In Harm’s Way? The Turbulence of Adolescence

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“Who Thinks They Know More – But Actually Knows Less? Adolescent Confidence in their HIV/AIDS and General Knowledge”
Andrew M. Parker, Baruch Fischhoff, and Wändi Bruine de Bruin

Health-related decisions are among the most important ones we make in our lives. Adolescents’ growing emancipation gives them the power to make choices that can dramatically affect their current and future well-being. This paper investigates teens’ knowledge and confidence in that knowledge, regarding HIV/AIDS-related and general issues. We find that high-risk teens are both less knowledgeable and more confident than their lower-risk peers, resulting in dramatically higher overconfidence. This increased confidence appears related to social influences such as peer risky behavior and parental confidence, while knowledge is not. “At Risk or Out Front? Understanding the Women of the Future”
Linda M. Scott

This study takes the generational trajectory of American women as its starting point. Based on her recent history, Fresh Lipstick, Linda Scott speculates that female adolescent behaviors frightening observers today are consistent with a long-term trend in which each successive cohort of American girls sheds more restrictions of gender. In history, a few generations stand out as (1) having been particularly shocking to their parents and (2) having made major challenges to gender roles. Two are the flappers of the 1920s and the Baby Boomers. Having now completed 60+ video interviews with girls 8-23, Scott argues the emergent generation will be another “breakthrough” cohort. “The Cyborg Teen: Identity Play and Deception on the Internet”
Laurel Anderson and Julie L. Ozanne

This paper presents an interpretive exploration of teenagers’ relationship to their computers and explores the opportunities, as well as some of the problems, that arise when teenagers self-socialize on the computer. While the Internet offers a rich opportunity for identity exploration, it is not without dangers. This paper explores the traditionally private aspects of identity that are presented in these anonymous but public forums. It seeks to understand when the cyber identities help teens work out problems in real life and when the cyber identities become problematic.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/12446/volumes/v33/NA-33

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No longer children but not yet adults, teenagers have earned a reputation for inflicting pain on themselves and anyone within range. Adolescence is a period of experimentation and risk taking. Consumer research traditionally views adolescence as one stage in a series of progressive stages and has examined the socializing influences of family, peers, and media (Roedder John 1999). However, recent research in neuroscience raises questions about this framework. Massive changes are occurring in teen’s synaptic reorganization, with millions of neuro-connections being erased and created, at a rate only matched during infancy. This recent research documents that a growth spurt occurs in teens’ frontal lobes, the area of the brain that is responsible for planning, reasoning, and controlling inhibitions (Giedl, Blumenthal, Jeffreis et al. 1999; Strauch 2003). Rather than one stage in a series of progressive stages, adolescence is a period during which teens’ brains quite literally get redesigned. Moreover, teens are managing this inner turbulence during a time of unprecedented social change, such as the increasing ambiguity of gender roles, the dizzying speed of technological innovations, media pervasiveness and interactivity, the global AIDS epidemic, and the spread of new designer drugs, to name a few. Teenagers are coming of age during an increasingly dynamic socio-historical context.

The objective of this special session is to take a multi-paradigmatic, multi-method approach to adolescence and focus attention on both the problems and opportunities facing contemporary adolescents. We seek to move beyond stage theories of development and research that only emphasizes the vulnerabilities of adolescents. We hope to begin building a more comprehensive understanding of teenagers that considers how they make decisions, assess risk, explore conflicting roles, play with gender expectations, assert their identity, and develop new norms and forms of communication within a socio-cultural-historical context.

Parker, Fischhoff, and Bruine de Bruin employ a behavioral decision-making approach to understanding teens’ decision-making through the analysis of field data. They explore the problem of overconfidence in some of the most risky decisions made by teenagers. Scott approaches the challenges of adolescents using a socio-historical approach and bases her findings on in-depth analysis of video interviews. Her provocative thesis is that the seemingly shocking consumption behavior of contemporary young women is a continuation of decades of progressive social change. Anderson and Ozanne take a socio-cultural approach and utilize a range of data: metaphor, essays, collages, and web diaries. They examine the way that teens engage in identity play in cyberspace and explore the potential dangers and benefits of a plastic self during what was traditionally conceptualized as a period of identity solidification. These papers all focus on consumer research that is in the interest of consumers.

