-cultural research probably would not expect this plan to be pursued basically without funding, to a worthwhile end. Think of the decision of what measures to include, the definitive setup of some new measures, the translations and back translations, the subject sampling, the time coordination of the data collection, the data coding, the consistent pulling together of all the data sets, not to mention the text writing and laborious editing. None of the European participants were native English speakers. But the plan was carried out to a happy and very worthwhile end; this book is the final outcome. Our success was due to many fortunate circumstances, foremost was the enthusiasm and friendship among the participants. Of decisive importance were Alexander Grob's huge effort and competence in data management and first data analysis, and the tenacious and overly time-consuming work of organizing and editing this volume, which was done by Françoise D. Alsaker.

Nevertheless, collaboration and friendship need care and face-to-face contact. We were fortunate to obtain funding from the Swiss National Science Foundation (Project No. 11-33 126.91) for a week-long meeting in Switzerland. This was done in order to bring together and purify our data sets and discuss analytical procedures in 1992. We then received funding from the Johann Jacobs Foundation for more advanced data analyses, the coordination of the project in 1993, and another week-long meeting in order to exchange the initial results from our data analyses; this time we met in Szeged, Hungary, in 1993.

This volume contains the result of our study, offered to all those who have an interest in adolescence and/or an interest in the diversity of Europe, but also to those who are ready to excuse the fact that not all countries are included and the fact that the samples represent the countries only in some selected respects. However, in reading the contributions the reader will learn about hundreds of features of adolescence that are more or less characteristic of the cultures, ages, and genders.

Europe is very diverse; in fact, on average, it is much more diverse in itself than it is different from the United States. These diversities do not make life easy all the time, but most of the time they make it more interesting. We hope that Europe becomes more united without losing the richness of diversity.

—August Flammer

The Adolescent Experience

European and American Adolescents in the 1990s

1

Cross-National Research in Adolescent Psychology: The Euronet Project

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In the last decade, the role of cultural factors in human development has been increasingly recognized, and the number of studies referring to the possible role of culture has grown rapidly. Frequently, however, possible cultural influences are merely used as alternative explanations for results that depart from mainstream findings (i.e., mostly North American findings). In such cases, the authors rarely offer clear definitions of how they conceptualize cultural effects. Culture becomes merely part of the error variance.

In fact, differences between results of studies conducted in different cultures or countries cannot necessarily be taken as evidence for cultural differences. Cross-cultural research is confronted with a wide range of methodological problems (see, e.g., Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 1992, for a detailed discussion) that may produce differences among samples. In other words, differences or similarities in mean scores may be due to variance in variables other than the cultural context. This particular issue is discussed in more detail chapter 2.

The term *culture* is generally used in a very liberal way. Whereas some authors say that it should be reserved to characterize large units that differ in many ways (e.g., in religion, beliefs, political systems, and traditions), such as the Western versus the Asian culture, others use the term *culture* to describe differences between small units, such as families. In everyday language, we talk about cultural gaps to describe problematic differences between people from different countries, even if the countries belong to the same broad cultural tradition. In doing so, we assume that people raised in a specific context will be bearers of the characteristics of this context and will behave in accordance with the norms, attitudes, and traditions that we call *sociocultural background*. Yet, can we really speak about a German versus

a French culture? Are they not both parts of the European culture? How can we define the European culture? Is it so different from the North American culture? Do not both represent the Western culture? So how can we find the boundaries of different cultures?

A German study on attachment (e.g., Grossmann, Grossmann, Spangler, Suess, & Unzner, 1985) is used as an example of the complexity of this issue. It shows clear differences in outcomes between a German sample and a North American sample, with more German infants showing avoidant patterns of reactions than did American infants. The authors explained this difference mainly in terms of the German mothers' higher demands for self-reliance, which was reflected in the way they cared for their children and consequently, in more detached behavior patterns in the children. In what sense are these differences in parental style attributable to cultural differences? One could argue that they are rooted in broader German and North American traditions (LeVine & Norman, 1995), but what if they are not rooted in such long traditions? Could we still speak of two cultural contexts?

