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The Factors of Informal Background Related to the Youth Value Orientation in the USA : part two

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Abstract: The article involves the results of the researches which were carried out in the conditions of the USA. They were focused on the factors of informal background related to the youth value orientation.
Key-words: Youth value orientation, youth, values, social background

Within the bounds of the article we are not able to devote our attention to all factors of formal and informal youth background which has affected the process of their socialisation in the socio/cultural background in their residence and the residence of their families.

We have chosen those cases which are the most surveyed and considered to be the most significant determinants of the socialisation of the adolescent, i.e. peers, sport, parties, sex, ethics and morality, busyness, and stress.

Peers/Friends and Clusters

> *My parents don't know me, my teachers don' know me, even my coach doesn't know me. The only people who really know me are my friends.*

The early adolescent will show signs of entering a new psychosocial phase, i.e. the second separation-individuation [Blos 1979] (he first phase is he developmental shift from infant to toddler). Because he or she does not have the cognitive ability to identify the source of the offending system or individual, he or she turns to a parent or family system to ease the as yet unidentified pain.

During mid-adolescence this changes. At roughly fourteen or fifteen year of age, adolescents begin to reflect on how they have been treated for much of their life. When examining the impact of past and present systems on them, the emotions expressed ranged from disappointment or mild sarcasm to outright bitterness and hostility.

Nowadays, secondary schools are populated by smaller grouping of friends, or clusters, who navigate as a unit the complex network of social independence with loyalty similar to that of a family. Donald Posterski recognized the emerging new social order of clusters.

A friendship cluster is more than just a circle of relationships. It is heart and soul of being young today. There is no formal membership. You are either in or you are not. Being in means you share many things: interests, experiences, intimate thoughts, problems, and triumphs of the day. Being in means you tune in to the same music, wear each other's sweaters, and generally just enjoy each other. [Posterski, Friendship 1985, p. 8]

Today, the cluster is a family with a set of respected and controlled expectations, loyalties, and values. What gives a cluster is power is a common, almost tribalistic bond and unifying social narrative (the grand story that gives meaning and cohesiveness to the cluster and defines who is in and who is not). The inability during mid-adolescence to balance disappointment over specific events, people, or institutions by separating the good from the bad drives the intense need for a safe place. Mid-adolescents gather in like-minded groups to protect themselves from the forces they perceive as alien to them. Clusters have replaced the cliques in today's adolescent economy: Adolescents believe they have no alternative. One of the most clearly observable aspects of middle adolescent is the structure of their social world and the operational expectations of their peer relationships, both friendships and romantic relations. Students also arrange their daily tasks according to this structure. From what hallway to walk down between classes, to where to see friends, whom to go to the homecoming dance with. The parameters of day-to-day experiences flow directly from the phenomenon labelled clustering. [Oetting, Beauvais 1987, pp. 205-13] Peer relations take on an extremely significant role in the life of an adolescent.

The adolescent landscape is changing at such a rapid ate, it is extremely difficult for studies and theories regarding peer relationships during adolescence to keep pace in any meaningful way. Four aspects of clusters are vital in seeking to understand how adolescents experience, define, and order their world:

1. The reasons clusters emerged
2. The distinguishing characters of clusters
3. How clusters are chosen and identified
4. The protocol for members of one cluster in relating to another [Oetting, Beauvais 1987, pp. 205-13]

Generally, peer relationships have been seen as a normal part of the adolescent process. Traditional theories of development affirm that the shift from familial allegiance and intimacy to peer affiliation and commitment is a normal process during adolescence. [Piaget 1950] Jeffrey Lashbrook reports that the social bonds

that are developed during adolescence are essential for two reasons: They address the need to belong to, and they provide a cohesive unit that serves as glue for society. [Lashbrook, Fitting] An even more significant driving force for clustering today is the need to find a safe place.

