



## “Whatever!” The Wonderful Possibilities of Adolescence

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## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to challenge mainstream understanding of the function and nature of adolescence. The author explores features of adolescence common in Western culture and specifically the way in which the teenage years are perceived to provoke and antagonize older adults. He suggests that adolescents present a significant opportunity for community-supported change and development and considers ideas from neuroscience and script development (Berne, 1961). A relevant case study is offered to illustrate these issues.

## Keywords

adolescence, education, neuroscience, developmental stages, cultural script

First, I want to declare personal interests in the subject of this article. I have four children, all of whom are currently in adolescence. I have been looking forward to this point in their development for several years, and now it has arrived. I marvel at their physical growth and their increasing sense of independence. I am quite intentional in expressing my wonder and excitement at having four teenagers. My reason for doing so is that it seems countercultural for parents and carers to welcome the onset of adolescence. I have run many workshops for parents of teenagers over the years and have frequently found parents expressing a range of views about this time in their lives, including fear, dread, exasperation, and irritation. Occasionally, it seems entirely acceptable for parents to say that they cannot understand their adolescents or even to talk of “killing” them. Typically, parents at this stage may become adversarial or withdraw from their son or daughter.

What has struck me over the years is just how acceptable it has become to talk like this about teenagers. Amplified by media coverage of rioters, muggers, and antisocial behavior, certainly in the United Kingdom (UK) context, it is entirely possible to disparage a generation with impunity.

Younger children may be enclosed on the grounds that adults are frightened *for* them. Older children are enclosed because adults are frightened *of* them. The latter fear is manufactured by the media in a blitz of hatred which would be illegal if it were applied to any other group. (Griffiths, 2013, p. 59)

I am curious about the function of the demonizing by adults of adolescents in the West. To emphasize this observation, it appears to be taboo for a mother to declare that she hates her infant. To

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express a disgust of babies, an intolerance of their constant demands, and even that one could easily kill the newborn, would provoke outrage and, in many instances, the interest of social services. I am intrigued at the idealization of infancy and the corollary of demonizing adolescents.

As a side comment to the general assumption in this article about the existence of adolescence, Griffiths commented that the concept of adolescence is absent in some cultures, especially those in which there is minimal separation of children from adults. Drawing, in part, from the work of Robert Epstein (2007), she argued:

So teenagers, 'isolated from adults and wrongly treated like children', will be in revolt, leading to teenager antisocial behaviour. This, argues Epstein, is not normal; if it were it would happen widely among all cultures, and it doesn't. In a review of research on teenagers in 186 pre-industrial societies, some sixty percent of those societies had no word for adolescence and teenagers spent almost all of their time in the adult world with very little sign of disturbance and antisocial behaviour. . . . Western-style teenage trouble appears soon after the impact of certain Western influences, particularly television and schooling. (Griffiths, 2013, p. 213)

Another personal interest I have in this subject is that I have spent much of my professional career working with teenagers. During the course of my work as a secondary school teacher and with young people at risk of exclusion or custody, I have often been puzzled, infuriated, and amazed (see Barrow, 2000). I have also been involved in supporting young people outside of the professional domain, including by staffing retreats for young people, heading up holiday projects, and leading groups on remote camping and walking trips in the United Kingdom and further afield.

So, I arrive at the theme of adolescence with an ambition to redress an imbalance in how society understands this stage of life. I suggest that the adolescent cohort in any community embodies energy and potential for renewal. How communities understand and engage this emerging generation is important for ensuring a sustainable and integrated legacy.

## **Alex**

The story I have chosen to illustrate my theme is taken from a situation that developed on my farm about a year ago. In addition to my professional work, I run a smallholding in the east of England. In an earlier article (Barrow, 2011), I explored an integration of education and cultivation, and this current article considers an illustration of this combination of pedagogy and husbandry. On one occasion, we arranged for a group of 13- and 14-year-olds to spend 3 days on the farm. The group was comprised of ten young people and three members of staff from a secondary school in central London. The students came from one of the most deprived areas in the city and had been identified as especially vulnerable within the context of the school.