Consider another example. Studies on puberty have shown differences, as well as similarities, in the impact of maturational timing in adolescents in different countries (Alsaker, 1995). For example, whereas some North American studies show that as age increases, there is greater dissatisfaction with the adolescents' own body in early maturing girls (e.g., Petersen & Crockett, 1985; Simmons & Blyth, 1987); in Norway, this relation was strongest in younger girls (Alsaker, 1992). In addition, whereas self-esteem seems to be unrelated to pubertal timing in most North American studies, girls who perceived themselves as early maturers had higher self-esteem scores in a German sample (Silbereisen, Petersen, Albrecht, & Kracke, 1989). These differences, too, are explained by broad cultural differences in attitudes toward one's body. Are such attitudinal differences actually substantial enough to be used as cultural indicators? Such questions show that there is a need to clarify what is meant by *culture* before it is used as an explanation. The aim of the following section is to bring some clarity to the definition of *culture* that we use in this volume.

There is another problem related to the use of culture as an explanatory variable, namely, it is difficult not only to identify cultures, but also to know enough about them in order to take advantage of their explanatory power. This volume not only uses cultural knowledge to explain differences among countries, but also contributes new knowledge about cultures. Metatheoretically, this corresponds to the hermeneutic circle in the understanding of historical texts in their historical context. We may say that our point of departure was our knowledge about adolescent development and our search for more differentiation and sophistication of this knowledge. Different cultural backgrounds were seen as opportunities to accomplish this task. In doing so, however, one not only obtains new knowledge about

adolescence, but also obtains knowledge about the cultural settings from which the adolescents come. For example, should we find that adolescents more often report to work for money in one country than in others, it might tell us something about the economic conditions or about the general lifestyle of this country. This could push us to look for differences in mean incomes per family, in the way the school day is organized (allowing many or fewer opportunities to work), or in general values. On the other hand, what we already know about one country can help us explain the differences we find in the adolescents' behavioral habits in other countries.

In short, any differences we find expand our knowledge about the cultures and about adolescents. Future research may then start at a higher level of understanding of culture and adolescence, and the circle will develop into a spiral of knowledge acquisition.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY CULTURE?

Berry et al. (1992) offered a long list of currently used definitions of *culture* and *cross-cultural psychology*. They also offered a short working definition of culture that seems to summarize essential elements; they define *culture* as “the shared way of life of a group of people” (p. 1). According to this definition, the cross-national differences in our earlier examples could definitely be considered as possible effects of cultural differences. However, the same authors also pointed to the fact that *cross-national studies*, defined as studies including samples from countries that are culturally closely related, are usually excluded from the field of cross-cultural psychology “by common consent” (p. 2). In this context, comparative studies between France and Spain are not characterized as cross-cultural studies; France and Spain both derive from the Latin tradition within Europe and, in addition, are geographical neighbors. In our view, the exclusion of such cross-national studies from the cross-cultural field stands in sharp contrast with the working definition proposed by Berry et al. (1992). Countries like Spain and France, although they share something in common, have different languages, histories, political institutions, and climates—they have clear differences in “the shared way of life” of their citizens.

The term *culture* is an anthropological one. Whereas sociologists or social psychologists talk about the members of a group, anthropologists refer more to the culture, in terms of the learned and shared behavior patterns, borne by the members of that group (Seltzer & Seltzer, 1988). Such a use of the term *culture* is very much in line with an early definition given by Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952), proposing that *culture* consists of patterns, explicit or implicit, of “behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of... traditional ideas and especially their attached values” (p. 181). This implies that people coming

from two countries, showing differences in language, political system, historical backgrounds, and so on, are considered as coming from two different cultures. In fact, language is the feature that most anthropologists consider the principal component of culture (Berry et al., 1992).

Naroll (1970) proposed the term *culture bearing unit* (or *cultunit*) to designate groups of people that can be considered to represent, or to be under the influence of, a certain set of cultural variables. He also pointed to difficulties in distinguishing some cultunits from one another when they share several cultural features. We argue that this kind of overlap is a true mirror of our cultural reality in the same way that different languages have common roots, syntactic rules, or expressions, yet still remain different entities. Yet, cultunits also subdivide into cultsubunits, just as languages produce many dialects or sociolects.

