

# Lessons from Cross-Cultural Perspective on Human Development and Education in India

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**Abstract** *The biological and cultural changes accompanying the adolescent years have separated these years as a distinct stage with a set of defined experiences, which one undergoes while growing up. Erikson's (1982) stage theory on lifespan development has led to a theoretical discourse that studies adolescence as a set of tasks to be accomplished within a specific period of time for 'healthy' development. The similarity in conditions of growing up in modern societies shows replication of the above premise, wherein, socio economic conditions and institutional structures lead to individuals following a predetermined trajectory. Adding to this, the pre-defined attitudes of psychological research towards what is desirable and what ideals of human development are, have come to determine which parental and educational practices are right and worth pursuing.*

*The cross-cultural research on human development presents a diversity perspective on how adolescence is experienced in varying cultural environments. They can differ significantly from the western models of development and, thus, necessitate re-defining of notions of optimal human development for research in policy formulation in education.*

**Keywords:** *Development, adolescence, cross-cultural psychology, diversity*

## Introduction

The Eurocentric view of adolescence dominates research and practice in human development (Saraswathi, 2003). Cross-cultural studies challenge the premises of such theories, which stand in contrast to the experience of adolescence in cultures significantly different from those of the Western countries. In the following paper, I present both the viewpoints and contrasting characteristics of experience of adolescence in India with that of the West. Such comparisons raise questions about the universal application of principles of human development and the definitions of optimal development. Lastly, I conclude by drawing some relevant lessons, pointed out by cross-cultural research, for education and policy implementation in India.

## Western theories on adolescent development

G. Stanley Hall's conception of adolescence was

influenced strongly by Darwin's idea of *ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny* (Santrock, 2007). This led to the study of the biological growth and other physiological changes experienced during teenage years as having some characteristic influences on the behaviour and emotions of an individual, leading to adolescent years being called as the years of 'storm and stress'.

Further work in the field incorporated the psychosocial aspects of human life with biological growth, giving way to one of the most important theories of human development - the theory of psycho-social development by Erik Erickson (Santrock, 2007). He divided the human life into eight stages, each having an overarching purpose of its own (Erickson, 1982). During the adolescent years, the main purpose was to search for a coherent sense of self; characterised by the crisis of identity achievement versus role confusion. According to Erickson (1982), identity crisis is a



time of upheaval where old values or choices are being re-examined and new alternatives are explored, i.e., an active involvement in choosing among alternative options and beliefs (Adams et. al, 1992). Both exploration and commitment are the two processes that contribute to differences in outcome during an Identity crisis. Exploration is the extent to which, or whether, one explores identity alternatives and commitment is the extent of, or whether, one makes a commitment to chosen alternatives. James Marcia's work has further elaborated upon this process by giving four statuses in identity formation wherein the degree of exploration decides an individual's optimal identity achievement. These ideas primarily constitute the Western model of human development which dominates research in the field of adolescence and identity development.

However, this conceptualization of identity achievement is primarily based on masculine ideals of an individualistic society that undermine aspects such as relatedness and interdependence, which are important in identity formation of individuals who construe their own self within a web of relations (Adams et. al, 1992). Cross-cultural studies point out that individualistic conceptualizations of personality research create artificial divides and leads to misrepresentation of groups from other cultures, ethnicity, gender and religions (Saraswathi, 2003). Socialization norms and expectations of collectivist cultures are significantly different from that of West and researches based on Western models provide contrasting views on 'healthy development' that do not do justice to participants from divergent cultural norms.

#### Cross- cultural conceptualisation of adolescence

Anthropological studies were the first to challenge such unilateral generalisations about human development. Margaret Mead in her classic work 'Coming of age in Samoa', elaborated upon the role of culture in building the experience of adolescence. Her study pointed out the diversity in human development. Through the contrast her study drew with the western pattern of socialization, she gave important insights about the modern society and the expectations it puts on the

adolescents. These insights have led to development of cross cultural studies, which compare adolescence across cultures, time and socio-economic conditions to demonstrate the impact such factors have on the development of an individual.

Schlegel (2003) concludes that that cross-cultural studies done across a number of countries and regions show that all cultures broadly recognize a period between childhood and adulthood and no society pushes their children directly into adulthood. Adolescence is a period when the young prepare for their future lives as adults. The content of this period, however, varies greatly from one culture to another.