Urie Bronfenbrenner argued that the gravitation toward peer relationships during adolescence has a negative side. Adolescents may tend to distance themselves from their families as they gravitate toward their peers. {Brofenbrenner 1979] Maja Dekovic and Wim Meeus state that "turn to peers for companionship and emotional support not because they are inevitably attracted to peers, but because they are pushed in that direction by inattentive and unconcerned parents". [Dekovic and Meeus] Clusters developed because adolescents know they have no choice but to find a safe, supportive family and community, and in a culture of abandonment, the peer group seems to be the only option they have.

Cluster can be defined as a group of adolescents who identify themselves as a defined relational unit. The word *friend* represents something much different from what was meant n the late 1970s.

Chap Clark outlines the list of distinguishing characteristics of clusters:

– *Size:* Clusters can contain as few as four or five and as many as eight or ten members

– *Gender:* Clusters are almost always gender specific. Often a male cluster will align itself with a female cluster and they will spend a great deal of time together.

– *Timing:* A significant mark of the move into mid-adolescence is affiliation with a cluster. This happens during later months of the freshman year and is often solidified by the end of the sophomore year. The power of cluster attachment at university can cause the adolescents remain in the cluster for several years.

– *Loyalty and commitment:* In the cluster there is a strong implicit agreement to remain loyal and intimately and regularly connected to the members of the cluster. Loyalty to those with whom one has chosen to align oneself has the highest value.

– *Rules and norms:* The necessary rules, norms, values, and even narratives of the cluster that serve to bind members together are all worked out prir to the cluster's ultimate formation. After these have been negotiated and established, the members of the cluster tend to subordinate their own personal convictions, loyalties, and norms to the will of the collective whole. [Clark 2000]

In ninth grade, I felt having a lot of friends and being accepted were the most important things. I even conformed to their desires and dyed my hair pink, dressed somewhat punkish, and went to parties with rock music, smoking and other activities. After a while, I realized that this was not me. It wasn't until eleventh grade that I broke away from that destructive group of friends and chose to hang out with others. My group of friends wasn't as big, but at least they were more like me.

high school student

Every person enters the adolescent phase of life shaped by three forces:
1. Genetic makeup (what someone calls nature and others refer to as the created self)
2. Familial and parental influences (often referred to as environment)
3. An internal determination of how to integrate the two

Some researchers assert that parents play a significant role in cluster formation. Maja Dekovic and Wim Meeus demonstrate that "the quality of the parent - child relationship affects the adolescent's self-concept, which in turn affects the adolescent's integration into the world of peers". {Dekovic and Meeus] Personal worldview and the accompanying sense of self, which is the centre of worldview, are the basic criteria on which clusters are based. Clusters are subconsciously chosen according to who will make one feel the most welcome and safe with the least amount of work and stress. There may be some overlap and movement from cluster to cluster, but this seems to be rather exception than the rule.

Clusters are not necessarily bad; they are just different from what most adults experienced. Peer groups are powerful and extremely important. Adolescents often use masks to disguise a deeper sense of dis-ease. The quest for a safe place is what drives the cluster phenomenon in the first place.

Sport

Sports should be fun. But sports are not longer about fun, exercise, experience, and play. They are about competition, winning, and defeating an opponent. Sports are no longer child's play; they are a grown-up dog-eat-dog reality.

The pressure from athletic coaches is really bad. The pressure to be the biggest and the best pushes kids to use steroids and other supplements, play hurt, and take one for the team. The coaches don't seem to care about your well-being. They just want the trophy and the recognition that come with a championship. A perfect example is my school. No team in its history has ever won three regional titles in a row. We've already won two, and the coaches are making practices longer and more strenuous to the point of dehydration and broken bones.

high school student

There are many positive aspects to high school sports. Few students participate in activities because they get exercise, make friends, and so on. For many athletes, coaches can be hard-headed, demanding, and not committed to what is best for each student, they are ultimately more concerned with what is best for the team.