On their arrival, the level of need among the students was clear. Some were physically underdeveloped or showed signs of poor nutrition, most were ill equipped for a farm stay, and some had language or general developmental delays. I had been keenly anticipating the arrival of this group, but once they had arrived, I wondered if they might be overwhelmed by the dramatic change in their environment. However, as they tipped off the minibus and into the camping field, they showed few signs of distress. They whooped and started scattering about the site, barely able to put into words their excitement as they let out their pent-up energy.

Their teacher suggested a brief walk around to exercise after the long journey, and we made for the main field where livestock graze. As we walked, the teacher began to tell me a little about the students, letting me know their names. She finally mentioned Alex. Of the group, he was the student who could prove most difficult and the one about whom the staff had expressed reservations regarding bringing him on the trip. Just then, a group of boys, including Alex, began to run yelling across the field. The teacher was worried at this and called the boys back, but they could not hear. Toward

the end of the field sheep were grazing, and although the teacher was immediately apologetic that the boys were scaring the flock, there was nothing she could do.

At this point I thought I had a good idea. I let out my sheep dog and sent him off to gather the sheep, which were by now beginning to be alarmed by the boys. The dog ran quickly to the end of the field, overtook the boys, circled behind the sheep, and began to bring them to me. The boys were in the way, and as the sheep ran toward them, they divided and went past the boys. The boys had stopped, and now the dog was running toward them to keep up with the sheep. It was at this point that something happened. Alex became distressed. He fell to the ground and began to cry; soon he was screaming. The other boys left him, the dog ran past to meet me, and the teacher ran to comfort Alex. He was obviously traumatized.

As I approached the teacher and Alex, his anxiety increased. He could see the dog at my side and looked terror stricken. The teacher now remembered that when he was an infant, Alex had been attacked by a dog, and the incident with my sheep dog had clearly triggered memories of that earlier trauma. I remember how dispirited I felt at that moment. The anticipation of a positive camp experience for the group seemed like it was beginning to evaporate, and yet they had been on site for just 20 minutes. My internal process was one of self-reproach: How could I be so stupid and not thought about this possibility? My instinct was to immediately send the dog back to his yard and keep him locked away as I began trying to make up for my error in judgment.

Later, I learned more about Alex's past and his ingenious ways of ensuring survival. Becoming spiteful toward others, not trusting anyone, and taking an outsider position all appeared to be part of how he created certainty and familiar strokes, albeit negative ones. Sabotaging his best efforts, being regarded as clumsy or stupid, also seemed familiar defenses. Despite the limitations of these strategies, they had clearly served Alex well. What was being worked out within the group of students were features of earlier script formation, and doing so created what in Adlerian terms is described as *private logic*: "Knowledge of the private logic may render meaningful the otherwise apparently meaningless behaviour that people display in a given situation; it may also reveal the contours of people's fictional guiding lines in life" (Oberst & Stewart, 2003, p. 200). In the specific reenactment of the early experience with the aggressive dog, there was brief glimpse into the genesis of a broader internal architecture that resulted in Alex's attacking behaviors, attitudes, and decisions.

## Adolescence, Neuroscience, and Script

I will return to Alex's story later, but its connection to the concept of script is crucial in terms of my overall concerns in this article. The idea of script being developmental (Allen & Allen, 1972; Cornell, 1988), cocreative (Summers & Tudor, 2000), and a combination of enhancing and limiting beliefs and decisions (English, 1977) has been the source of discussion in the transactional analysis literature for several decades. These contributions widen the options in transactional analysis for making sense of this central idea by extending it beyond the deterministic and episodic character of early theory in this area. Maintaining a more open approach to understanding and working with script has particular implications for adolescents. If script formation is more akin to a cycle of learning (Newton, 2006) in which the young person is an active agent, then the teenage years are especially rich in terms of both the individual making new meaning about self, others, and the world and in relation to the community in which the process takes place.