In the Indian context, the traditional *Hindu* conceptualization of adolescence as a life stage finds mention in words like *kumara* and *brahmchari* which refer to the stage of celibacy and apprenticeship or acquisition of knowledge (Brown, Larson and Saraswathi, 2002). These characterise the society's view of and expectation of those in the adolescent years. A belief in the right code of conduct at each stage of development is deeply rooted in the Indian psyche and continues to influence the cultural practices of Indians strongly. According to Kakar (1979, p.7), the primary task in the *bhramcharya* stage of the *Hindu ashrama* theory is primarily directed towards knowing of one's *dharma*, which would consist of acquiring skills in one's caste and in winning an identity based on a caste identity and identification with and emulation of the guru (Kakar, 1979, p.8). The strengths issuing from this stage would then correspond to competence and commitment that are similar to Erickson's stages of industry versus inferiority and identity versus role confusion respectively. The difference lies in the psychosocial development being based on one life cycle and the Hindu view on psycho social fate based on accumulation of virtues through many life cycles. Thus, although identity formation is seen as an important aspect of development during adolescent years in both traditions, the goals and expectations make it a very different experience.

The following discussion elaborates upon some of the characteristics that represent the Indian



experience of adolescence in contrast with the Western model; along with the diversities of this experience arising out of differences across social class and gender in the Indian society.

### Adolescence in India

The society in India is extremely diverse. Socio economic disparities are huge and so are the gender differences. The experiences vary across many factors such as region, class, caste, gender, and religion. Psychologists and developmental theorists have described that the experience of adolescence in India is extremely difficult to generalize (Saraswathi, 2000; Brown et. al., 2002; Saraswathi, 2003). In addition, the country at the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century finds itself in a peculiar position. Standing at the crossroads of technological advancement and a global market economy, it is an opportune time to examine how tradition and modernity in socio-political and cultural factors have shaped and continue to influence adolescence in India (Brown et. al., 2002). The following description of adolescence in India by T.S.Saraswathi (Brown et. al., 2002) explains the diversity arising from the transition phase of Indian society - traditional values at one end and technological advancement and globalization at the other.

The traditional conceptualization of adolescence as a life stage of *brahmacharya* or the stage of celibacy, apprenticeship, or acquisition of knowledge characterise the society's expectations from adolescents. Following traditional norms, and remaining close to religious and cultural ties are ideals that continue to influence the parenting practices in the modern times as evidenced by performance of *samskara* ceremonies, marriage rituals, and similar traditional Indian rites of initiation.

Child rearing practices differ significantly in India, where the collectivist nature of family and society emphasize cultivation of interdependence and subjugation to authority figures of the family rather than preparing the child for independent living and autonomy. The manner in which it is manifested is different for both males and females due to the stark differences in role expectations.

For boys, academic achievement and occupational success is closely monitored, especially in middle class homes. Patriarchal and collectivist roles are ritualised and celebrated at each stage of development in order to assure their continuance.

Although peer cultures exist, but, there is emphasis on duties and obligations towards family and family members as well and spending time with peers is discouraged by parents. Overt expression of peer culture is more than its actual influence even in lives of modern and well off adolescents. The time spent with peers is limited, parents monitor peer choice, and peer influence is moderate when it comes to long term decisions such as mate selection and career choice. The caste and religious identity of adolescents also reflect this trend. Adolescent friendship patterns and daily practices show a more secular trend which includes having friends of other castes, religion; involvement with other religious institutes like minority schools, visiting *gurudwaras* by Hindus etc. However, when it comes to marriages, the religious and caste identities play an important role where many adolescents choose to follow traditional expectations rather than exercise modern choices.

The peer culture, which sharply contrasts itself from the parental expectations, is absent for many adolescents in India. Peer culture varies according to socio-economic class differences and gender in India. For adolescent girls, the amount of time spent with friends is significantly low. It is negligible for girls belonging to lower socio-economic classes especially in face of early marriages and early sharing of household responsibilities, which make their life experience continuous and transition from childhood to adulthood almost direct, without any space for adolescence.