Many adolescents do not participate in sports for various reason: cost, lack of transportation, time commitment, and so on. The most important reason is that there are not enough sports or enough room in the ones that are available for "average" student-athletes to compete. Even if there were more opportunities for

participation, they were told not to compete or they chose the way of hard shaking. Adult's view is also different. Parents of an unsuccessful player do not give their child any emotional support. Parents of non-athletes often can see sports in a negative light.

True character is built when one is rewarded for hard work, when one is willing to sacrifice for a friend or teammate, when one experiences the instilled value that proclaims the love of sport and the lust for the competition. We say that sports build character, but in reality we can see it builds nothing else than arrogance, self-centeredness, and performance ethic that is destructive to healthy, communally connected development.

The social ladder is being dismantled in favour of a web of social influence. Students no longer put up with the stereotype that athletes rule the school and are the best ones. And the life of an athlete is full of suffering.

Carrie has always loved to dance. When she started fourth grade, dance was no longer a joyous adventure of free expression. It had shifted to a physically gruelling gauntlet every weekday as preparation for the next competition. By fifteen, the pressure from the driven coach, the early morning practices, the continual fight with her eight, and the daily pressure not to mess up and hurt the tem had taken its toll. She quit the team and she had lost her love of dance. Similar situation happens when, on the one hand, friends show compassion, loyalty, and concern, but the coach, on the other hand, is too concerned about being in charge, regardless of whom he hurt in the process.

A sensitive, savvy coach in an overly competitive system may be able to ensure that *that* sport or *that* season does as little developmental damage as possible, but the wave of winning and performing is a large force indeed. It used to be fun to play sports, but for far too many students know that they had better come through and perform, even if they are only playing for fun.

Sex

While the study of adolescent sexuality is of unquestionable importance, I am now amazed and saddened that so many of us have studied sexuality removed from its context, which is often, but certainly no always, a romantic relationship. It is ironic that scientists have neglected the study of adolescent romance since it is a topic of such great importance to so many teenagers. [Fisher 2000]

Terri D. Fisher, reviewing the book *The Development of Romantic Relationship in Adolescence*

We live in a sexually saturated culture. Adolescents grow up in a society that is regularly accused of being sexually outdated and puritanical and at the same time sexually preoccupied. The way we portray sex and sensuality in television shows and films seems to reduce life to one juvenile, narcissistic, sexual escapade

after another. Adolescents are the products of this cultural reality. The only way to understand is to watch and listen carefully to adolescents as they talk about the reality of sexuality in their world. The adolescent world is not as saturated with sex as it is infused with palpable loneliness. For most adolescents the issue of sex has lost its mystique and has become almost commonplace. They have been conditioned to expect so much from sex and have been so tainted by overexposure and the emptiness of valueless sexual banter and play as they have become laissez-faire in their attitudes and even jaded. As one student said "sex is a game and a toy, nothing more". When two girls trying to have oral sex with a boy in the room have accidentally been caught by daughter's mother, the only moral aspect of the event was that the mother had no right to enter the room without knocking. Apparently, the young people were more concerned about what was going to happen to them than about the event itself.

A controversial new study links teen sexual intercourse with depression and suicide attempts.

The findings are particularly true for young girls, says the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank that sponsored the research. About 25% of sexually active girls say they are depressed all, most, o a lot of the time; 8% of girls who are not sexually active feel the same.

The Heritage study taps the government-funded National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health. The Heritage researchers selected federal data on 2,800 students aged 14-17. The youngsters rated their own "general state continuing unhappiness" and were not diagnosed as clinically depressed.

