Adolescent Development – By Sharon Maguire, April 2009

*This paper will critically evaluate the key theoretical approaches from the social developmental area specifically related to adolescence. I will then describe how I would apply these theoretical approaches in the workplace for the improvement of practice.*

A key feature in the social development in adolescence is the influence of peer groups. Also of significance is the formation of moral identity and emotional development, as these too are influenced heavily by peer groups and the socio-cultural context in which the adolescent operates. Much of the conflict experienced during adolescence can be related to an intense need for belonging and the need for autonomy and independence from family. The peer group serves to satisfies intimacy needs and provides a transitional platform to adulthood.

Dunphy (as cited in Slee, 2002a) observes that peer groups are an important avenue through which socialisation occurs, individuals make the transition from a dependent family member to a more independent individual functioning in wider society. The peer group structure changes during adolescence, paving the way to romantic relationships, it progresses through stages, initially from a same sex clique to mixed sexed cliques and crowd structure and finally to more intimate couples relationships. Socialisation through peer groups may also assist in resolving issues of egocentrism.

The tendency to be self absorbed is referred to as egocentrism. Elkind (1967, 1968, 1970, as cited in Slee, 2002b) suggests that during ego development individuals may imagine themselves as the target of others thoughts, a form of egocentrism referred to as imaginary audience. A desire to be alone may indicate a perception of being scrutinised and evaluated, this may be brought on by self consciousness about changes in physicality. They may also

experience another form of egocentrism known as personal fable where they perceive that their feelings are unique and not experienced by others. A propensity for reckless behaviour and deeply felt emotions may indicate the isolated feeling of not being understood.

Elkind (1990) suggests that egocentrism in adolescents is evident when there is an apparent belief that their appearance and behaviour occupy the thoughts of others, and that this is a by-product of a failure to differentiate between their own thoughts and the assumed thoughts of others. This can create a propensity to anticipate how others may react to them; this then is a constructed and imagined audience. Egocentrism is also evident in the construct of a personal fable, a belief that feelings and emotions are unique to them and not experienced by others, this can lead to two extremes; feeling as though others can not relate to their inner turmoil, or feeling invincible and untouchable.

Group socialisation plays an important role, as egocentrism begins to diminish as adolescents integrate the thoughts of others into their own. Through the bonds and sharing of the peer group and the intimate relationships within it, they come to realise that others experience similar feelings and also begin to differentiate their thoughts from those of others (Elkind, 1990).

Peer group participation is a significant contributor to identity formation in adolescents. Adolescents form their identity as they interact and socialise with peers through a process of integrating and rejecting the norms and values of others with their own values. They explore who they are and who they want to be and begin formulating their plan for the future. Peer groups serves as a reference platform, providing opportunities for comparison, opposition and discussion, which in turn promotes reflection and evaluation of the self (Pugh & Hart, 1999)

Piaget (1997) suggest that between the ages of approximately 15 to 20 the formulation of a life program begins that is consistent with aptitudes, the ability to hypothesise reasoning and think abstractly paves the way to idealisms – alignment with causes, philosophies, ideals, movements. According to Piaget, development is at the formal operational stage in adolescence.

Piaget's (Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development, (n.d.) 'Four levels of development' are;

(1) infancy - Sensorimotor stage: from birth to age 2

(2) preschool - Preoperational stage: from ages 2 to 7

(3) childhood - Concrete operational stage: from ages 7 to 11

(4) adolescence - Formal operational stage: from age 11 to 16

During the formal operational stage adolescents are observed as more capable of thinking in abstract terms. They talk with their peers and think for extended periods about their own internal states as related to ideas and feelings, they think about thinking. Language development becomes more sophisticated, there are increased discussions about personal issues with friends, and higher animation and effects used in language use among peers (Slee, 2002a).

According to Freud's psychosexual stage theory, adolescence is associated with the genital stage, characterised by detachment from parents and focus on genitals. Erikson's psychosocial stage theory builds on the work of Freud, adolescence is associated with the firth stage of identity versus role confusion, characterised by confusion regarding sexual and occupational identity. A more contemporary views suggests adolescence is characterised by

a need to address new responsibility, reawakening of sexual urges and a need to establish intimacy (Slee, 2002a).

Developmental changes that occur throughout adolescence may result in a greater likelihood to experience feelings of loneliness. In Sullivan's Developmental Epoch there are three stages of adolescent development, during which the importance of developing a close relationship with a peer becomes important in regard to psychological adjustment "early adolescence is characterised by the need to find a 'chum' " (Townsend et al. 1998, as cited in Slee, 2002a). Romance and the need and desire for intimacy become increasingly important throughout adolescence.

Brown (1999, as cited in Sigelman & Rider, 2006) proposes that romantic relationships move through four stages; the initiation phase during which the focus is on the self, the status phase during which having the 'right' partner takes focus, the affection phase where focus is on the relationship as opposed to the self or peer approval, and the bonding phase during which affection is coupled with commitment.

Romantic relationships at too early an age can have a negative effect on development due to a lower level of emotional maturity, romantic relationships among older adolescents has a more positive effect and may result in improved self esteem and a tendency to be better adjusted (Collins, 2003; Furman & Shaffer, 2003, as cited in Sigelman & Rider, 2006). Adolescents that have good family relationships are also likely to have more successful romantic relationships.