Thus, the cultural context of the individual shapes his/her experiences in such a profound manner that any generalizations across cultures becomes questionable. Different communities are structured and function on different premises and, thus, have significantly different social roles and expectations. This influences what individuals



aspire to become and what they choose as part of their identity.

### **Lessons from cross cultural perspective on human development**

The Indian adolescence poses many questions to various universals on adolescents. Firstly, can the experience of adolescence be generalised! The experiences of females belonging to lower socio economic class in India are an example of how the Western conceptualisation of adolescence is an artefact of a post-industrial society and economic structure rather than a human universal experience. In view of the socio-economic constraints, the emphasis on interdependence and following prescribed social roles leaves little scope for emergence of an adolescent culture for such individuals. There can be seen a huge diversity in the experience of adolescence in India ranging from complete absence of adolescence in girls married before puberty, to prolonged adolescence that extends beyond teenagers for education with parental support (Saraswathi, 2000).

Secondly, the Indian adolescent questions the notions on what 'healthy' development signifies. The western models based on western ideals of autonomy are specific to a culture which values independence over interdependence and self-worth over community living. The societal values and cultural ideals decide the pattern and constituents of a developing identity which vary across cultures. In the Indian context, development of self-assertion is construed as selfishness and independence as disobedience in families living with interdependent structures (Saraswathi, 2000, p.217). Thus, while defining what 'healthy' development is, one should be careful to not neglect the community beliefs and socio-economic realities which lead to emergence of such values in a particular community.

With the advance of globalisation and modern economic lifestyles as well as increasing influence of technology through use of internet and social media, there is a rapid expansion of commonalities of experiences around the globe. However, this Eurocentric image of human life is challenged by research in cultures, like India, which

point towards the differences in basic conceptualisation's about life expectations and developmental goals in such cultures. Research on adolescence points out that the forms that adolescence takes within a given culture, let alone across cultures, are remarkably diverse and distinctive (Schlegel, 2003). The commonalities of experience and challenges brought by the 21<sup>st</sup> century certainly share some repeated themes in human development, however, adaptations towards them and the manifestations of such challenges in individual lives are shaped by the historical cultural contexts of the society they occur in.

Hence, the experience of adolescence markedly varies not only across nations, but, also among different economic or social groups within a nation. This makes the task of policy makers, educational practitioners, and health and social service personnel- who work with youth- especially difficult. To meet the needs of youth one must forge a policy that aims at a certain level of convergence in opportunities while maintaining their historical and cultural distinctiveness.

### **Implications for education**

For cross-cultural theorists, different kinds of family interaction patterns and child rearing orientations lead to different kinds of selves and competence; and socio-cultural contexts necessitate such particular patterns. Negligence of such differences and the relevance of their existence create a conflict between modern education and traditional culture. Nsamenang (2003, p.223-224) has observed, with regards to modern education in Africa, that "imported systems of education did not incorporate in their curricula the African culture, economic realities, social thought and modes of construing knowledge. Thus, while most indigenous knowledge relied on participatory skill learning and building social competence through interdependence, schools that relied on verbal theoretical instruction and building cognitive competence to the neglect of social competence created home-school conflict. The disjoint education system created the impression that home



was a “culturally deficient” (Nsamenang 2003, p.224) place and that the indigenous culture is an obstacle to development of a 'healthy' modern personality.

Thus, research in cross-cultural psychology is needed to improve such disjoint and conflicting policies and social initiatives in developing countries. Research from cross-cultural psychology presents a world view which is different from Eurocentric ideals on which contemporary developmental psychology is based (Nsamenang, 2003). The diversity is important as it points towards what are, or are not, the universals in human development. For education and for optimal development of youth, it is important that policies and programmes be well-informed and sensitive to the psychological, social, and cultural needs of individuals.

All societies need to socialise their children to be competent in changing lifestyles. With increasing patterns of globalisation, urbanization, technologization there is greater demand for universally valid knowledge, skills and competencies from educational services. However, discarding traditional knowledge and social interaction patterns, or adopting Western individualistic family patterns is counter-productive for its development. There is a need for assimilation of psycho-social needs of adolescents with learning new skills for optimal development. There is a need for assimilation of psycho-social needs of adolescents with learning new skills for optimal development.

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