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*Youth Society* 1996 28: 139

DOI: 10.1177/0044118X96028002001

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# DENATURALIZING ADOLESCENCE

## *The Politics of Contemporary Representations*

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*This article critiques several taken-for-granted assumptions about adolescents' alleged distinctive nature and their universal, outside-of-history-and-society status. The article examines the social being of truth about adolescents by closely scrutinizing the confident characterizations that they are "coming of age," controlled by hormones, and peer oriented. A major strategy of this rereading of adolescence is to locate the seemingly timeless characteristics of adolescence within the sociohistorical context of their creation: the late 1800s and the concerns within the United States for social order, virility, national and international expansion, and the participation of the sciences of anthropology, psychology, and child study in the social anxieties and responses. This analysis employs rhetorical, historical, and feminist readings to call into question the accepted discourse about adolescent nature.*

There is really no clue by which we can thread our way through all the mazes of culture and the distractions of modern life save by knowing the true nature and needs of childhood and adolescence. . . . Other oracles may grow dim, but this one will never fail.

—G. Stanley Hall (1900, p. 701)

G. Stanley Hall had a noble goal for re-capitulation in education—to reconstruct the grammar-school course: scientifically, so that school-hours, curricula, exercise, buildings, etc., shall all be . . . in accordance with child-nature, the true norm.

—Stephen Jay Gould (1977, p. 154)

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**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *This research was supported, in part, by grants from the Spencer Foundation and the Proffitt Foundation, Indiana University. The author is solely responsible for the ideas expressed. Correspondence can be sent to Nancy Lesko, School of Education, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47405; e-mail: nlesko@indiana.edu.*

YOUTH & SOCIETY, Vol. 28 No. 2, December 1996 139-161  
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Adolescents, whether embodied as television's stars of *Beverly Hills 90210*, *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, or *The Wonder Years*, as pregnant teenagers on the cover of *Time* magazine, or as the ubiquitous knots of teenagers at shopping malls and video arcades, are a familiar and seemingly fixed element of the social, cultural, and economic landscape. Similarly, the knowledge about adolescents' characteristics—that they are hormonally driven, peer oriented, and identity seeking—is accepted as fact, established by empirical research. Even the idea that a population can be identified by age, massed together as distinctive on that single criterion, is unremarkable. Adolescence is natural and naturally occurring.

However, historians of childhood and youth argue that conceptions of young people are social categories and, therefore, subject to historical processes. Youth is not an immutable stage of life, free from the influence of historical change (Hawes & Hiner, 1985). Rather, adolescence can be seen as the *effects* of certain sets of social practices across numerous domains of contemporary legal, educational, family, and medical domains (Walkerdine, 1990). This conceptualization highlights the constructedness and mutability of what are assumed to be natural and naturally occurring teenagers. Certainly, a full archaeology of adolescence is beyond the scope of this article. However, this article initiates a critique of several taken-for-granted views of adolescents. This "denaturalizing" of conceptions of adolescents involves calling into question key assumptions through rhetorical, historical, and feminist rereadings of the production of particular knowledge about adolescents.

This deconstruction of natural adolescents is called for by both practical and theoretical events. First, educators currently are involved in restructuring secondary schools to make a variety of school programs both more humane and worthwhile learning environments.<sup>1</sup> A failure to examine the commonsense assumptions regarding students may undermine educational reform efforts. Policies grounded in static ideas of adolescence will likely reproduce, albeit with small changes, current educational practices. Thus a piece of school reform left unexamined is the implicit and explicit assumptions that teachers have regarding adolescents. For example, literature on middle school practices so heavily emphasizes the physiological turmoil of young adolescents that self-esteem issues and hormones appear to consume

them. Such an emphasis positions teachers to question whether such hormonally burdened young people can respond capably or successfully to substantive intellectual tasks. In this way, unexamined conceptions of the nature of adolescents undeniably contribute to decisions about feasible school curricula and policies.

From a theoretical perspective, there is likewise a need to examine underlying conceptions of students in empirical and theoretical literature on youth. Walkerdine (1990) explains that "the purpose of examining the conceptualizations which form the bedrock of modern practices is to draw out the key terms to the regime of truth which is constituted in and by the practices" (p. 137). Walkerdine's argument accepts Foucault's characterization of the modern period in which social control changed from being wielded through repressive practices to practices of normalization. The creation of normal adolescents occurred along the same lines as did the demarcation of wayward girls (Schlossman & Wallach, 1978), juvenile delinquency (Platt, 1977), and White trash (Rafter, 1988). Populations were identified, usually as problems and with alleged defining characteristics, to be measured against *others* on the basis of physical, mental, and/or moral traits. The middle to late 1800s and early 1900s witnessed the steady production of knowledge in social sciences, medicine, education, and social work, among others, regarding normal individuals and groups.<sup>2</sup> Deviance was identified and studied, and professions and institutions were developed to respond to deviants (Macleod, 1983; Richardson, 1989). Buoyed by the knowledge of the new sciences of psychology, physical anthropology, biology, and sociology (Cravens, 1978), populations were labeled and treated as feeble-minded, morally disordered, wayward, and/or lacking parental guidance (Richardson, 1989). In defining and measuring the deviant populations such as the precocious and the laggards, the new researchers, social workers, and educators legitimated and enhanced their own positions as socially useful experts but also constructed scientifically grounded normalities. For example, as psychologists discussed the sources and hazards of both precocious and wayward youths, a normative unproblematic youth was constructed simultaneously.

