

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

Journal of Adolescence

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/adolescence

Adolescent psychopathology in Times of Change: The need for integrating a developmental psychopathology perspective

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Adolescent psychopathology
Stress
Societal changes
Developmental psychopathology
Family

ABSTRACT

In addition to the major physical, sexual and cognitive changes, as well as changes in relationships with parents and peers, in recent years adolescents also have to cope with many technological changes and increasing societal instabilities. Most of the existing research has examined the extent to which increasing uncertainties might impact expression of psychopathology and its magnitude. Emerging from a developmental psychopathology perspective, we are looking first for a better understanding of the meaning that adolescents give to these changes, which in turn is likely to affect their behavior. We are also looking for better understanding of the importance of the role parents, and other societal systems/institutions (such as peers) play in ameliorating or enhancing the likelihood of maladaptive adolescent behavior under these circumstances.

Adolescence is the stage in which a multitude of changes in different domains take place; physical, sexual, cognitive, identity, and relationships with parents and peers. This magnitude of changes is accompanied by considerable stressors and is likely to affect adjustment (Seiffge-Krenke et al., 2010), as the malleability of negative brain experiences might be more harmful than in later developmental periods (Steinberg, 2010). Nevertheless, problems during adolescence are hardly ever a direct consequence of the normative changes of adolescence itself. Research and clinical work have repeatedly shown that while earlier psychological problems continue into adolescence, new problems such as personality disorders and eating disorders appear for the first time during adolescence (Roberts, Harms, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2007). While depression or conduct disorders may start during childhood, there is an abundance of evidence showing that depression or conduct problems might also set on during adolescence following a normative childhood (Cyranski, Frank, Young, & Shear, 2000; Moffitt, Caspi, Harrington, & Milne, 2002). Thus, adolescence can be described as a period characterized by both continuity and change in psychopathology.

Past research investigated the mechanisms that are associated with child onset, adolescent onset and continuity of a disorder, and described their different courses (see Moffitt et al., 2002; Moffitt et al., 2008). While these studies are informative about the changes from childhood to adolescence, less is known about changes in psychopathology during adolescence, or about mechanisms that might explain such changes. Additionally, in recent years we have witnessed major changes in the lives of adolescents - social media, environmental safety and family stability- but the extent to which these changes are associated with the expression of adolescent psychopathology is unclear.

In the introductory paper of this issue, Seiffge-Krenke (this issue) reviews the relevant research on the prevalence of adolescent psychopathology and shows that overall current prevalence figures are quite stable compared to past statistics (Costello, Copeland, & Angold, 2011; Polanczyk, Salum, Sugaya, Caye, & Rohde, 2015). On the other hand, cross-cultural comparisons across time showed that on the clinical level, changes in the appearance of specific disorders, for example traumatic diseases, eating disorders, self-harm,

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2018.03.005>

antisocial and delinquent behaviors, are on the increase, but not in all countries (Rescorla et al., 2012). On the other hand, antisocial behavior and delinquency have decreased the last 15 years in a number of Scandinavian countries (Dodge, Coie, & Lynam, 2006).

While the review is informative about the prevalence of adolescent psychopathology, it falls short on informing us whether, and under what conditions adolescent psychopathology is more or less likely to be expressed. Findings of a number of the papers in the current issue might provide some clues, and serve as a starting point for exploring this question. Stattin and Latina (this issue) showed that expressions of mutually hostile interactions may differ among adolescents across settings (school, home, peers) and this difference is an important indicator of the severity of their problem. Seiffge-Krenke (this issue) found that while expressions of internalizing and externalizing problems differ across gender as could be expected, these gender differences might be different for males and females in some countries. Alain, Marcotte, Desrosiers, Turcotte, and Lafortune (this issue) also showed that considering earlier history (such as being or not being maltreated during childhood) should be considered when incarnation is considered.

Considered together, these three studies from the current issue, as well as some cross cultural comparisons (Achenbach, 2016), suggest that context might play a role in the emergence of or the magnitude to which psychopathology is expressed. For example, it is possible that there are contexts or conditions that are more difficult for females and lead to them experiencing greater stress while, in contrast, there are contexts that are less stressful for them and there is less likelihood of adjustment problems.