The Heritage researchers do not find a causal link between "unhappy kids" and sexual activity, says Robert Rector, a senior researcher with Heritage. "This is really impossible to prove." But he says that the study findings send a clear message about unhappy teens that differs from one portrayed in the popular culture, that "all forms of non-material sexual activity are wonderful and glorious, particularly the younger [teen] are better," he says. [Peterson 2003]

The students themselves believe that sex falls in the range of normative sexual behaviour. If it is done with sixteen-year-olds, they say "It would have happened only with girls who were so drunk that they didn't know or care or girls who were just stupid". With popular television programs such as *Friends* or *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* unblushingly making reference to a ménage a trois, it is a little wonder that the concept of multiple sex partners at a single event would be considered mainstream by adolescents. There are no longer any rules regarding sexuality in mainstream society, especially for adolescents. By the time a typical child reaches ten or eleven years of age, he or she has seen on television or in films or at least

heard not only about sexual intercourse but also oral sex, multiple sexual partners, masturbation, anal sex or any other form of sexual expression and experimentation a human can invent. [Regrenus 2002, pp. 681-706]

Children and early adolescents are subjected to this barrage of sexual expression without having the understanding of how relational and psychosocial dynamics intersect with sexual activity. Sexual joking and sexual language were common and even intrusive. The explicit nature of sexuality on the campus is shocking:

– A group of girls was judging a guy's backside. Pleased with the attention, he erotically posed for the judges.
– A student dropped a note that was filled with a sexually explicit description of the adventure she had planned with two male students.
– I walked in on a couple embracing ad kissing. The boy's arm was through the girl's thong, which was exposed above her low-cut jeans.
– I heard a group of students taking about things that would have been banned from all but the most severely rated movies twenty years ago.

Because teens may have different ideas about what constitutes " having sex", professionals must take care that both they and the adolescents understand exactly what behaviours they are talking about when discussing issues of sexuality. For example, although both will view vaginal sexual intercourse as having sex, they may differ in their perceptions about whether activities such as oral sex, mutual masturbation, or even kissing constitute having sex. [Solarz 2002, p. 26] Almost no mid-adolescent believes that sex is anything other than penetration in a vagina. Everything else, including oral sex, is generally not considered sex. Several indicators (the abortion rate, birth rate, non-marital birth) point to the fact that sexual intercourse is less prevalent among adolescents today than in the past decades. It is difficult to gauge sexual activity from reported episodes of transmitted diseases. Chlamydia is greatly increasing in the mid-adolescent population, while gonorrhoea rates are falling for mid-adolescents even though they are rising for those aged twenty to twenty-four. [Child Trends 2003]

The only ethical boundary that exists in the mid-adolescent word concerns actual intercourse. A break-up after months of intimate dating and sexual experimentation is followed by sadness, heartache, emptiness, loneliness. Non-marital sexual activity and intimacy can have measurable negative consequences. [Martin, p 601-609] The reason for the decreasing age of intimate sexual activity is loneliness. Adolescent sexuality is connected more to a desire for relational connection and a safe place than to a physical activity of the body. Sexual activity and desire are obviously related to natural drives and hormonal changes of this phase of life. On top of that, today's adolescents are crying out for attention and affection. Sexual behaviour and sexual fantasy are immensely powerful, they can mimic authentic love and this is why sexuality for adolescents is more dangerous and potent

than most adults can imagine. Many students hold to the philosophy that sexual activity is generally better reserved for someone you love.

The definition of sex is now limited to the technicality of the intercourse. Will this generation be able to understand the power o love that gives sacredness to a physical love? All we can do is remind the young of our culture that love matters, that people are not objects or playthings, and that our hearts and bodies cannot be separated. Adults will need to stay involved in the battle for balance.