To disavow the racist and classist attitudes of the new experts of the late 1800s but to continue to use their assumptions and conceptualizations, despite noble intentions, perpetuates their regime of truth.

The interconnections between regulation of behavior and knowledge construction and use in the social sciences and in education are central to Foucaultian theory. Thus theories must be seen as part of interactional social practices, with particular effects in and on the ways in which adolescence and adolescents exist and mean. From this perspective, retheorizing is crucial to the construction of new social practices in and outside of schools.

This article is premised on connections between scientific research findings and socially regulative practices and asks how scientific knowledge about adolescent nature, located primarily in the field of psychology, participates in constructing and maintaining the boundaries for what may count as normal and deviant teenagers. However, I posit that adolescence has multiple registers of meaning and effects (Haraway, 1991) and functions as defining and limiting what counts as normal (and socially desirable) in the domains of civilized/uncivilized, sexual/asexual, rational/irrational, and manly/unmanly. Talk about adolescents—their problems, characteristics, and needs—is a central arena for talking about social expectations for productive, rational, independent adults.

When we specify the end product of the transition to adulthood as unified, self-reflective people with coherent identities and emotional control, we are specifying a normal developmental outcome that is gender, race, and class specific although masquerading as universal and neutral (Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1984; Walkerdine, 1990). In turn, the nature of adolescence is connected through a “chain of needs” (Fraser, 1989) to specific policies and practices. Along with the power to define nature and needs is the power to specify the response to that nature and needs. For example, when educators define young adolescents as having a need for close relationships with adults, curricular practices that provide homerooms or other types of mentoring or counseling opportunities are constructed simultaneously. To define, with empirical evidence, that adolescents have a particular nature and thus specific needs is to scientifically construct educational practices (Walkerdine, 1990). As Hall (1900) clearly understood, scientists who define youths’ nature have enormous influence over all aspects of scientific pedagogy.

## STRUGGLES TO DEFINE NATURE

According to Haraway (1989), nature in the last instance grounds identity: "A kind of being grounds a kind of knowledge, i.e., ontology grounds epistemology" (p. 417). Haraway (1991) maintains that knowledge in any scientific field contests for how to construct "what can authoritatively count as the case about the world" (p. 310). The present analysis challenges the reigning authoritative knowledge about adolescents and asks, What kind of being is the adolescent who grounds particular kinds of knowledge about adolescence?

The reigning conception of adolescents is that of a natural being, outside of specific historical time and place (Lipsitz, 1991).<sup>3</sup> The social processes through which teenagers are produced are removed in this view of adolescence, leaving a naturally occurring adolescent who are simultaneously defined as problematic, out of control (Walkerdine, 1990; Macleod, 1983), and, concomitantly, needing control by others (Haraway, 1991). If adolescents are portrayed as universal and ahistorical, then their characteristics are immutable. Consequently, they must be constrained by adults rather than by changes in the social and organizational practices that helped create them.

Feminist scholars in various fields have noted the politics of representing social constructions as natural objects. For example, anthropologists Yanigasako and Collier (1990) argue that inquiries into childbearing and child rearing as socially constructed in particular historical situations are fundamentally undermined by the assumed natural biological division between women who bear children and men who do not. Yanigasako and Collier discuss how an acceptance of the nature/culture division in anthropological theory and research is concomitant with an acceptance of biology as universal, outside of cultural influences, and with inevitable social consequences for gendered division of labor. They argue that in not examining how biological sex differences are socially constructed, feminist theory ultimately is undermined by these biological differences. In a similar vein, Fausto-Sterling's (1985) critique of research on sex differences in intelligence and hormones amply illustrates the social consequences of empirical research on natural, or biological, differences as they have

implications for educational policy and employment practices. Thus it is not enough to study the cultural or social aspects of adolescents, allowing the biological processes to stand as real truths outside of social processes. We must examine the ontological assertions regarding adolescence and the biological research that establishes them as natural and inevitable.