The likely audience for this session should include researchers interested in the substantive areas of adolescence and social issues. People who are interested in theories of risk, identity formation, and socialization will also find this session relevant. Marvin Goldberg has studied youths for decades and is one of the most well respected experts. He will be the discussant for this session. However, rather than playing the traditional discussant’s role, he will offer advice on the most fertile areas in which to do research for anyone considering work in this area.

**“Who Thinks They Know More—But Actually Knows Less? Adolescent Confidence in their HIV/AIDS and General Knowledge”**

Andrew M. Parker, Baruch Fischhoff, and Wandi Bruine de Bruin

Decisions regarding health-related behaviors are among the most important ones we make in our lives. Decisions about health checkups, sexual behavior, exercise, and diet affect our future health and well-being. In order to act effectively on their beliefs, individuals need to know how far to trust them. Undue confidence (i.e., thinking they know more than they do) can lead to capricious actions, failure to seek missing information, and inadequate sensitivity to signs that choices were wrong. Inadequate confidence (i.e., thinking that they know less than they do) can lead to unwarranted paralysis, needless worry, procrastination, and reliance on others. One group whose health-related decisions raise particular concern is adolescents, whose growing emancipation gives them the power to make choices that can dramatically affect their current and future well-being. The appropriateness of their confidence in their health-related beliefs is the subject of this paper. In it, we ask how much do teens know, and how aware are they of the extent of their knowledge? We contrast teens with high and low levels of self-reported risk behaviors, as well as parents of the low-risk teens.

One hundred and eleven teens (median age 16, 59% female) were recruited from community organizations in a large urban area, identified as having relatively high- or low-risk participants. Data were also collected from one parent for each of 38 of the low-risk teens (median age 42, 76% female). Teen respondents from the two populations differed markedly in their prevalence of self-reported risky behavior, for themselves and their peers, regarding sex, alcohol, smoking, and drugs. Respondents answered 100 true/false questions regarding HIV/AIDS and 30 questions regarding general knowledge. For each item, respondents then judged the probability that they had selected the correct answer (on a 50%-100% scale), as a reflection of confidence in their answer. Design of the HIV/AIDS knowledge test drew on mental-models research, designed to select questions in an ecologically valid way, focusing on key concepts, and formulated in terms recognizable to lay people (Fischhoff et al. 1998; Morgan et al. 2001). Demographics and reading comprehension (as measured by the Nelson-Denny Verbal Comprehension Test) were also measured.

Teen respondents were assigned individual risk-index scores, determined by their reported behavior, as well as peer social norms, as evident in the self-reports of the participants recruited through the same community organization. Specifically, the risk level of a community was determined by the self-reports of all respondents at that location. A median split across locations was used to label locations as high or low risk. By a variety of measures, the high-risk teens’ performance was considerably poorer, even on a subset of HIV/AIDS items related to drug and sex risks, domains where they had much greater experience. In particular, the high-risk teens knew less, but were more confident than the low-risk teens. Additional analyses suggested that teens in both groups could reflect their
knowledge in their confidence judgments, giving higher probabilities with correct items. This meta-cognitive ability (to know what one knows) was equivalent to that of parents. However, the high-risk teens showed dramatically greater overconfidence (i.e., confidence judgments were high relative to percent correct).

Confidence showed signs of being socially influenced. Although parents-teen pairs’ actual levels of knowledge were unrelated, their confidence judgments were highly correlated. Furthermore, the risk index, which reflects the reported risk behavior of teens and their peers, predicted the appropriateness of teens’ confidence much more for the general-knowledge questions than for the general-knowledge questions. Regression analyses, predicting confidence and accuracy with risk status, literacy, and gender, showed that accuracy was most strongly predicted by literacy, whereas confidence was more strongly predicted by risk status, as was overconfidence (and calibration).