Busyness and Stress

Today's child has become the unwilling, unintended victim of overwhelming stress – the stress borne of rapid, bewildering social change and constantly rising expectations. [Elkind]

David Elkind*, The Hurried child*

Today's adolescents are about as busy as humanly possible. The ever mounting demands on their time and energies; the heightening expectations from coaches, bosses and activity leaders; the steadily increasing proliferation of homework makes them both busy and tired. One student at the Yale Political Union has noted, the system does not necessarily reward brains; it rewards energy. The ones who thrive are the ones who can keep going from one activity to another, from music to science, to sports, to community service, to the library and so on without rest. To get into a competitive school, you need a hyperactive thyroid as much as high intelligence. [Brooks 2002] Adolescents who work 20 or more hours per week during the school year experience consistently negative outcomes. These young people are emotionally distressed, have poor grades, are more likely to smoke cigarettes, and are more likely to become involved in other high-risk behaviours such as alcohol and drug abuse. We can mention main stressors and their point value:

Parent dies	100
Parents divorce	73
Parents separate	65
Parent travels as a part of job	63
Parent remarries	50
Parents reconcile	45
Mother goes to work	45
School difficulties	39
Threat of violence	31

Three areas of stress take their toll on most students: the pressure to succeed, the pressure to maintain stability at home while remaining loyal and connected to the peer group, and the general pressure associated with relationships. These pressure points seem to have a significant impact on emotional equilibrium of

most students. On the one hand, a mayor aspect of their developmental responsibility is to learn how to cope with stress and manage their emotions. On the other hand, the adults have continued to pile on them increased burdens and complex demands. Mid-adolescents feel the need to flee from both pressures and their responsibility to cope. Young adolescents do not want to be left to their own devices. They want more regular contact with adults who care about and respect them. [Hersh 1998, p 364]

> *Funny, isn't it, how one little incident could send me straight into tears and running away like am I nine. I feel ridiculous. I am seventeen and almost an adult. Why can't I handle it?*
>
> *high school student*

Mid-adolescence is a period when even those with belief in themselves have difficulty with the multiple layers of expectations placed on them. Today's strongest mid-adolescents face challenges that their parents did not (nor their brothers or sisters). Those who have a greater ability to handle whatever the environment throws on them still face periods of struggle, insecurity and stress. Most adolescents carry inside them a powerful defence mechanism that keeps them do the best. They know no other way to cope with life. The quicker they move, the less vulnerable they are to ridicule, critique, or examination. They are busy and stressed but they want someone to show their concern.

Parties

> *No matter how many stupid things you do while drinking (except driving, etc.) it's all worthwhile. Knockin' back beers with your best buds s the way to go.*
>
> *high school chatroom, www.futazi.com (accessed July 17, 2003)*

The information on parties is based on student reports of normative behaviour among the campus community. An adult would clearly not to be welcomed to any mid-adolescent party. In their opinion everybody is supposed to drink alcohol at the party. When it comes to substance use and abuse, mid-adolescents fall into one of two categories: Students, who drink and smoke almost exclusively in the context of a communal event. The second group is comprised of adolescents who use alcohol and/or drugs while alone or perhaps with one other person. Those who fall into this category are often outcasts.

Members of clusters usually keep some rules and norms of the cluster, e.g.

1) All members of the cluster drink alcohol and/or smoke marihuana. The most common situation is when one member of a cluster drinks alcohol and the rest of the cluster also drinks roughly at the same rate. This is true even if one or more members of the cluster did not drink when the cluster was being formed.

[Baumann, Ennet, p. 184]

2) When a member of a cluster seems to deviate from the rules, the cluster must decide what to do. It appears that most of the time this deviation was present when the cluster was formed, and therefore, members implicitly acknowledged that this behaviour would not be seen as deviant. The cluster may seem to be committed to a corporate ethic that excludes drinking, but in reality, the decision whether to drink is left up to each member.

3) Majority of members do drink alcohol and smoke but some of them do not. At such times, cluster and the member have to rethink a previously held value, shift ethical commitments, or they distance themselves from even the closest relationships.

If the cluster is confronted with the need to renegotiate the rules and norms of the cluster, a significant dilemma can result for not only the cluster but the individual members as well. Cluster groups hold cohesion and unity as higher values than specific behaviour of individual members. Exception t this would be those behaviours that are destructive to the cluster itself.