Understanding that scientific truths—whether theory or empirical findings—are the effects of sets of assumptions and practices, this article examines the “social being of truth” (Taussig, 1987, p. xiii) around adolescence. By examining the rhetoric and content of selected contemporary truths about adolescence and the contexts of their initial articulation during the late 1800s in the United States, I investigate the politics of a particular representation and interpretation of adolescence. The method of analysis is a montage of historical, rhetorical, and feminist analyses across the domains of the emerging disciplines of psychology, anthropology, and pedagogy (Taussig, 1987).

### CONTEXTS OF THE MODERN DISCOURSE ON ADOLESCENCE

Although conceptions and representations of adolescence existed prior to the late 1800s, in that time period youth became an object of the emerging sciences of psychology, anthropology, and pedagogy (Walkerdine, 1990). That scientific conception of adolescence, articulated most effusively by the “father of adolescence,” G. Stanley Hall, in his two-volume *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education* (Hall, 1905), was produced during a historical period characterized by broad social, economic, and scientific change. The scientific discourse on adolescence was constructed in the contexts of urbanization, industrialization, nationalism, colonization, domestic changes in family relations, and bureaucratization.<sup>4</sup> Thus scientific adolescents came into existence when the United States itself was a *young* modern nation and, in the eyes of certain groups, in turbulence, adrift, or, in the contemporary jargon, at risk. Wiebe (1967) characterizes that perplexity as follows:

Americans in a basic sense no longer knew who or where they were. The setting had altered beyond their power to understand it, and within an alien context they had lost themselves. In a democratic society, who was master and who servant? In a land of opportunity, what was success? . . . The apparent leaders were as much adrift as their followers. For lack of anything that made better sense of their world, people everywhere weighed, counted, and measured it. (pp. 42-43)

Historians such as Wiebe (1967) and Platt (1977) argue that the sense of social confusion of that time period cannot be overstated; similarly strong was the belief among nativists that the United States had a clear choice between ordering the new disorderly immigrants (e.g., Catholics, Eastern Europeans, Blacks from the South) or being overtaken by socialist and ethnic demands. Historical accounts portray these decades as fateful, where America would prosper or decline, a clear turning point in the nation's history. I read the emergent discourse on adolescence as speaking with and to the (primarily) White, middle-class, nativist concerns about social order and progress during those turning-point years (Cravens, 1978; Macleod, 1983; Franklin, 1986).

The emergent discourse on adolescence also spoke with and to concerns about manliness, strength, and dominance. The concerns about order and progress were connected to a "nervous masculinity" (Macleod, 1983, p. 46) in which concerns about civilization and economic progress were interwoven with gender and dominance issues in families, workplaces (Smith-Rosenberg, 1985), and scientific research (Russett, 1989). Thus social and economic progress was seen as a problem of virility, strength, and/or dominance (Haraway, 1989; Macleod, 1983; Smith-Rosenberg, 1985), and adolescent development was a vehicle through which to discuss the means to secure strong wills and disciplined bodies among middle-class White males (Macleod, 1983). One sees this dimension of concern over boys in the spectacular growth of character-building organizations such as the Boy Scouts and youth programs of the YMCA during these years; these were conscious movements to get boys out of the hands of mothers and female teachers into comradeship with males (Macleod, 1983). Concerns about feminized boys were acute, especially in the Northeast, where the number of middle-class White youths had declined substantially. The precious resource of future leaders for America needed to be managed closely; to ensure potency, males needed to



control against feminizing, that is, weakening influences. This move for remasculinization of youths was supported by viewing adolescence as a pivotal and problematic life stage and by scientific conceptions of development that defined middle-class White male characteristics as normative for adulthood and denigrated characteristics and behaviors identified as feminine or childish. A third context in which concerns of dominance and masculinity arose was the international. One sees this concern in Lord Baden-Powell's founding of the Boy Scouts, which was an outgrowth of his experiences in the Boer War and his resultant fears for the British Commonwealth's strength and viability. As a career officer, he wanted to promote early and continuous training of boys to be nationalistic, disciplined, and obedient to orders (Macleod, 1983; Rosenthal, 1984), and he packaged this regimen with the playfulness and camaraderie of camping, woodcraft, and nature lore. During the late 1800s, the United States emerged as a colonial power, and the connections between colonialist expansion and the new disciplines of psychology and anthropology are marked.<sup>5</sup>