Adolescents that have healthy relationships with their parents are more likely to have higher self-esteem, a more well developed sense of identity, better social skills and improved

emotional adjustment (Kobak et al., 1993; Scharf, Mayseless, & Kivenson-Baron, 2004, as cited in Sigelman & Rider, 2006).  A study of adolescents by Brown and Mann (1998, as cited in Slee, 2002b)  found adolescents that participated more in decision making within the family if the family was 'adaptable' in regard to roles and rules.

Havinghurst (as cited in Dunphy, 1980, p.179) identifies ten developmental social tasks provided through peer group socialisation; "achieving new and more relationships, achieving a masculine or feminine role, accepting one's physique and using the body effectively, achieving emotional independence of parents and other adults, achieving assurance of economic independence, selecting and preparing for an occupation, preparing for marriage and family life, developing intellectual skills and concepts necessary for civic competence, desiring and achieving socially responsible behaviour, acquiring a set of values and an ethical system as a guide to behaviour".

Role taking encourages restructuring of earlier moral reasoning and thinking, interaction among peers and opportunities for role taking allows incorporation of moral views of others and consequently a reorganisation of their own.  Damon (2004) suggests we should approach adolescent development from a more positive perspective and not be blinded by the more commonly perceived problem-youth perspective, he believes all adolescents possess a capacity for moral awareness and prosocial behaviour.   We should seek to maximise the resiliency and potential, assumed by Benson (as cited in Damon, 2004), to be inherent in the nature of every child.   Thus we should seek to maximise internal assets [personal characteristics] such as social skills, commitment to learning,  positive identity formation and moral values.   Encouraging civic and community affiliations provides a sense of civic identity, which in turn is closely related to moral identity formation.

Internal assets can be shaped positively through the influence of external assets including high expectations from others, encouraging the adoption of useful community roles that foster a sense of civic duty, encouraging spiritual faith and responsibility. Social behaviour is thus shaped positively by fostering a strong sense of moral identity as "personal identity develops within the context of community relationships" (Slee, 2002a, p.424).

Kohlberg (Crain, 1985) developed a stage theory of moral development that provides an indication of the level of moral identity reached. At stage 3 role-taking is characterised as a deeper, more empathic process where the feelings of others becomes significant, there is an emphasis on being a good person. At stage 4 a broader, society-wide conception is observed, obeying society laws and rules is more important. Stage 5 emphasises democratic processes. Stage 6 places significance on the principles of justice and the value on life and dignity.

Kohlberg's six stages of moral development.

Level 1. Preconventional Morality

    Stage 1. Obedience and Punishment Orientation.

    Stage 2. Individualism and Exchange.

Level II. Conventional Morality

Stage 3. Good Interpersonal Relationships.

Stage 4. Maintaining the Social Order.

Level III. Postconventional Morality

    Stage 5. Social Contract and Individual Rights.

    Stage 6: Universal Principles.

Muss (1998) suggests that the moral reasoning an individual reaches is likely to remain at the same level attained at the termination of education, therefore education is

significant in the formation of moral reasoning. It could be proposed that further education advances progression through further stages of moral reasoning. The peer group also assists the adolescent in developing moral and personal identity.

In a quest for self identity adolescents can temporarily lose their individuality by aligning themselves with causes, over identifying with heroes and stereotyping themselves through their clothing, speech and ideals. Individuality emerges as the adolescent develops a sense of who they are to both themselves and others. Those that do not develop a strong sense of self continue to display immature behaviours such as blind loyalty and intolerance to difference into adulthood (Thomas, 2000).

The threat of exclusion from a group can create pressure on group members, due to the emotional investment, to conform to group expectations. Group cohesion is often expressed through things such as clothing and music, music plays a central role in adolescence as it facilitates emotional expression. Contrary to misconceptions that peers negatively influence development, peers are likely to encourage positive behaviour and provide a secure base from which to develop autonomy. Good family relationships usually encourage adolescents to associate with peers that hold similar values to their own family, whereas poor family relations may encourage association with antisocial peers. Parents need to be firm yet adaptable to cater for the increasing need of adolescents for autonomy (Sigelman & Rider, 2006).

In concluding I believe that I can improve my practice in the workplace by becoming more aware of the social developmental stages of my adolescent learners. Piaget (Munari, 1994) considered active participation of the learner to be an important aspect of education and coercion to be the worst form of teaching. He believed learners should reconstruct the

path to the outcome through active participation. Thus, I place more significance on the relevance of group work and social activity in learning. I also believe I have a strong role to play in regard to my influence on moral development by encouraging open discussion on issues so as to provide multiple perspectives and maximise exposure to alternative values. There is importance in creating a safe environment, built on mutual trust, with clear boundaries and firm [yet flexible] rules, but I also need to be willing to negotiate, adapt to their changing requirements and involve my learners in decision making. I also believe I can introduce role taking skills into the classroom environment more so than I have done in the past and maybe strive to create a stronger sense of community in the classroom.

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