Traditionally there are two major approaches to diagnosing and classifying psychopathology. The first is the categorical approach, such as the DSM-5 or ICD-10. The second is the dimensional approach (empirically-derived), such as the BDI or Achenbach. These approaches, based on direct observations (or reports), provide differential diagnoses and are important for epidemiological information. However, they reveal little about how the problems came about, and are not sufficient for examining processes and trajectories.

In order to better understand how adolescent psychopathology might be expressed and change in Times of Change, we propose to explore the processes and mechanisms that are relevant for understanding the changes the adolescents experience nowadays and how these changes might be associated with the course of psychopathology. Within this framework we need to understand the psychological meaning of the changing societal contexts, and their possible direct and indirect impact on adolescent adjustment. We will discuss and conceptualize the changing realities and changes that adolescents in the Western world face and have to address. We will then elaborate on the possible mechanisms through which societal changes influence adolescents and, in turn, psychopathology. We will embed our conceptualization within a developmental psychopathology framework, which could further our understanding of adolescent psychopathology under the Times of Change. Finally, we will integrate findings reported in the current issue, and recent reports from an intervention project in Iceland, to support our notions.

1. Recent societal changes and their direct and indirect effects on adolescents

Over the last decades we have witnessed major economic and societal changes around the world. Since 2008 the world has been plunged into a Great Recession, a Global Financial Crisis (GFC) — the worst since the 1930s Great Depression. Stable economies have turned out to be insecure where individuals lost their jobs, their savings and sometimes their homes, and this within an atmosphere of growing societal unrest (Jetten, Mols, & Healy, 2017). A close inspection shows that this Great Recession is coupled with major societal changes characterized by quick technological advancement on the one hand, and increasing uncertainties concerning economic and personal security on the other hand (Furlong & Cartmel, 1995). A major body of theorizing and research in the last two decades has focused on understanding the lives, development and adjustment of young people who are expected to make the transition into adulthood in a different and unstable world (Schoon & Silbereisen, 2009).

While adolescents are embedded within their (virtual) environments, they are not disconnected from events and processes that take place in the society at large. They are aware of the instabilities and economic uncertainties that might have affected their families or families they know (Jetten, Mols, Healy, & Spears, 2017). They are also aware of the growing difficulties that young adults face nowadays completing their education and finding a secure job (Settersten & Ray, 2010). Additionally, there are adolescents who are channeled to join the labor market (EUROSTAT, 2011) and are exposed to societal difficulties before the age of 18. Based on their own experience, or witnessing hardships experienced by others, adolescents are likely to develop a perception of the world as unstable. For them it is no longer clear if future plans can be materialized (Shulman & Nurmi, 2010).

In their assessment of adolescent stressors in 17 countries, Seiffge-Krenke et al. (2010) found that fear of the future is a major source of stress among adolescents. For example, adolescents in many parts of the world have become far more worried about their educational progress, because success in school largely determines their professional outcomes (Seiffge-Krenke et al., 2012). Considering the instability in current societies, these worries have probably intensified. It is not only questioning whether an individual will be successful in meeting one's goals. Adolescents' worries are more realistic considering today's expectations for achievement and the competition in a global market (Ungar, 2009), and they may ask themselves whether the future will be worse and lead to a "fall", despite efforts and investment (Jetten et al., 2017).

In addition to the broader societal changes that adolescents face, their immediate environment has also been changing dramatically. Due to major changes in information technologies, adolescents spend a significant amount of time in the virtual media. While these changes have eased access to information and knowledge, they have changed the daily routines of many adolescents (Kennedy & Lynch, 2016; Konijn, Veldhuis, Plaisier, Spekman, & den Hamer, 2015). In his classical works, Larson (see for example, Larson & Richards, 1991) showed that time spent alone and time spent with peers increase during adolescence and signify the individuation process. Currently, substantial numbers of adolescents are involved in social media. As a result, the close and familiar peer group has changed into larger and less intimate peer networks (Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell, & Walther, 2008). At times this might even be a virtual peer group that the adolescent will not meet in reality. Loneliness is particularly prevalent during adolescence (Heinrich &

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