Peter K. Smith: *Adolescence: A Very Short Introduction*

Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 2016, 144 pp, ISBN: 9780199665563

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Received: 17 October 2016 / Accepted: 19 October 2016 / Published online: 28 October 2016
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Adolescence: A Very Short Introduction defines adolescence as a life stage. In doing so, the author Peter K. Smith analyzes different perspectives on adolescence and the developmental changes that come with it. In each chapter, the book highlights research to allow readers to understand how and why adolescence as a life stage is significant. To provide evidence, Smith eventually focuses puberty and its effect on physical and cognitive health, relationships, and behaviors.

Chapter 1 introduces how different perspectives of adolescence as a life stage originated. Smith begins by comparing the biological and social factors that mark children as adolescents. “Biologically, entrance into adolescence can be marked by the onset of puberty... Socially, adolescence can be marked by an increasing independence from parents, an increasing importance of the peer group, and often aspects such as mood swings, conflicts with parents, and risky or reckless behaviours” (Smith 2016, p. 1). These two factors contribute to the several theories described in this chapter of when adolescence begins. Reflected in the book are the various highlighted features that differ for evolution theorists, anthropologist, sociologists, historians, and psychologists. To describe evolutionary theorists’ ideas, Smith uses Glenn Weisfeld and Melvin Konner’s evolutionary perspective that children reaching puberty enter adolescence. They base their views on life history theory and sexual selection theory. Arguing with this perspective are anthropologists and sociologists. Smith explains that they both “support a view that the experience of adolescence was entirely a matter of social

structure and cultural pressures” (Smith 2016, p. 7). This statement is supported by Smith as he provides an example of how pre-industrial societies had initiation ceremonies to welcome youth into adolescence, as it was a tradition and few biological factors played a role. The perspective of historians is explained using historian Hanawalt’s argument that the age for entering and exiting adolescence has changed and will continue to change over centuries with health care and education improvements. Lastly, Smith ends the chapter describing psychologists’ belief that “storm and stress” depicts adolescence. G. Stanley Hall illustrates “storm and stress” as conflict with parents, mood disruptions, and risky behavior; however, Smith adds the perspective of recent psychologists in the past two decades that cultural variations can have a big impact on the three aspects of “storm and stress”. Chapter 1 gives insight into the various perspectives that have been theorized about what factors actually mark the beginning of the adolescence life stage. Within each chapter, Smith takes an aspect of puberty and illustrates the importance of how it affects the stage of adolescence.

In chapter 2, the author analyzes the overall significance of puberty. This chapter goes into detail about the purpose of puberty, why genders have different onset times, and the different bodily changes that occur during puberty. For background knowledge, Smith explains the role of the hypothalamus in the stage of puberty. As the pituitary gland produces hormones, the hypothalamus controls the gland and tells it how much to produce. Smith states that the production of both growth and sex hormones are greatly increased during adolescence. He supports this claim by explaining that, during puberty, the hypothalamus has the role of making the hormone levels stable as they change. Changes in hormones thus cause the physical developmental changes. James Tanner, from the Institute

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of Child Health in London, studied adolescence and created the Tanner diagrams to show physical changes of maturation. Smith provides the diagram on page 19. It presents three images of both genders to analyze the age of maturation. This diagram also portrayed how the age of puberty can considerably vary. Smith examines how the onset of puberty can vary because of genetics, cultural, and social class differences. As data presents, puberty is delayed in African countries because of their poor nutrition, along with low socioeconomic class. One study referred to in this chapter researched the onset of puberty for boys. The results showed that the onset of puberty was delayed for the participants especially during a time of famine. This shows evidence for cultural and social class differences. Lastly, this chapter identifies why early and late onset of puberty can greatly affect adolescents. Smith states that males generally reach puberty after females. Reaching puberty for males means gaining a higher status in their peer group because physical features of being stronger and taller are valued, therefore early onset puberty for males can be beneficial. Smith explains that for females, early onset puberty means gaining weight and being self-conscious in a peer group that idealizes thin bodies for girls, a negative aspect of early onset puberty for females. Additionally, a negative to early onset puberty for adolescents is that they are more likely to associate with older people going through the same maturation changes as them, thus engaging in more dangerous and risk taking activities. The overall point that Smith makes in chapter 2 is that puberty fosters many bodily changes and it does affect adolescents both physically and mentally.