I suggest that adolescence is a period in which a major revision of earlier script formation can take place. Furthermore, unlike script formation in infancy, this revision is undertaken in the context of a much wider community. While the infant makes meaning within the relative privacy of the immediate family and care system, the teenager reaches out to a wider system for new possibilities. I will go even further and argue that in some respects, and for some individuals, the impact of the adolescent script process is more important and greater than that of early childhood in terms of determining

how a sense of self is maintained in later life. In support of this claim, recent research into adolescent brain development is both interesting and exciting for those working with teenagers; the message is increasingly clear that there is everything to play for.

Blakemore and Frith (2005) are among a number of neurologists who have been researching changes in the adolescent brain. Historically, there has been a good understanding about the impact of hormonal changes at the onset of puberty, but the neurological implications have been relatively unclear until more recently. It was during the late 1960s and 1970s that experiments began to illuminate important neurological development in adolescence. Initially coming out of neurological research with groups of teenagers with specific mental health issues, researchers in the field soon became curious about what happens generally to the teenage brain. There is now a growing literature outlining the development of not only hormonal and physical changes but also the neurological and, by extension, psychological shifts in adolescence (see Bainbridge, 2009; Strauch, 2003).

While recognizing the initial sensitive period of neurological growth in infancy, Blakemore and Frith (2005) presented specific observations about adolescent neural development:

It seems that only after puberty does synaptic pruning begin in the frontal cortex. This vigorous synaptic pruning occurs after puberty and throughout in the frontal lobes, and results in a gradual decrease in synaptic density in this region. . . . [It] is essential for the fine-tuning of functional networks of brain tissue and of perceptual processes. The results from the frontal cortex suggest that fine-tuning of cognitive processes of the frontal lobes only takes hold in adolescence. (pp. 113-114)

The implications of this crucial reorganization extend beyond the individual and his or her parents and carers to include teachers and others who encounter adolescents.

If 0-3 years is seen as a major opportunity for teaching, so should 10-15 years. During both periods, particularly dramatic brain reorganization is taking place. This may well be a signal that learning in certain domains is becoming ultrafast during these periods. . . . In the adolescent brain these [early infant] start-up mechanisms may no longer fulfill an important function. Instead, modularization of culturally transmitted skills that were learned in the absence of start-up mechanisms may be the predominant activity. (Blakemore & Frith, 2005, pp. 121-122)

In other words, Blakemore and Frith suggested that new development is necessary, in part, to jettison redundant ways of making meaning and to make way for more relevant contemporary understandings of self, others, and the world.

The plasticity of the brain in infancy has, for many years, been connected to levels of psychological well-being. The carefully considered accounts by Gerhart (2004) in her work with young mothers and their babies and Lewis, Amiri, and Lannon's (2000) general theory of love are especially powerful, yet their narratives conclude with the conventional observation that much is already complete and closed by middle childhood. This reflects more the limitations of the reach of their research and practice than of the extended territory itself.

Those researching adolescent brain development are discovering a similar level of neural plasticity. This also results in a *sensitive period*, which Blakemore and Frith (2005) defined as a time "in which the brain is particularly likely to be affected by experience," after which it "is unlikely that it will develop certain sensory or motor functions normally without special remedial input" (p. 204). I see this overhaul in psychological terms as connected to the rescripting process: a checking out and either holding onto or discarding of archaic beliefs, decisions, and behaviors. In practical terms, we see this played out in a series of crossed transactions during the teenage years, with the young person seeking out something different from his or her previous experience.

I am interested in the connection between the emerging neurological research and the work of Clarke and Dawson (1998) in the context of transactional analysis. Adapting earlier work (Levin,

1982), they presented a cyclical model of development that regards adolescence, in part, as a reintegration of early infant developmental stages. This comprises revisiting a sense of belonging, a desire to explore and experiment, practicing thinking skills, creating a sense of identity and personal power, and finding out again how to get along effectively with others. Each of these dimensions demands of the individual the completion of a series of tasks that are initially tackled during early years and then reexperienced in the teens. Running in parallel with the tasks for each stage are supporting affirmations, behaviors, and attitudes that parents and carers might demonstrate in working with the young child. In adolescence there is a renewed hunger for these encouragements, although I suggest that this time the young person is more interested in seeking them from outside of the immediate family and that this is where the significance of community emerges.