Many scientists, working from a recapitulationist perspective, believed that inquiry into lower species such as women, savages, and children would illuminate the evolutionary progression of the race and factors contributing to or blocking such progress. If individual lives recapitulated the history of human evolution, then by studying those persons at lower evolved stages, scientists and educators could minimize the number of White males who were *arrested* at the lower stages of development. Thus greater contact among the United States, European nations, and savages through colonialism provoked scholarly interest in establishing scientifically the differences between civilized and uncivilized peoples and in securing the continued progress and dominance of the civilized (Haraway, 1989; Stocking, 1982). Anthropology and psychology were concerned with investigating differences between males and females, between adults and children, and between civilized peoples and savages. Psychologists of adolescence, such as Hall and his students and colleagues at Clark University, situated their inquiries within and across psychology and anthropology, explicitly drawing analogies across women, savages, and youths (Russett, 1989). Thus recapitulation theory is crucial for understanding the link

among conceptions of adolescence, developmental psychology, and cultural anthropology because it established child development and human evolution as mirrors of one another. The identifiable stages of child development replicated the identified stages of the development of civilizations (savagery, barbarism, feudalism, constitutional government). The objects of study in psychology, anthropology, and child study were women, natives, and youths, and numerous parallels were established across the three natures. All three shared an otherness from middle-class White men, as we will see, in their emotionality, weakness, and failure to be disciplined individuals. The norm for development was constructed within and against the undeveloped, inferior, and/or arrested characteristics of women, natives, and children (Haraway, 1989; Walkerdine, 1990).

The discourse on adolescence during the late 1800s and early 1900s participated in three broad social arenas: the changes in the U.S. economic, urban, domestic, and corporate life; the struggle for masculine control within the new families, institutions, and industries; and the colonialist and nationalist concern for progress and domination. In this view, adolescence spoke about controlled change and development, reason, potency, and discipline, and it linked these positive attributes with Euro-American middle-class masculinity. Adolescence is positioned to discuss and mark boundaries for proper development, civilized thought and behavior, productivity, reason, and masculine virility. Thus adolescence, situated across the academic questions (and social conflicts) of race and ethnicity in anthropology and the questions of gender and normality in psychology, spoke with and to concerns for establishing intellectual and social boundaries between normal/abnormal, civilized/savage, masculine/feminine, and sexual/nonsexual.

But to stipulate in this brief way the social and scientific contexts in which adolescence emerged is insufficient to the task of denaturalizing adolescence. In addition to drawing the contexts in which scientific findings were produced, we must investigate the scientific truths regarding adolescence for the presence of these histories (Smith, 1990). The following sections pursue that aim by examining the "confident characterizations" (Trinh, 1989) of adolescence for how anxieties about control, normality, masculinity, and sexuality, among others, are reproduced in contemporary visions of youth.

### COMING OF AGE

Adolescents *come of age* into adulthood. Adolescents are *at the threshold* of adulthood. Adolescence is also referred to as the *transition to adulthood*. Gould (1991) suggests that these terms have an evolutionary connection, a sense of coming into an enlightened period after a long darkness. Hall was an evolutionary psychologist (Curti, 1959; Gould, 1977), and he believed that adolescence was a time of an evolutionary leap of individuals and of the race. If the species, and individual young men, were not to be arrested at the gang stage (boys from the ages of 8-11 years), then adolescents must be helped to develop.

Coming of age participates in what Wood (1984) characterizes as an "ideology of emergence" (p. 73). Wood found that adults in secondary schools considered teenagers, but specifically the sex drive of young males, as naturally emerging, outside of social influences or relations, and this allowed adults in schools to turn their backs on sexist practices. Wood's analysis of an ideology of emergence points to a conception of adolescence as outside of society, just emerging from within, rather than socially constituted and constituting.<sup>6</sup> Coming of age locates the force of the arrival in youths as natural creatures, arriving at age akin to how spring arrives each year with the swelling of tree buds. Natural and portentous, coming of age signifies an important, powerful, and uncontrollable change.

Chudacoff (1989) demonstrates how industrial capitalism, technological advances, medicine, and education all operated during the late 1880s and early 1900s to develop an age-conscious America. Schools began age grading (Kett, 1977), and psychologists provided tests for mental age as well (Richardson, 1989). Hand in hand with the identification of distinctive and narrowly age-bounded peer groups, norms for behavior were articulated. Coming of age also carries norms for behavior, which provide standards by which deviance can be identified. Age became a major factor in the normalizing of populations. Youths in age-graded and mentally measured school classrooms could be identified as age appropriate, as "on time," precocious, or slow (Macleod, 1983). Similarly, pedagogies could be evaluated for their age appropriateness (Walkerdine, 1990). Chudacoff carefully describes how narrow bands of age peers became normed by specific

expectations for behavior and accomplishments in health, in schooling, and in play. Thus the terms coming of age and at the threshold identify youths at the turn of a new normative period of life.