We found that teens from locations with higher amounts of sexual activity and drug use (tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, and cocaine) were much more overconfident than were teens from less risky environments—reporting higher confidence, even while exhibiting lower knowledge. To the extent that such overestimation of their knowledge affects information search, vigilance, and rash action, it could increase the chances of ill-considered behaviors. In addition, confidence is related to social influences, such as peer risky behavior and parental confidence, while accuracy (i.e., percent correct) is not. If confidence is socially constructed, as supported by the parent-teen correlations and differences across the social group-based risk index, then effective interventions may require group-based interventions, such as social skills training programs tailored to teens of different backgrounds (DiClemente 1990; Downs et al. 2004). Speculatively, one secret to the success of such programs is creating a shared sense of the limits to teens’ knowledge of risks, even where they have direct experience.

“At Risk or Out Front? Understanding the Women of the Future”
Linda M. Scott

The starting point for this presentation emerges from Scott’s recently-published history, Fresh Lipstick: Redressing Fashion and Feminism. This book documents a 150-year period in which dress, sex, recreation, and feminism have been contested among various subgroups of American women. One of the key points of struggle, consistently, is the generational conflict between the “mothers” and the “daughters” of an era about respectable dress and chaste behavior. Scott argues that this persistent conflict is not only a function of normal identity development, but is also directly attributable to a long-term trend in American history. With each successive generation, American women have shed more of the restrictions that attend gender. Since patriarchal order is built on identifiable “cornerstones,” such as sex, kinship, work, warfare, spirituality, and consumption, it’s predictable that this trajectory in gender relations would periodically result in “shocking” behavior, especially in terms of sexuality, dress, and recreational consumption.

Interestingly, there also appears to be a pattern in which those generations who most shock the “establishment” in their youth are also those who make the most significant and lasting gender breakthroughs. One example is the New Girls of the Jazz Age, whose penchant for “necking,” alcohol, cigarettes, jazz, and the movies shocked their parents easily as much as today’s girls drugs, rap, porn, Internet, and “friends with benefits” dismay current observers. In their teen years, the “flappers” were dismissed as shallow, sinful, and dissipated. Yet they became the young mothers of the Depression and the home front workers of the war years—the cohort Tom Brokaw called “the Greatest Generation.” Clearly, the vagaries of their youth were no index to what their ultimate historical contribution would be.

Similarly, the “let it all hang out/if it feels good do it” generation of the 1960s challenged gender restrictions, not only by ushering in the “sexual revolution” but also by their theatrical and often “gender-bending” modes of dress. In the arena of consumption and recreation, too, we see the hallmarks of rebellion: from marijuana brownies to rock concerts, the Baby Boomer girls were just as outrageous as the flappers before them and the generation that now follows. And, though their parents despaired of their demise through the years of their youth, these women ultimately contributed more to the equal rights of women than any previous generation, chalking up a staggering number of “firsts” and pushing back boundaries on a range of fronts from work to kinship to church.

Today’s young women are the daughters of that historic cohort. They are the first generation born after the “Second Wave” (the name usually given the women’s movement of the 1970s). They are the first children generally raised by women who worked (though the majority of American women, contrary to popular belief, have always worked, what is significant about the shifts of recent years is the huge increase in the percentage of married women and, especially, mothers who work). They are also the first generation of teen-agers to be reared in the relatively more relaxed environment created by the very “sexual revolution” their own mothers instigated.

When we look today at those “cornerstones” that mark the gender structure, we can see the cracks wrought by thirty years of rapid change—and the many ambiguities of gender that have resulted. Marriage, motherhood, and the family are radically different than they were a generation ago. Women are in combat and become ministers. Females head corporations and smoke cigars. The bugaboo of the last generation—premarital sex—remains only for the young (in the form of the “abstinence” campaign). Given all this, we might expect the morals, norms, and dreams of the next generation to differ enough from their parents to shock the most liberal among them. And, indeed, that is exactly what we’re seeing.

Scott’s current research project picks up where Fresh Lipstick left off—with the current generation. She has interviewed, so far, 60+ young women between 8 and 23 about marriage, motherhood, sex, and careers, as well as media influences, consumption habits (especially pornography), and spirituality. Her findings are beginning to emerge in a picture very different from the hand-wringing conformation typical of pundits and parents. Instead, she argues that the behavior observable in today’s young women is a continuation of two hundred years of history: they continue the efforts of their mothers and grandmothers, as well as generations before them, to break down the barriers of gender across a number of fronts—and they are shocking the socks off the older generation in the best tradition of American girlhood. Unlike so many who have berated the present generation of girls as slutty, shallow, and stupid, she finds them respectful, thoughtful, ambitious, and creative—an offer of hope for the future.