Following this argument, one could conceive of culture in a hierarchical manner, starting at the top with very broad categories, such as the Western versus Asian civilization, dividing into large continental units, such as America and Europe, dividing again into smaller national units, which in turn subdivide into religious or linguistic groups. At the bottom of the hierarchy, we think of small social units such as certain groups of people defending unique lifestyles or ideologies.

Such a hierarchical view, however, is problematic in the sense that it gives the impression of definite units adding together to form broader units¹. As with dialects, languages, and linguistic groups, the overlap between the units is large but not always systematic, or even logical. Historical events, geographical conditions, trade routes, and so on, play some role in such overlap, but they also interact and produce different effects in different places. Therefore, one could possibly better conceive of cultunits in terms of overlapping circles (or ellipses), sending and receiving impulses to other cultunits that are more or less permeable to this kind of impulse. An alternative solution is to allow for different hierarchies, for example, one according to linguistic relations, one according to historical background, and one according to economic or political systems.

As pointed out by Berry et al. (1992), in many studies, the term *culture*, on a conceptual level, coincides with *country* on the empirical level. In this study, we mostly chose to speak about cross-national differences. We did so in order to indicate that our samples all pertain to one cultural tradition on the macrolevel (i.e., the Western culture). However, in line with the previous discussion, we consider the populations from which our samples were drawn as different culture bearing units. Hence, when we speak of cultural influences or differences, we refer to these specific cultunits. More specifically, we mean that our cultunits differ at least along the following dimensions: language, historical

¹The discussion on the hierarchical structure of the self (Harter, 1983; Shavelson & Marsh, 1986) is actually a good parallel to this discussion.

and geographical context, political system, welfare system, school system, housing, finances, family setting, and nutritional habits.

Kohn (1987) proposed four types of cross-national studies. The first category is a type of study in which the nation is the object of study, that is, the researcher is primarily interested in understanding the uniqueness of the countries. In the hermeneutic circle proposed earlier, it would correspond to obtaining knowledge about cultures. The second category includes studies in which the nations are conceived as different contexts; the aim of the comparative research is primarily to test the generality of findings and interpretations in different contexts. This corresponds with our obtaining more knowledge about adolescence in different contexts. In the third category, the nation is the unit of analysis, statistically speaking. Here, researchers seek to establish relations among characteristics of nations. An issue on this level is to examine the relation between national income and health (on an aggregated level). In the fourth category, we find studies examining how nations are systematically interrelated and form larger entities (corresponding to a hierarchical nested model of culture). These two latter issues are not directly addressed in this volume.²

WHY DO WE NEED CROSS-NATIONAL EUROPEAN STUDIES OF ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT?

In line with the arguments presented earlier, we can conceive of Europe as offering a large number of cultunits. This rich cultural resource has not been utilized so far to any substantial extent in psychology. Especially when it comes to adolescent psychology, the mainstream research was conducted on the North American population. Although there has been a rapid development of adolescent research in Europe, very often there are not enough studies on the same topic within Europe to allow European cross-national comparisons; hence, results are primarily compared with North American studies. Moreover, the opening of the borders to the Eastern part of Europe has brought a new opportunity to examine the heterogeneity in European cultural backgrounds and the effects of different political systems on personality and social development.

The dominance of North American research on adolescence masked some true differences in patterns of social relations or social behavior in different Western countries. A typical example lies in the case of dating. It is extremely difficult for Europeans to understand what dating in the United States really means (e.g., the related formalities or rituals of dating). Adams, Gullotta, and Markstrom-Adams (1994) wrote: "When a boy and a girl plan to meet alone or in a group at some place at some time, a date

²Nevertheless, the cluster analysis presented in chapter 4 could be considered as falling into this category.

has been arranged” (p. 324). When does a lunch with somebody become a date? What do adolescents do when they date? Do they hold hands? Do they kiss? Is dating the same as going steady? Does dating imply that one is in love with another? How does sexuality fit in? In Europe, there is a girlfriend-boyfriend culture and girls and boys go out together without being one another’s girlfriend or boyfriend. They are simply good friends. Very often they go out in mixed groups without any specific pairwise pattern. Nevertheless, European researchers describing cross-gender relationships feel compelled to use the term *dating* when they publish in English, even in the absence of a comparable dating culture in Europe.