Trinh (1989) terms language such as coming of age and at the threshold as “homiletic,”<sup>7</sup> capturing the mix of patriarchal preaching and scientific gospel found in much scientific rhetoric (Brumberg, 1988; Haraway, 1989). Trinh demonstrates how such homiletic language appears to give the subject—adolescents—importance but really confers greater authority on the author of the homily. If a scientist proclaims the potentials and problems of coming of age, then the scientist who is defining the not yet of age is positionally superior. Being in the state of coming of age erases the ability of those in the state to describe or know themselves and places the privilege and responsibility on adult experts to explain adolescents. Anthropologist Victor Turner used the term “liminality” to describe the position of persons between states, in the midst of a rite of passage, outside of social positions and power (Turner, 1969). Trinh’s (1989) critique of colonialist anthropology also applies to youth; she writes that the natives (or adolescents) are the “handicapped who cannot represent themselves and have to either be represented or learn how to represent themselves” (p. 59). Adolescents are similar to colonized natives when scientists declare them to be coming of age, a rhetorical move by which the experts “strip their identity off and paste it back on” (p. 12). Adolescents are emptied out, made liminal, and then reconstituted by scientific descriptors and schooling practices.

To mass youths together with the terms coming of age and at the threshold sets up a clear positional superiority of adults over adolescents based on age. Age is a positional superiority in which adults always come out better, no matter what the particular issues or behaviors. Coming of age reduces human subjectivity to one dimension—age—accompanied by shadowy evolutionary images of animal, savage, and civilized societies.

What sources, functions, and effects might such a positional massification of youths have? Haraway (1989) writes that massification, or dehumanization, needs a story.<sup>8</sup> What is the story that allows us to reduce adolescents to a one-dimensional mass on the basis of age? Spacks (1981) argues that “our psychology confirms our sociology” (p. 290). The old have power in our society, and it follows that our

psychology illuminates how the undeveloped—the young—are lacking. Other scholars point to the economic conditions of industrial capitalism during the late 1800s, which diminished work opportunities such as apprenticeships. As a result, middle-class youths remained economically dependent on families longer, and extended schooling became more normative in securing jobs in the changing economy (Kett, 1977; Modell & Goodman, 1990; Ryan, 1981). However, if Haraway (1989) is correct, then neither the sociological nor the economic analysis alone helps understand the story that supports the massification of adolescents into the liminal coming of age.

To inquire further into the massification of adolescence and adolescents' scientifically based inferiority, I turn to the other two confident discourses on adolescence: that adolescents are hormone driven and that teenagers are overwhelmingly influenced by peers. Being teenaged locates a young person in a liminal state, but the hormonal and peer-oriented descriptors provide the action and problems of the naturalized story of adolescence.

### **BIOLOGY IS DESTINY: THE ADOLESCENT BODY**

Sex asserts its mastery in field after field, and works its havoc in the form of secret vice, debauch, disease, and enfeebled heredity, cadences the soul to both its normal and abnormal rhythms. . . . Thus the foundations of domestic, social and religious life are oftenest undermined. (Hall, 1905, p. xii)

The second confident characteristic of adolescents declares that they are controlled by hormones and, therefore, dangerously out of control.<sup>9</sup> The onset of pubertal growth sets in motion hormonal changes that determine physiological growth and affect emotions. The image of a storm-tossed land is invoked; the adolescent body is tormented by the physiological and emotional storm of hormonal changes. Hall also wrote of adolescent disorientation stemming from being driven from the Garden of Eden of childhood. Both metaphors link images of nature with crisis.

In a recent comprehensive anthology of research on adolescence in the developmental framework, the editors write that "biological processes drive many aspects of adolescence, although social contexts shape the expression of biological imperatives to a remarkable de-

gree" (Feldman & Elliott, 1990, p. 1). The chapter on adolescent sexuality in the same collection opens by stating that "reproductive maturation is the most distinctive feature of the transition from childhood to adulthood. It is also potentially the most problematic" (Katchadourian, 1990, p. 330). Read together, these statements identify biology, or reproductive maturation, as driving many aspects of adolescence.<sup>10</sup>

The medical model of the human being is invoked here, "the belief that biology is primary, that hormonal changes cause behavioral ones, but not vice versa" (Fausto-Sterling, 1985, p. 100). This is the paradigm of biological causation, a linear, uncausal model of human behavior. Fausto-Sterling analyzes how this model leads to a set of beliefs, supported by problematic studies, about menstruation and menopause. When biology is viewed as the sole cause of behavior, "the hormonal renders the social inevitable" (Goldberg, 1973, p. 93).

"The idea that women's reproductive systems direct their lives is ancient" (Fausto-Sterling, 1985, p. 91). The fluctuations of women's systems (naturally abnormal women) render them untrustworthy in positions of responsibility.

Their dangerous, unpredictable furies warrant control by the medical profession, while ironically, the same "dangerous" females also need protection because their reproductive systems, so necessary for the procreation of the race, are vulnerable to stress and hard work. (pp. 91-92)

We know that thoughts, mind-sets, and emotions can affect a woman's menstrual cycle; for example, exhaustion, travel, illness, and/or stress can alter the timing of a menstrual flow, change the number and intensity of premenstrual signals, and influence discomfort. These all are variations in the physiological monthly cycle, influenced by a woman's emotional state and, in turn, by social and economic situations. The biological primacy model, also called the "normative disease-model framework," ignores historical and cultural contexts, as it also pathologizes changeableness or rhythmicity as either "inherently unhealthy" or judged according to appropriate norms for change (Koeske, 1980, p. 8).