“The Cyborg Teen: Identity Play and Deception on the Internet”
Laurel Anderson and Julie L. Ozanne

Adolescence is widely recognized as an important period during which far ranging changes take place, such as the formation of identity and gender roles (Arnett 1995). Despite the significant changes that are occurring, adolescence is a time when the family’s influence on socialization diminishes and the role of media in-
creases (Larson and Richards 1994). Among teenagers, the force of media is strong and growing. A recent study by the Kaiser Foundation (2005) found that by multi-tasking with different media children and teens cram 8 hours of media viewing into 6 hours each day. Among teens, Internet use was 18 hours per week, more than TV viewing time (Born to be Wired 2003). The relatively recent influence of the Internet is poorly understood and potentially more influential. In the case of the Internet, this media socialization often goes on behind the backs and over the heads of many parents who often have less expertise than their offspring and find the new “net lingo” unintelligible (e.g., PIMP—peeing in my pants). Teenagers have greater access and control over this media and are using it as an important source of self-socialization. Whether this self-socialization is good or bad is largely an empirical issue.

In this study, 150 thirteen and fourteen year olds articulated their relationship to the computer by developing metaphors and creating collages. These data were interpretively analyzed for themes (Thompson 1997). The findings support that the teens used their computer to create and explore multiple identities. For most of the teens, these different cyber identities spanning school, friends, and family cohered and were connected to their real lives away from the computer. The computer was an external “brain” that facilitated schoolwork; it was a “fraternity house” where they could engage old and new friends and stay current on gossip and fads; and it was a “carnival” full of bright lights, music, and fun. The computer was largely a positive influence, except within the family, where “WW III” raged and battles erupted over use and access.

These teens were too young to drive, but their computers were like their driver’s license to go anywhere, with “no speed limits” posted, and no need to “borrow the keys!” For the most part, the teenagers perceived the computer to be a safe, non-evaluative setting in which no one “tells me its bad” and the computer “never complains.” While they often traveled to inspiring destinations (e.g., the speech of Martin Luther King Jr. and the London Museum), dangers and opportunities existed.

The computer provided a unique social opportunity for teens to explore publicly private aspects of identity. Some teens complained about privacy within the family and longed for a computer in their own room where they would have their “friend and keeper of secrets.” But for many of the teens the anonymity of the computer made it an ideal place to explore alternative identities and this exploration was liberating. As one youth said: “The Internet taught me that I can be anyone on the Internet not my old boring self.”

The teens were generally unreflective about the ramifications of exploring cyber identities far removed from their real lives. A few teens stressed the potential dangers in this identity play. The teens used metaphors and images of “make up” and “masks” to capture the computer’s potential complicity in more negative aspects of this identity play, such as cyber deception. In a few cases, teens lost their sense of time and space; they spent “hours staring at the computer as if it were a god.” Cyber reality was a different reality: they likened it to a reality that was apart from normal life. “You can get swept up in the computer, just as if you got lost.” The most ominous metaphors used by some of the teens involved the computer as an addictive drug. While on this drug, judgment may be poor and they travel to unsafe destination and engage in risky behavior.

The hazard of sexual predators on the Internet is well publicized. We ponder less about teens being the architect of new cyber identities and realities. What happens when teens explore an identity that cannot be integrated with their real identities? What occurs when a profound gap exists between their cyber and real identities (Turkle 1995)? These social fledglings are evolving new norms for conduct. How do they develop and negotiate these norms and are cyber norms transferred back to real life? What traditionally private aspects of identity do we see presented in these anonymous but public forums? Do the cyber identities help them work out problem in real life and when do the cyber identities become problematic?

To delve more deeply into these questions, we are currently analyzing data from a website of teenagers web blogs (cyber diaries) and will use these results to address these questions.

(References available upon request.)