This crucial difference in the formation of script is both potentially exciting and hopeful while also carrying possibilities for limitation and despair. If the adolescent is rescripting in public as opposed to in the privacy of the family unit, what kind of support and encouragement does he or she encounter? My concern is that in some societies, including the United Kingdom, public policy increasingly regards teenagers with mistrust and as a threat that needs to be kept at arm's length.

Children who are told "It's rude to stare" are themselves stared at all the time. It's no surprise that children desire—fervently and furiously—to be unseen. . . . The fashion for hoodies arose at the same time as increasing surveillance, and it surely represents a highly appropriate response to it as young people shade themselves from the constant, aggressive staring of adults. (Griffiths, 2013, pp. 58-59)

This has tended to result in a focus on adolescents in terms of either their (un)employability or criminality and on providing support to families only when there is a breakdown, either through substance misuse, mental health difficulties, antisocial behavior, or school exclusion.

So, to return to my question, what kind of support and encouragement might young people encounter as they venture into local communities to revise their sense of self? Arguably, greater account might be given to not only the challenges and difficulties in raising adolescents but also the possibilities for doing so within the context of the wider community. In transactional analysis, some valuable materials have been developed for parents and carers (see Clarke & Dawson, 1998; Mellor & Mellor, 2004). The role of schools is an obvious one to consider, and there are good examples of how transactional analysis educators recognize this (e.g., Barrow & Newton, 2004), although it is simplistic to imagine that schools are synonymous with community. Adults live in communities, whether or not they have children. Teenagers are a particularly important resource for building social capital for the future. They are the people most adults will rely on to nurse them in old age, to educate their grandchildren, to underwrite their pensions, and to maintain their civic infrastructure when older adults can no longer do so. Adolescents matter, and their engagement by the wider adult community counts too.

### **Alex Continued . . .**

To pick up again with my story, I was just about to put my sheep dog into its pen when in an unchecked moment I turned and walked toward Alex, my dog at my side, unleashed. In retrospect, I understand this now as a moment of misattunement, in which I began to "mind the gap," a wonderful phrase in Eusden's (2011) work that I have found perfect for clarifying what sometimes happens if I am not being too careful.

Minding the gap is, for me, about attending to my interventions and their impact while staying exquisitely curious about what emerges and remaining available to explore the dynamic disturbance that may unfold. It is often at the edges of the relationship—the misattunements, absences, and ruptures—that the deeper, more unconscious forms of relating emerge. (p. 106)

Much of my conscious self was warning me against bringing the dog to Alex. I had already begun framing my action in terms of the fact that I should not have let the dog out in the first place. It felt like a tactical mistake: "Tactical mistakes occur when a therapist, in the context of a well-formulated therapy, does something that is not appropriate. . . . The effect is negative. Something has gone wrong, unpleasant feelings are stimulated, and therapeutic chances seem to be missed" (Mazzetti, 2012 p. 46).

As I got near, Alex's anxiety rose, and I was aware of his fear of the dog at my side. I let him know that the dog had done what it is trained to do, that is, protect the sheep and bring them to me. Alex refused to hear this and cried that he was sure the dog would bite him. I assured him this would not be the case and that the dog knew not to bite, that the dog's task was to gather the sheep and protect them from harm. The dog remained quietly at my side, and we stayed like this while Alex took deep breaths and steadied himself. He told me about how dogs can attack and bite and be scary, and I, and the teacher who was holding him, agreed that what had happened in the past to Alex had been true. And that it would not happen this time.

After a while, the other students had gathered round and were stroking the dog and wondering about how one animal can make another animal move on command and not attack or harm them. While staying close to Alex, I called the dog to round up the sheep again, and he circled and brought them to us. Gradually, Alex became grounded again, and I tested him by asking if he would like to stroke the dog. "Not yet," he replied. We left the field and returned to the campsite.

Over the next couple of days, I watched as Alex first looked on while his mates played with the dog, then began to join them in the field, and finally started throwing the ball and calling to the dog.

