

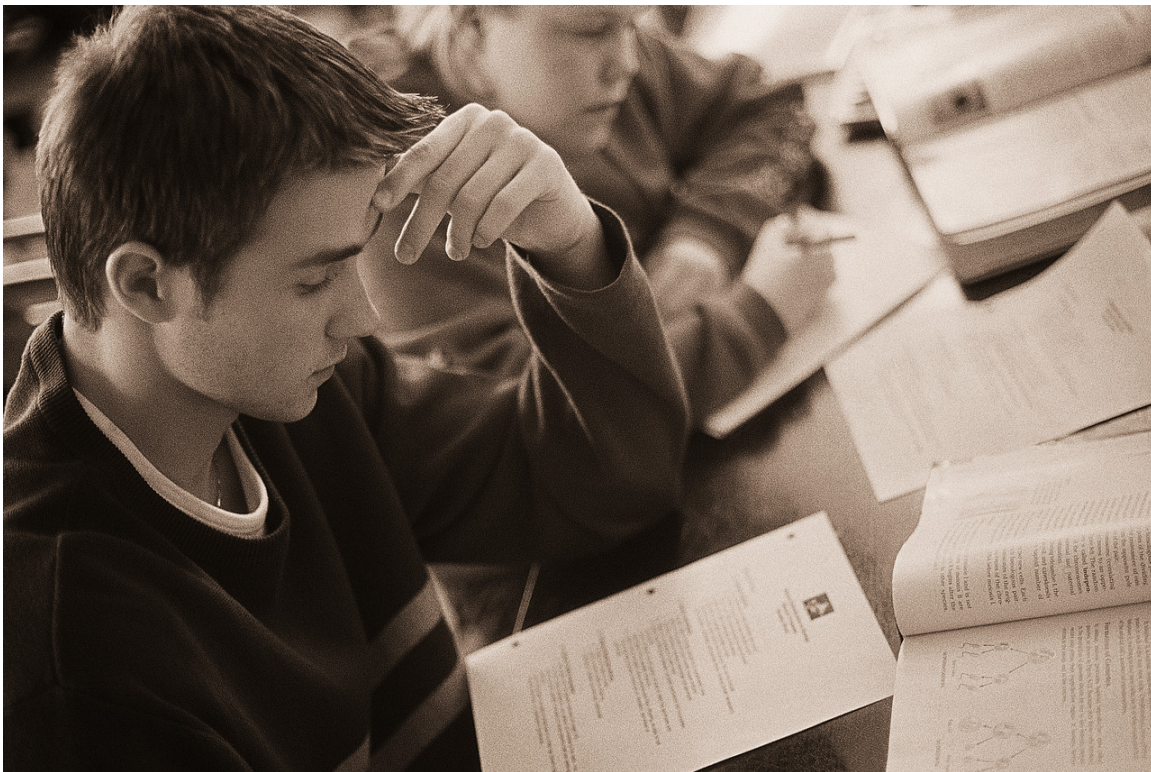
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ADOLESCENT COGNITION: THINKING IN A NEW KEY

DAVIDSON FILMS, 1999

Grade Level: 12–13+

33 Minutes



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ADOLESCENT COGNITION: THINKING IN A NEW KEY

with David Elkind, Ph.D.

[33 MINUTES]

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a time of passage into a new phase of life - commonalties across time and culture:

- Even the teenagers described by Aristotle in his Rhetorica are recognizable today.
- Intellectual aspects areas important as the more commonly studied physical and social changes.
- Sometimes there is an awkward transition into adult forms of thought.
- Ancients saw syllogistic logic appearing about age 6 or 7 and called it the Age of Reason. This correspond to the **Concrete Operational** stage of Jean Piaget. "Concrete" refers to the logic applies to tangible items Enables children to operate according to rules, necessary for formal education

FORMAL REASONING

Barbel Inhelder and Jean Piaget defined this stage

Elements of Formal Reasoning:

Abstractions - using symbols for other symbols.

- Proverbs, with a longitudinal demonstration.
- Young people need this ability to successfully deal with subjects like algebra and complex issues like pollution.

Propositions - argue from the basis of a statement.

- Over-use results in argumentative nature of many teens.
- Need opportunities to use this skill.

Ideals - imagine possibilities.