Adolescence is similarly conceived from the biological causation model, with biological changes being primary and unidirectional, resulting in disequilibrium—the storms of hormones and moods. The

quotes at the beginning of this section assert that adolescence, with its fluctuations, charges, and unpredictability, is attributed to "biological imperatives" or "reproductive [sic] maturation." Context is only *grafted on* and shapes the expression of the biological forces (James & Prout, 1990).<sup>11</sup>

Fausto-Sterling (1985) argues that a simple linear model of biological causation is inadequate for theory and research on hormones in women and men and that we must struggle for a complex conceptualization in which mind, body, and culture depend on one another inextricably. Similarly, adolescence requires a conceptualization in which physical changes are viewed as interrelated with mind and feeling in specific situations. Such a conceptualization would contribute to a view of youth as socially constructed, within particular contexts and discourses, rather than universal, timeless, and massified.

A related problem in the discourse on adolescents as body out of control is the objectified, developing body. Leder (1990) writes,

Since the seventeenth century, the body has been primarily identified with its scientific description, that is, regarded as a material object whose anatomical and functional properties can be characterized according to general scientific law. The human body is taken as essentially no different from any other physical object. (p. 5)

This scientific account emphasizes the body as experienced from a third-person rather than from a first-person perspective.

Leder (1990) proposes investigating the "lived body" rather than the physical body. The lived body is the locus of experience, not just a constellation of hormones that get "expressed" in different social contexts. The lived body is the embodied self that lives and breathes, perceives and acts, speaks and reasons. The lived body is not a located thing but rather is a path of access, a being in the world.

Leder (1990) illustrates the concept of the lived body with a discussion of what it means to learn how to swim, which is not merely a physical skill comprised of mechanical movements. In Leder's view, the skill of swimming is *incorporated*. When Leder learned to swim, his relationship to the world also changed: "I operate from that new skill upon the world. . . . For example, the lake looks different than in my pre-swimming days, when it could not be crossed and offered no access" (p. 32). Perspective and perception changed with physical

ability. Incorporation of new skills is the result of a “rich dialectic wherein the world transforms my body, even as my body transforms its world” (p. 34). This is an investigation of the body from the first-person perspective, an approach that could provide a socially located understanding of pubertal changes that included physical, mental, and emotional dimensions.

Adolescent bodies in this second confident characterization of physical and hormonal changes are objectified as things that are out of control. A denaturalizing of adolescence must include both a view of body in interaction with the world and a first-person, lived body perspective.

### PEER CULTURES AND PEER PRESSURE

The third confident characterization about adolescents is that they are strongly peer oriented. Coleman’s (1961) study, *The Adolescent Society*, is the cornerstone of the contemporary sociological evidence for this aspect of adolescent nature. In a study of student attitudes in 10 high schools, Coleman found that being popular was more important than getting good grades. Although Coleman’s findings have been critiqued (Brown, 1990), numerous other field studies<sup>12</sup> confirm the conclusions (or begin with the assumptions) that friends are more important to teenagers than is anything else. By examining similar strains in Victorian psychology’s view of women and savages, I show how this taken-for-granted view is a demeaning one, a term that again massifies and positions its objects as immature, dangerous, and needing to be controlled. Some feminist and cultural critiques of psychological and social psychological research<sup>13</sup> characterize the bias against peer-oriented social relations in work like Coleman’s as evidence of the dominant White, middle-class, male perspective throughout the sciences. Whose lives and values are supported in the demeaning of peer orientations? Does the pathologizing of peer orientation exalt individual autonomy as a primary characteristic of adulthood?

Victorian psychologists studied and pronounced on the natures of women, savages, and children. All three were “undeveloped men,” that is, seen as deficient against the norm of middle-class European men. Men were believed to be stronger intellectually, creatively, in



will, and in achievement drives. Two characterizations of women and savages by the Victorian psychologists relate to peer orientation.

First, the undeveloped men were less individuated.

Endowed with less measure of individuality, women resembled one another more than did men. Women's nature was more generic and less specific. Each woman is a more adequate representative of her sex than a man is of his. (Russett, 1989, pp. 74-75)

Russett translates this assertion into the colloquialism, If you've seen one, then you've seen them all. Thus women were seen as uniform.

Second, the psychological correlate of this uniformity of women was conformity. "Women go in flocks, and in social matters are less prone to stand out with salient individuality" (Russett, 1989, p. 75).