Nearly all mid-adolescents want t party and are going to party, regardless of what parents say. Unfortunately, the party scene is not about parties at all. It is about drinking, to a certain degree, drug use, sexual play and experimentation, and other risk behaviours (defined as behaviours that may cause harm to oneself or someone else). [Arnett 2000] Far too many students believe that it is simply impossible to have a good time at a party without alcohol.

The experiences and antics of the players make the parties memorable, not the alcohol itself. A party offers the deeply human elements of communal celebration and ritual as the party-goers attempt to discover what people they belong to. Regrettably, in our culture the use of alcohol and marihuana as a central feature of parties creates an artificial celebration. Adolescents are hungry for a transcendent experience that provides meaning, hope, adventure, and carefree celebration. Adults should not downgrade this fact.

> *Everyone wants to fit in, so they do what everyone else does, such as drugs and drinking. People have to be extremely strong not to give in to these actions. I think a person's family influences actions in saying no. But drugs, they are extremely popular. They are everywhere. Drinking is also popular.*

> *high school student*

One of the major aspects of adolescent development is the longing for a place to belong. Mid/adolescents cannot yet explain their passion for parties or their love for alcohol, but their behaviour, humour, and even social structure scream loudly that they cannot survive without a safe, welcoming place and a ritual. Unfortunately, that ritual requires alcohol.

Adolescents today

According to a psychologist Erik Erikson [1967] and his work supported by extensive studies of people from various cultural lives, the human development is based on interaction of hereditary disposition and environmental influence. He describes the resolution of this process as a stage of "identity achievement". It includes the identity crisis, a period that spans late adolescence and early adulthood.

An unusual deviation from the process of exploring the identity is a process known as "negative identity. The person with a negative identity may turn to negative activities (rebellion) as a way of dealing with identity crisis.

The result is classification of the individual into

1) Identity Diffusion – the situation with no crisis and no commitments

2) Identity Process – the situation with no adolescent's crisis. There are some commitments, often under parent's pressure

3) Identity Moratorium – the situation with a significant crisis with no commitments

4) Identity Achievement – the situation with a number of crisis and relatively abiding commitments

There are two important aspects in identity seeking: job aspect and sexual aspect. Finding a job plays an important critical role in the life of an individual. It is influenced by the fact that the work time takes less time than the free time. To choose a job, individuals use these criteria:

1) Service – the individual tries to fulfill the needs following from the job and needs of other individuals at the same time

2) Practicality – the individual tries to choose the job which is worth it

3) Prestige – the individual chooses the job on the best recommendation of his/her parents and other important people

4) No rational choice – the individual takes to the first opportunity.

The choice of jobs is usually influenced by one of parents and by sex. Here, school advisors play an important role.

The second important aspect while seeking the identity is the sexual role, i.e.

1) Sexual orientation – differences between individuals and their certainty about sexual identity

2) Sexual preference – if an individual is happy with his/her sex

3) Sexual adaptation – how other people can see the behavior of the individual in his/her sexual role.

The sexual role is defined by the behavior of the individual in the group of other people. Sexual identity is defined by the satisfaction with our sex determination. We inculcate the sexual identity to our children from their early age. Sexual

role is changeable, it can be changed during lifetime and it has been changed during history. Identity is taught by imitation. Children imitate their parents or other people in accordance with their own sex and they get support from adults.

Boys and girls mainly identify with their mothers in first two years of their life. Girls continue with this identification. Boys learn how to identify with their fathers. According to Freud, this identification makes them uncertain for all their life.

An adolescent's environment plays a huge role in their identity development. The basic influential environmental determinants on sexual role are parents, the absence if father, brothers and sisters, school, peers, mass media.

People who achieved their identity can be defined as tolerant, able to master their tasks and cope with new facts and conflicts, they are able to make the right choice and put their strong points into effect in their job.

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