

## Contextualising adolescent development

### Book Review

Adams, G R, Montemayor, R, & Gullotta, T P (eds) (1996) **Psychosocial development during adolescence: Progress in developmental contextualism**. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. ISBN 0-7619-0533-2 pbk. 346 pages.

*Arvin Bhana*  
*Department of Psychology*  
*University of Durban-Westville*  
*Durban*

**Psychosocial development during adolescence** is part of the annual book series published by Sage and deals exclusively with advances in adolescent development. The authors have diverse academic backgrounds and research experience, and includes, developmental psychologists, sociologists, psychiatrists, and graduate students. The multidisciplinary focus of this book is a singularly positive feature as many of the authors attempt to provide multiple conceptual outlooks.

The book organises itself around the seminal writing of John Hill who wrote a document entitled: **Some perspectives on adolescence in American society** (1973). This document and its later extension focused on (a) psychosocial variables as central to the study of normal development in adolescence; (b) the role of bio-psychosocial factors (e.g., puberty, cognition, self-definition) in understanding adolescent behavior and development; and (c) the contextual influences of gender, race-ethnicity and social class.

Essentially, Hill used the work of earlier writers such as Freud, Anna Freud, Peter Blos, Sullivan, McClelland, and Erikson among others to identify six central psychosocial variables that are important to the study of adolescence. These included *detachment* which referred to object relations that emphasised emotional independence from parents. Hill believed that detachment was often confused with *autonomy* and defined the latter as follows: "independence in decision-making and to feelings of confidence in personal goals and standards of behavior" (p37).

It is noteworthy that Hill examined each of these constructs from multiple perspectives and did not believe that any one had greater value over the other. For example, *sexuality* as a psychosocial construct of importance to adolescence may be considered from multiple perspectives - traditional psychoanalytic, which views the development of sexuality as a gradual and continuous process, while others viewed sexuality as a discontinuous developmental process. For Hill, understanding the relationship between gender identity and sex behaviour held greater interest. *Intimacy* is also closely

associated with sexuality. He was concerned to draw attention to examining the issue of intimacy in the context of differing socialisation experiences for boys and girls.

The psychosocial construct of achievement motivation and behaviour was perhaps the most studied. A psychosocial construct of great concern is that of identity and its resolution as a major task of adolescence. Hill believed the resolution of identity was integral to concepts of self, body image changes, sexuality, and intimacy. Hill, however, argues that these constructs must be understood in relation to situational, contextual, and interactional factors in trying to understand psychosocial development during adolescence.

Hill argued strongly for understanding adolescent development by examining behavioural, motivational, and cognitive components, dispositions and situational factors, and interrelationships, and associations and parallels between the six psychosocial constructs.

Methodologically, Hill argued for careful definition of variables, good measures that are validated for these definitions, the use of both questionnaire and observational methodologies, and the use of multi-trait, multi-method strategies.

This brief outline of Hill's work guides the content of the rest of the book as each author attempts to conceptualise and investigate adolescent psychosocial development using Hill's work. Each of the chapters that follow focuses on one of the psychosocial variables referred to by Hill. For example, Susan Silverberg and Dawn Gondoli examine autonomy in adolescence from a contextual perspective, while Edward Herold and Sheila Marshall write on adolescent sexual development. Similarly, issues of intimacy, identity, and achievement are the subject of individual chapters as is the treatment of adolescent socialisation from a cognitive perspective. Included in this line-up is a chapter that deals with the interplay between biological and psychosocial processes in adolescence. A very positive feature of this work is that each author provides a historical context for their ideas thereby providing the reader with an understanding of conceptual issues that indicate the origins of the ideas under study. The research focuses on psychosocial development since the 1970s.

Each chapter is a carefully documented account of the construct under consideration with empirical evidence used to buttress conceptually driven arguments. The complexity of the issues at hand is reflected in the careful sifting through of arguments and evidence. In short, this is a very scholarly book that deserves the full attention of researchers and academics concerned with adolescent development.

To provide the reader with greater insight into the content and organisation of this book, I have focused deliberately on elements of a chapter that deals with identity. The chapter entitled *Identity: A multidimensional analysis* is written by James E Côté. In approaching this topic from a psychological and sociological perspective, the writer argues that attempts to come to grips with the concept of identity, very often takes on a multidimensional form which has social, personal and psychological characteristics. Côté believes that the major obstacle confronting identity research is how to theorize social context and the issues related to developmental contextualism. It is psychology that has focused on development rather than context while the reverse can be said of sociology.

Beginning with Erik Erikson, he notes that psychology in general has focused on the subjective-experiential dimension of identity. Psychologists regard adolescence as a stage while sociologists generally apply the identity concept across the life span. The most recent sociological view is that identity formation is a "life-long reflexive project of self" (pp132-33), required by the degree of continual social change. Identity therefore cannot occur without society as it steers this process and individuals attempt to create a path for themselves. This conceptualisation argues that it is social organisation that guides self-organisation and it is both together that explain social action. Nevertheless, Erikson recognised not only psychological dimensions to identity but also personal and social dimensions. It is when these three dimensions dovetail, i.e., "(a) when a relatively firm sense of ego identity is developed, (b) when character and behavior become stabilized, and (c) when community roles are acquired" (p136) that the resolution of identity is facilitated (Côté, 1996).

Côté then substantively deals with these two approaches to identity by referring to empirical work in the area. Interestingly, Côté also reflects on how Erikson's concern about the disruptive effects of social change on identity formation may have prefigured current sociological concerns regarding modernity and postmodernity.

Côté disputes the notion that identity has to be "achieved" in certain contexts as this is a particular Western construction. Thus, he argues that a choice-commitment matrix in identity formation within Western society is supported so long as the individual is able to maintain a certain amount of autonomy in making choices. Côté believes that a multidimensional understanding goes beyond this choice-commitment matrix, essentially arguing for greater choices than Erikson's dichotomous view of identity versus identity confusion. The arguments are too complex to reproduce here, but this argument does provide an alternative view of identity that suggests non-linear possibilities for identity status and formation.

The reader's attention is drawn to the complex relationship that exists between ethnicity, gender, culture and identity that is theoretically dense but also revealing in its exposition. Côté presents compelling arguments disavowing the assumption that adolescents face the same problems as everyone else in forming and sustaining an identity. Modern societies have contributed significantly to the marginalisation of youth and they in turn have sought out various subcultures on which to predicate their identities.

This book is written for the researcher who is deeply focused on understanding adolescent development and wishes to be at the cutting edge of developmental contextualism in adolescence. As such it helps provide important guideposts for researchers and scholars alike.