Both of these characteristics are regularly attributed to adolescents, who are characterized as succumbing to peer pressure and being part of peer cultures, which socialize them to peer norms. Whether it be middle-class youths with norms of sexuality or drug use or studies of gangs or of high school groups, friends are the most important and influential people in adolescents' lives. The linking of uniformity and conformity among adolescents in relation to strong peer orientation persists in current research, with some modifications.<sup>14</sup> This conceptualization establishes teenagers as dangerous *others*, not as individuated adults. Fabian (1983) notes how the term "culture" historically has been used as part of the description of and distancing from others. The application of the term culture to youth (e.g., youth subculture or peer culture) helps create conceptual distance between the activities and perspectives of those with a culture and those with "practical reason" (Sahlins, 1976).

This third characterization of adolescents as excessively peer oriented is also portrayed as naturally occurring. When youths reach the age of puberty, they long for only the companionship of other youths. However, little attention is given to the impact of social practices and attitudes on youths' peer orientation. The separation of youths in age-segregated middle and high schools for 6 hours each day must have a strong impact on looking to other youths for norms, approval, and companionship. The sociological work of Eisenstadt (1964) suggests that in a highly competitive, production-oriented society, youth friendships may be the sole arena for affirmation as a person without

evaluation by external standards. Corroborating the social structural seclusion of youths, Greenberger and Steinberg's (1986) study of teenagers' waged labor shows that even in contemporary jobs, youths work primarily with peers and have little interaction with or supervision by adults. These studies suggest that peer orientation is as likely to be an effect of social and institutional arrangements as it is a foundational element of adolescent nature.

To identify adolescents as succumbing to peer pressure and, therefore, as insufficiently individuated also contributes to the expecting adults to act as autonomous individuals, a norm that has been analyzed and critiqued by scholars in several fields (e.g., Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Gilligan, 1982; Varenne, 1977). To demean peer pressure has the effect of privileging an individualism that historically is associated with middle-class White males and largely alien to the experiences of many people of color and women. Thus this aspect of the discourse on adolescence validates individual autonomy as the superior mode of being in the world, a position that is problematic for contemporary economic, environmental, and family situations.

### **AGE DUALISM: ADOLESCENT/ADULT**

The scientific view of adolescents, as examined through three of its most confident characteristic discourses, draws from and contributes to a series of binary oppositions that include adolescent/adult, feminine/masculine, savage/civilized, emotions/reason, body/mind, massed/individuated, and culture/practical reason. Adolescence participates in multiple registers of meaning in social, cultural, and economic life. One result of these multiple binary oppositions is to reify age in a way that appears completely natural. People between the ages of 12 and 17 years are believed to naturally and inevitably possess certain characteristics and behaviors that correspond with essentially different natures than those of adults. The set of binary oppositions cements adults in positions of superiority, regardless of the topic. Adolescents have been constructed and problematized in a way similar to the modern conception of the elderly (Cole, 1984), with the effect of making youthfulness the problem of adolescents and

denying a basic human solidarity in growing up. When groups such as the elderly or the young are constructed as other and problematic, social regulation of these others is supported and specified by the social science experts who represent them.

By examining the confident characterizations regarding adolescence, I have endeavored to call into question the naturalness of the hierarchy of adult over youth that is part of the modern scientific discourse on adolescence. Historian Joan Scott summarizes the aims of such denaturalizing:

We must find ways (however imperfect) continually to subject our categories to criticism, our analyses to self-criticism. If we employ Derrida's definition of deconstruction, this criticism means analyzing in context the way any binary opposition operates, reversing and displacing its hierarchical construction, rather than accepting it as real or self-evident or in the nature of things. (Scott, 1988, p. 41)

## CONCLUSION

I have articulated a critique of the reigning conceptions of adolescence as twice naturalized in that they portray particular characteristics of youths between the ages of 12 and 17 years as naturally occurring and as having natures that essentially are distinct from those of adults and children. In critiquing the naturalized status of adolescence, I seek to contest for the scientific account of what counts as knowledge about adolescence and to establish the social nature of adolescents over the abstracted, ahistorical, individualized view that ends up confirming, backed by scientific evidence, that teenagers need to be controlled.

The analytical approach employed here first examined the rhetorical construction of adolescence in the continuing use of terms such as coming of age and at the threshold. This homiletic style helps establish the age as important but also as indecipherable by those undergoing the portentous changes. Teenagers are massed together on the single criterion of age.

Feminist critiques of research on hormones provide a model for scrutinizing assumptions of a biologically driven view of human beings. Because adolescence is defined on the basis of biological

changes of puberty, which are presumed to be disruptive and destabilizing, this characterization of adolescence also contributes to a view of teenagers as dangerous and out of control. Because teenagers are biologically (and thus inevitably) unstable, adult control is a logical and necessary response. This characterization has important consequences for school practices and curriculum; adolescents are considered under the control of hormones and unavailable for serious (i.e., critical) school tasks and responsibilities.