Luckily, tactical mistakes are sometimes beneficial. . . . They can be turned from possible damage into powerful instruments of good therapy. . . . Such mistakes can have deep significance in the relational field . . . by creating an opportunity to cure through a new relational experience. (Mazzetti, 2012, p. 45)

On the last day of the students' visit to the farm, early in the morning before the day had started, Alex and I walked into the field, and I asked if he would use the dog to move the sheep. With some caution he began to call the dog, moved it around the sheep, and successfully had them gathered in the shelter. He declared it the best bit of the trip. I think I was pleased too. We had earlier both stepped into uncertain territory and both revealed something more of ourselves than we had initially known or were prepared to do.

A year later I talked with his teacher, who reported how, while Alex continued to struggle with his school work, his relationships with others had settled, his previous aggression had subsided, and he was demonstrating increasing maturity.

There were undoubtedly many interrelated factors that influenced how Alex made a new sense of himself in the world, and that summer afternoon in the field was just one of them. Allen's (2009) work on constructivist transactional analysis and neurological development provides a framework for making sense of the myriad ways in which adolescents are busy cocreating new narratives about who they have been and how this identity might be renarrated.

Neurons that fire together wire together, survive together, and are more likely to fire together again. This means that new experience can lead to changed connections between nerves (synaptogenesis) and to new neural pathways. That is, new experiences can lead to actual brain change! (p. 186)

However, a critical dimension of this process is that it takes place within relationship, both with others and within the context of a particular social/cultural milieu. If life narratives are cocreated, Allen argued that changing earlier ways of understanding the self are possible. Referring briefly to redimension work, he suggested that

sometimes, however, the patient has not “redecided” an old “decision” at all, for there really was no old decision, or at least not a specific one that was consciously remembered. Rather, the patient has been helped to make sense of his or her life in some new way. (Allen, 2009, p. 184)

Equally important is the fact that there is a collective restorymaking taking place in this process; it is not only the patient undergoing a reframing:

For receiver *as well as sender* [emphasis added], understanding life stories requires an ability to think of oneself and others as motivated by internal states, dynamics, and cognitions. This is the ability to mentalize, largely a medial prefrontal ability whose development is associated with attachment. (Allen, 2009, p. 190)

Sometime later, Alex saw me in the school foyer and first asked after the dog. I saw how he had changed, and I wondered if he saw in me a change in which he had, in part, had a hand.

## Conclusion

The story of Alex illustrates the general features that underpin this article. Revisiting early experiences, beliefs, and decisions takes place during adolescence within community, in the world out there, peopled by teachers, others’ parents, youth workers, congregations, sport coaches, team members, club enthusiasts, campaign comrades, mentors, and incidental older adults. Such engagement brings with it risks for all parties and, most crucially, the embracing of the unknown other generation.

Throughout this article I have sought to reframe conventions for understanding the function of adolescence for both individual young people and society at large. While aspects of the desire for renewal have been identified in the past, this approach to adolescence remains countercultural. How might transactional analysis practitioners recognize and support this reaching for growth with clients at this stage? Furthermore, when we engage as citizens in our local communities, do we reenact a cultural antipathy toward teenagers or do we enact an alternative way of connection? My sense is that there is little material in transactional analysis to support understanding the phenomenon of adolescence, and my hope is that this article might encourage further development of the observations I have made here.

In focusing on any period during childhood and young adulthood, we are drawn to wider existential themes concerned with notions of personal past and the past of previous generations, our collective and individual sense of the present, and possible futures for our own and new generations. In confronting adolescence, the mortality of the older generation is contrasted with the sense of invincibility of the young, accompanied by the combining of jealousy, desire, regret, and the power in claiming who we were, are, and might be.

Beyond the individual challenge in this cross-generational engagement, there are wider questions of what decisions, beliefs, and actions are promoted and encouraged within a community. Arguably, in the United Kingdom these currently emphasize mistrust, Don’t Belong, and fearful behaviors as evidenced in the oversurveillance and demonization of young people. However, there are also possibilities for flourishing and renewal. For those who choose to live, learn with, and accompany adolescents, anything—“Whatever!”—might happen.

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