Chapter 3 addresses mental development in adolescence. Smith specifically addresses three cognitive developmental aspects produced during adolescence: formal operational thought, moral development, and identity. Smith exclusively uses Piaget's stage model of cognitive development to describe the significance of formal operational thinking. Piaget claims that the formal operational stage is described by when adolescents, 11–15 years old, gain the ability to systematically and abstractly think and solve problems. Smith continues by discussing researchers' arguments against Piaget's theory stating that formal operational development continues into adulthood. Piaget responded by affirming that adolescents vary on timing of reaching this stage, however the significant factor is that this cognitive development begins in adolescence. Next, Smith discusses how puberty influences moral development. Regarding conflict with peers, trust, sharing, and other moral dilemmas, moral reasoning is how adolescents find solutions. During the formal operational stage, adolescents are beginning to form their identity and this also means that adolescents are considering the perspectives of others. Smith brings in Erik Erikson's theory of eight

developmental stages. Erikson believes that the stage adolescents should be at to be psychologically healthy is "identity versus role confusion" (Smith 2016, p. 38). In this chapter, Smith discussed the importance of identity exploration and how ideas and attitudes about their identity will change throughout the stage. Puberty has physically changed adolescents, as explained in chapter 2, and now Smith notes the significant role of mental development during this stage. Smith focuses this chapter toward explaining how puberty activates cognitive development, in which adolescents reach a stage where they have developed abstract thinking, have more sophisticated moral reasoning skills, and have enough cognitive skills to be aware and concerned about forming their identity.

In chapter 4, entitled "Relationship changes-parents and peer," Smith discuss just as the title states. According to Smith, puberty and cognitive changes initiate adolescents' search for identity, and following are relationship changes. Smith explains that parent-child relationships can change because adolescents are figuring out if they can trust their parents with both prudential and personal concerns. Smith connects in psychology's perspective on the adolescence stage in life from chapter 1 when discussing how adolescence creates parent-child conflict, known as an aspect of "storm and stress". Smith uses research from a study done on Asian-American adolescents to show that closer parent-child relationships can develop when parents allow adolescents autonomy early on. Smith made an interesting point when noting that research found adolescents keeping stronger relationships with mothers than fathers during adolescence. Smith also provides a figure on page 49 of three different parental controls: psychological control, psychological autonomy support, and behavioral control. Smith uses bedtime as an example of something parents control and that consequently causes conflict with adolescents. Smith explains, "a pacemaker in the hypothalamus maintains a state of alertness later into the evening," meaning that the sleep cycle of adolescents begins to change (Smith 2016, p. 50). Smith uses this example to show that parents want to control their child's sleep but adolescents are changing, thus challenging the rules. Smith connects parent-child conflicts to increased peer interactions. Smith states, "as adolescents become independent from their parents, they spend more time with peers..." (Smith 2016, p. 51). Ultimately, Smith underscores that parent relationships are unilateral, while peer friendships are mutual and reciprocal, which is why they tend to create these new relationships where they have partial control. Recently, however, social networking has shown a change in the interaction and creation of friendships, which is discussed further in chapter 5. Smith additionally talks about peer influence within adolescence and how popularity is an important aspect for their current life stage. This

chapter exemplifies changes in both parent and peer relationships as important because adolescents are finding their autonomy.

Youth culture is introduced in chapter 5. Smith begins by addressing the recent change in youth culture of increased communication through social networking and the Internet. Additionally, the book presents leisure activities other than information and communication technologies, such as sports, hobbies, music, and spending time with friends. Sports being a popular leisure activity, Smith discussed a study showing that 60 % of males and 49 % of females participated in a sport during grade 9 through 14 (Smith 2016, p. 60). However, Smith also presents the facts that sports can be both beneficial for physical and identity development, while a burden too if the adolescents are socially comparing themselves or have negative coaches. Smith turns next to T.V. use for a leisure activity not being beneficial for adolescents. This is because it portrays gender stereotyping and explicit aggression, and this too belongs in the category of video games. Smith reminds reader of the risks that adolescents face when using mobile phones and the Internet because they are still in a vulnerable state. Smith, however, did not leave out the fact that video games, television, and other leisure activities like these can have educational value. A major point made by Smith in this chapter is that youth leisure activities have been increasing toward information and communication technologies, such as phones, computers, and the Internet, and there are many risks that come with these new activities.