The third confident characterization of teenagers is that they are peer oriented or prone to cliques and gangs. This characterization provides further evidence of their irresponsibility and untrustworthiness; bolsters the White, middle-class, male norm of individual autonomy as synonymous with maturity; and supports adult control of youths' lives. No attention is given to the sociohistorical segmentation of teenagers into organizations with narrow age bands and the lessening of contact with adults or children as the contexts for turning toward age mates. Peer orientation has been naturalized as a universal, naturally occurring characteristic of teenagers. The deconstructive moves of this analysis are initial steps in a larger examination of the production of adolescence in sciences, schools, and popular culture. Assumptions regarding the distinctive nature of youths and the acceptance that adolescence unfolds of its own accord in the individual teenaged body, triggered by hormones, are significant effects of social practices and scientific discourses. I believe that a view of teenagers as essentially out of control due to hormonal storms plays an important part in maintaining control of youths as the highest value in secondary schools and simultaneously legitimates a dumbing down of the curriculum. Only those youths who demonstrate how reason, rather than hormones, rules their lives (e.g., youths who are compliant with *and* successful in meeting educators' demands for how, when, and what to learn and accept as important) are deemed mature and given some small measures of freedom and responsibility. In the interest of changing widely held conceptions of teenagers as disequibrated, out of control, and requiring continual surveillance, I have begun these critiques of how social scientists and educators contribute to the construction of adolescents as natural and problematic.

## NOTES

1. Of course, reformers moving toward more humane or liberatory practices are joined by reformers interested in producing more orderly, regulated, predictable workers (Labaree, 1992).

2. See, for example, Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, and Walkerdine (1984), Luke (1989), Rafter (1988), Richardson (1989), and Walkerdine (1990).

3. I am not ignoring the scholarship on the history of childhood, which clearly locates youth in specific historical and social situations. Nevertheless, the concept of adolescence carries modernist baggage of ahistorical, asocial subjectivity. However, for recent work that attempts to rectify this, see Elder, Modell, and Parke (1993) and James and Prout (1990).

4. For elaboration on the turn-of-the-century period, see Gay (1984), Kett (1977), Macleod (1983), Ryan (1981), Schlossman (1977), Smith-Rosenberg (1985), and Wiebe (1967).

5. For examining connections among the new sciences and colonialist expansion, three very important works are Cravens (1978), Haraway (1989), and Stocking (1982). However, this is by no means a definitive list of useful scholarship on this topic.

6. The conception of youth as outside of society is also visible in scholarship on peer sexual harassment in schools and its accepted status as natural, as "boys being boys" (see Stein, 1993).

7. Speier (1976) terms this perspective an "adult ideological" perspective, whereas Alanen (1988) critiques it as elitist. Each characterization captures a different dimension of its social relations.

8. See Haraway's (1989, p. 231) *Primate Visions*. Haraway's actual words are that "sadism demands a story," a quote from Laura Mulvey. However, I think that the sense in which she invokes sadism can be broadened to dehumanization.

9. Hall's (1905) quote refers to some of the social fears of his and our time: national, economic, and social decline due to failure to control sexuality. The bodies of Black youths, especially Black girls, are central to these anxieties in both Hall's time and in the present. Space does not permit a discussion of the racialization of sexuality issues that are encoded in the problems of teenage sexuality. For an introduction to those issues, see Lesko (1995) and Solinger (1992).

10. I have selected particular quotations that support my argument from the lengthy and varied Feldman and Elliott (1990) anthology. At numerous points in the anthology, authors state that the unilinear biological approach to conceptualizing youth is inadequate. Nevertheless, I argue that in a fundamental way, developmental perspectives are grounded in biology and can be faulted in the way Fausto-Sterling (1985) does. In arguing this point, I also rely on the critique that psychology is grounded on a humanistic view of human beings as autonomous individuals outside of society (Henriques et al., 1984). The biological view of youth participates in that modernist, asocial definition of human beings. Two recent volumes that will be helpful on denaturalizing biological characterizations, but that arrived too late for use in this analysis, are Oudshoorn (1994) and Tiefer (1995).

11. Zuckerman (1993) claims that historical analysis of children and youths often is used as a prologue to the "real" data, presided over by developmental psychologists (p. 231). This is a different way of characterizing the failure to contextualize.

12. For example, see Brake (1985), Cusick (1973), Dunphy (1969), Larkin (1979), Hammersley and Woods (1984), and Willis (1977).

13. In psychology, see Gilligan (1982) and Hare-Mustin and Marecek (1990). In anthropology, see Heath (1983), Lubeck (1985); Stack (1974), and Varenne (1977).

14. For example, see Brown (1990). Schwartz (1987) portrays the dualism attendant in this conformity view. When teenagers (or women or natives) are not oversocialized, they are undersocialized or rebellious. Neither the conforming nor the rebelling position of youth gathers much positive support, although both are generally thought to be in the nature of adolescents.

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