- Adolescents tend to be idealists.
- Difficult to distinguish between what they can imagine and reality, i.e.: other people's parents seem better than their own.
- Leads to creativity in many fields.

Think About Thinking-

- Can evaluate their own work.
- Privacy becomes a big issue as they can imagine other's reactions to themselves.
- Imaginary audience- being self conscious, thinking everyone is as interested in them as they are in themselves.
- Children and older teens less self-conscious as demonstrated with structured interviews.

- **Personal Fable:** bad things happen to others not us, - leads to risk taking behavior.

Applies to all ages, but at its peak in adolescence.

Personal Fable Scale shows that teens who think they are special and invulnerable are more likely to indulge risky behaviors.

- **Strategic Interactions-** concept developed by sociologist Erving Goffman.

Action taken to conceal, scramble or manipulate information in order to attain a particular goal.

Gum-plastic chewing episode is used as example.

Combinatorial Logic- hold many variables in mind at the same time.

- Science class example of evaluating toilet paper on several measures.
- Leads to ability to prioritize, a skill teens find difficult.
- Pseudo-stupidity - reading more into a problem than is really there.

CONSTRUCTION OF A PERSONAL IDENTITY

- Erik Erikson saw this as a life-time task but also the defining developmental challenge of the teenage year
- Need Formal Reasoning to intellectually pull together aspects of oneself into a coherent whole.
- Social aspects important- young people define themselves through memberships in groups. Groups tend to be more inclusive during teenage years.
- Importance of including academic success as an aspect of the construction of a sense of personal identity

SUGGESTED TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. A discussion of the culturally determined ways different societies mark the passage of the young into sexual maturity can be interesting to students who have recently made the transition themselves. In the West, we tend to think of teenage as a recent social invention, but it is good to note that people in other times and places have commented on and created rituals around puberty.

2. Barbel Inhelder was a colleague of Jean Piaget. She died in 1997. She worked with Jean Piaget for forty years and was a collaborator on several of his works. Her work in formal reasoning was especially important. The role of women psychologists in the 20th century has been largely that of collaborators, or perhaps, unheralded workers. It will be interesting to watch how this changes in the next decades.

3. Jean Piaget (1896-1980) was recently mentioned in TIME as one of the hundred most influential thinkers of the 20th century and was one of about five that were featured in a major article in the same issue. His research methods of structured interviews grew out of his initial training as a biologist in the early part of the century before the field was dominated by laboratory work. Piaget was an observer and his structured interviews were his attempt to control observations. Both his methods and theoretical constructs have been challenged but remain central to developmental psychology courses. A discussion of how human thought is otherwise to be studied might be interesting.

4. Some see the attainment of Formal Operations as a by-product of formal education and do not see it as an unfolding of natural abilities. Inhelder and Piaget themselves did not do much cross cultural or even cross social studies although many of their followers have. More mature students might be able to give some good examples of Concrete Operational thinking in adults of their acquaintance.

5. Abstractions. Besides algebra what other portions of the curriculum depend on abstract thinking before high school? What support for fledgling abstract thinkers is possible in the middle school and high school?

6. Propositional thinking. What activities could (or do) schools give for young people to practice this new mode of thinking? Can your students remember "arguing for the sake of arguing"?

7. Ideals. Twentieth century literature abounds with stories of idealistic young people who "become sadder but wiser" in maturity. But after the watershed of the 1960's there has been a concern that young people are not as idealistic as they once were, and are earlier oriented towards practical concerns. What do your students think about this? Do young people become disillusioned earlier? Is cynicism fashionable?

8. Thinking about thinking. Can your students remember when they first thought about thinking? What were the issues involved? What school experiences fostered thinking about thinking? Does Elkind's supposition that the self-consciousness displayed by adolescents is a result of this cognitive transition seem reasonable?

9. Identity. It is hard to remember that this was not a term commonly used in psychology before Erik Erikson's inclusion of it in his eight-part life stages chapter CHILDHOOD AND SOCIETY in 1950. Is it still a meaningful concept to your students? Is its shadow "role confusion" useful to them in looking at their own current and adolescent lives? In recent years the concept of identity has more often been seen in the literature in terms of group membership (ethnicity, sexual orientation etc) rather than individual roles (daughter, student, worker).

10. If this video had been longer, what other questions might it have addressed and answered?

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