The Presumed Role of Culture

Theoretical models, such as Bronfenbrenner’s ecological perspective (e.g., 1979), clearly include culture as one of the factors influencing an individual’s development. This influence is typically mediated through specific systems such as the legal, political, value, norm, and religious ones that regulate the daily lives of people living in the same culture. All these systems together form what we call the *cultural background* and are highly intertwined. Furthermore, the influence of the cultural background is always mediated through lower level interactions between people. Therefore, we conceive of the direct social context as a culture bearing factor.

When it comes to variables that may be receptive to cultural factors, the list seems to grow parallel to the field of research. For example, recent research shows that health and illness are not only the consequences of biological phenomena, but are also culturally mediated (Kessel, 1992). For example, starting with individuals’ relationships to their own body, we find large variations across cultural groups as to the number of anatomical terms in use and the importance attached to them; also, it seems that the way people relate to or conceive of their bodies is seen as a cultural trait (Fabrega, 1972). This variance is furthermore reflected in definitions of illness that vary to a great extent from one culture to another. In fact, the same clinical manifestations may be ignored in one context, treated as tiredness, as part of a developmental process, or as illness in others.

We want to illustrate this point with a short depiction of the French liver crisis—*la crise de foie*. As indicated by the name, we are talking about a state implying a belief that one’s liver suffered some attack. It usually includes pain concentrated to the upper right side of the abdomen and is accompanied by nausea (and vomiting) and a general unpleasant feeling in the body. This syndrome is usually considered the direct result of stressful events or the result of eating certain types of food; for example, chocolate, among other things, is considered by most French people to be responsible for liver crises. Who would dare say such a thing to Swiss people? The problem with this liver syndrome is that it has no clear somatic basis and

it seems to exist only in France. So, while French people take great care of their often-stressed liver, other Europeans do not even know where their liver is. Alsaker vividly remembers the liver crises of her childhood and adolescent period in France, symptoms that totally disappeared after some years in Germany and Norway.

We chose these medical examples to demonstrate that even phenomena linked to biology may be highly influenced by the beliefs people share in a cultunit. Let us now go back to psychological variables, such as personality development, and consider the case of the self-concept. Within the same cultunit, *self-concept* is considered a highly individual trait that is defined as an organization of mostly evaluative representations and beliefs about oneself as a person in terms of characteristics, behaviors, feelings, and thoughts (Alsaker & Olweus, 1992). However, as Markus and Kitayama (1991) pointed out, the construals of the self are tied to normative tasks that various cultures hold for what people should do. These authors drew our attention toward a major cultural differentiation on the basis of the construction of the self—an independent view of the self versus an interdependent view. The independent view of the self corresponds to the typical North American and European view of the individual, whereas the interdependent view is best exemplified in Asian cultures³. Furthermore, we find different guidelines to the construction of the self within the same cultural orientation. For example, whereas Americans are typically encouraged to take the initiative and are brought up to believe that they are special and in control of most things, Norwegian children have to learn very early that it is better not to “stick one’s head out,” because it could get “cut off,”⁴ and that nobody should believe that she or he is special. This kind of attitude is so deeply rooted in this culture that it has been given a name: *Jante-law* (Storm, 1989).

Such differences in basic attitudes to the self in different cultures might be expected to be reflected in the kinds of self-concepts we find in these various cultures. However, given that the self-concept is a multidimensional concept under the influence of many factors, some individual differences within cultures are larger than differences across cultures.

We should also keep in mind that culture can only be one of many factors impinging on psychological (or somatic) functioning in general and that cultural factors may interact with one another and with individual factors. Therefore, cultural differences are not necessarily reflected in obvious differences across cultures (where we would expect them to show up). Moreover, given that the influence of cultural factors is primarily mediated by other factors, we may think of more indirect effects. For example, a

³However, as noted by the authors, the interdependent view of the self may also be characteristic of the African, the Latin American, and many southern European cultures.

⁴This in fact corresponds well to a Japanese proverb, “The nail that stands out gets pounded down” (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 224).