Chapter 6 emphasizes that adolescence is a stage where it is common to take risks and misbehave. Smith discusses that delinquency peaks during adolescence and uses a Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development to support it. This study followed working class boys and evaluated that the peak age for first arrests was 14–15 years of age, proving that delinquent behavior is common in adolescence. Smith inserts historical changes that the U.S. has been charting since 1991, and that is that these risky behaviors, like smoking, fighting, and carrying weapons, have been declining. To explain why adolescents misbehave, Smith discusses the Cambridge's study of boys in London's predictors that occur in childhood that cause these delinquent behaviors. These predictors revolve around trouble in school, poor concentration, family poverty, and poor parental child rearing (Smith 2016, p. 80). Another reason discussed is the theory of reputation enhancement. This theory is that adolescents perform these risky behaviors because their peers find it of value and therefore peers accept them. Smith switches to discussing new findings from neuroscience of which adolescents increase in risky behaviors is related to the brain changes during puberty. This is explained by “emotional impulse

and cognitive control, plus other factors such as enhanced peer influence” (Smith 2016, p. 85). Lastly, Smith discusses that for society to not take the burden of the adolescents dangerous behaviors, interventions by parents are important to keep adolescents involved in school, engage in healthy activities, and also make it harder for adolescents to make risky decisions.

Chapter 7 brings attention to the topic of internalizing disorders prevalent in adolescence. Smith states, “‘Internalizing disorders’ is primarily used to refer to sadness, mood disruptions, withdrawal, and depression,” and these are the highlighted areas reviewed in this chapter (Smith 2016, p. 89). Smith compares earlier research from Hall and Freud, who believed adolescence was a time of emotional confusion and mood disruption, with a recent theory of John Coleman's proposing that these emotional difficulties are spread out throughout adolescence and can be dealt with one-by-one. This chapter notes that depression and sadness correlate. This is because variables such as relationships, daily actions, and identity can bring along sad emotions like anxiety, self-consciousness, and loneliness, which develop into depression, if severe. Smith connects this depression with the issue of suicide and self-harm in adolescence. As stated in previous chapters, there can be variations in development with gender. Along with development, Smith uses a study from the U.S. that shows a difference in rates of suicide and self-harm between genders, to prove that both genders also have different coping strategies and risk factors. Additionally, Smith discusses eating disorders being common in adolescence, especially in present time and for females. The author associates these internalizing disorders with factors of adolescence reviewed throughout the book. Cognitive development, identity, culture, and peers can all influence disorders in some type of way. Discussing the well-being of adolescence in current times, Smith uses a study that shows an increase in obesity and eating disorders and a small decrease in adolescent suicide attempts. Smith provides this information to exemplify how adolescence is a vulnerable life stage that continues to change and demonstrates new findings.

Lastly, chapter 8 discusses how sexual development and behavior has transformed from the past. Smith uses a study from Sweden recording the first time of sexual intercourse for people going through adolescence. In 1965, only 18 % of participants had sexual intercourse by the age of 17, while ten years later the average age was 17 years old (Smith 2016, p. 106). This example supports the idea that sexual behavior for adolescents is getting earlier as time passes. Smith explains how romantic behaviors increase with each age during adolescence; however there is also an increase in homosexual relationships and a small presence of gender dysphoria. As adolescents are sexually developing, dating

becomes common and also dating violence. Smith explained in chapter 5 that technology has been overtaking adolescents' leisure time. As a result, online romantic relationships influence sexting. Smith goes into detail about the risks of sexting. Adolescents will be permanently exposed and Smith suggests that education in schools is needed for this. Education in schools is also needed for teenage pregnancy. Smith provides a graph on page 116 showing a steady decrease in teenage pregnancies in the U.S. over a 40-year span; however, he also reviews the risk factors adolescents face with teen pregnancy in present time. This chapter suggests that our world has gradually changed adolescence and the events that occur during this stage of life.

Adolescence: A Very Short Introduction makes a significant contribution to the study of adolescence by considering the various perspectives of adolescence as a life stage. The information presented in the book was supported by empirical research and well-studied theories. As a result, Smith was able to emphasize the important factors that collectively make up adolescence. The material Smith directly discusses begins with puberty and expands on how

puberty affects adolescence in various ways. Puberty brings the physical and cognitive development that essentially develops into new abilities and mental processes. Smith openly discussed the safety concerns present in adolescence and how they have been altering throughout the years. Smith concludes the book stating, "there are common features across the adolescent experience, wherever and whenever it happens" (Smith 2016, p. 119). He supports his claim that adolescence is an experience of commonality, even though cultural and environmental factors can change some features of adolescences as a life stage.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflicts of interest The author reports none.

Reference

Smith, K. P. (2016). *Adolescence: A very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.