

Adolescent Development in a Diverse and Changing World: Introduction

Lene Arnett Jensen
Clark University

Xinyin Chen
University of Pennsylvania

Cultural and contextual perspectives provide an understanding of universal and unique patterns of adolescent development. The articles in this special section show how this is vital for theory and research in today's diverse and changing world, and for interventions with adolescents within and across countries. The articles by Diers, Kagitcibasi, and Way, based on their addresses at the 2012 Meeting of the Society for Research on Adolescence, elaborate on the meeting theme of "Culture and Context." Here, we give a précis of the articles and then discuss how they exemplify our three intellectual goals for the 2012 meeting. Specifically, we aimed for breadth in regard to development, culture, and context. We end by noting novel synergies that emerged among the articles.

This special section of the *Journal of Research on Adolescence* (JRA) brings together three articles based on major addresses delivered at the 2012 Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research on Adolescence (SRA) in Vancouver, Canada. The articles are by SRA Past President Niobe Way, who provided the 2012 Presidential Address; Cigdem Kagitcibasi of Koc University, who gave The Roberta Grodberg Simmons Prize Lecture; and the Chief of UNICEF Adolescent Development and Participation Unit Judith Diers, who delivered the conference opening keynote.

In this introduction, we start with a précis of the articles to highlight the importance of each in its own right. We then discuss how the articles fit with and exemplify three intellectual goals that we had for the 2012 Biennial Meeting. Specifically, we aimed for breadth in regard to development, culture, and context. Finally, as ideally happens when one brings together different speakers and authors, their work collectively gives rise to new ideas. We end by giving a couple of examples of how we see the three articles as speaking to each other in unexpected and novel ways.

THREE IMPORTANT IDEAS ABOUT ADOLESCENCE

The present articles synthesize decades of scholarship by Way (e.g., 2011) on adolescent friendships

and by Kagitcibasi (e.g., 2007) on family relations, and more than 60 years' worth of intervention work by UNICEF (e.g., 2009). Integrating long and diverse lines of work, the author of each article puts forth a pivotal proposal. Briefly, Way argues that during the early to midadolescent years American boys speak freely and fondly of their emotional attachments to their male friends and of how they see the friendships as vital to their mental well-being. By mid-to-late adolescence, however, these intimate friendships are abruptly abrogated. According to Way, the reason is that the boys have absorbed a cultural message that men should not be open with one another about their emotions because such openness threatens their masculinity. In a fusion of vivid statistics and quotations from her longitudinal interviews with American boys, Way explains why the implications of the loss of male friendships are serious—for boys and men and for American society as whole.

In light of the large-scale societal changes due to modernization and urbanization that have taken place and continue at a rapid pace in many parts of the world, Kagitcibasi discusses implications for the self and family relations. She argues for the development of a self, especially during the crucial years of adolescence, that allows for both autonomy and emotional relatedness in regard to one's family. To Kagitcibasi, this "autonomous-related" self has not been "adequately recognized in Western psychology" (p. 224), nor is it oxymoronic. In her article, she draws on a wide array of theory and research to speculate that this self may in fact be adaptive in many of today's changing and diverse societies.

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Requests for reprints should be sent to Lene Arnett Jensen, Clark University, Department of Psychology, 650 Main Street, Worcester, MA 01610. E-mail: ljensen@clarku.edu

Also taking stock of today's world, Diers argues that the time has come for UNICEF to expand its long-standing focus on young children to include adolescents. One reason, according to Diers, is that adolescents constitute almost one-fifth of the world's population (UNICEF, 2012). A second, and more important, reason is that trends over the last 50 years indicate that in many places mortality rates for adolescents have not declined nearly as much as those for toddlers and young children. In her article, Diers provides a review of the history and program structure of UNICEF, and its mission and accomplishments in regard to young children. She also highlights examples of recent work that UNICEF is doing with adolescents, and calls for more active collaboration between UNICEF and researchers to address not only the risks to adolescents but also assets to help them thrive.

BROADENING WORK ON ADOLESCENCE

For the 2012 SRA Biennial Meeting, we had three central intellectual goals that also are reflected in the present articles in a variety of ways. One goal was to stretch the age boundaries for research on adolescence. We encouraged work that relates adolescence to what comes before and after. One reason—paradoxically—is that the importance of research on adolescence is highlighted by comparisons with other periods of life. As Diers writes, and as mentioned briefly above, comparisons of mortality trends in childhood and adolescence have recently made “advocates (for adolescents) sit up and take notice” (p. 216). Trends over the last five decades for 50 countries ranging from very low to high income show that mortality rates for young men aged 15 to 24 were two to three times higher than those for one- to four-year-old boys from 2000 to 2004. For females of comparable ages, mortality rates have been equal across age groups since 2000. While data were unavailable for notable sections of Asia and Africa, for the countries included the traditional mortality patterns have reversed over the last half century as declines have been quite rapid for children (Viner et al., 2011). This news is encouraging for children, but clearly it also calls for attention to the lives of adolescents.

Looking at adolescence from a broad developmental perspective also encourages new theoretical thinking. Kagitcibasi's research program, for example, is not specifically focused on adolescence, but her work inspires new vantage points. In her article, she questions adolescent development orthodoxies about the necessity of separation and individuation

from parents during adolescence. It is not that she casts autonomy entirely aside. Rather she draws on her own and others' research with families from different cultures to reconceptualize its meaning and connect it to relatedness.

This brings us to our second intellectual goal which was to encourage research with and for culturally diverse peoples. (As an aside, this is why for the first time in the history of SRA we hosted the 2012 conference outside the United States. Not by many kilometers or miles, but then as Canadians will tell you, the two countries are not the same!). Demographic patterns compel cultural breadth. First, majority world adolescents (growing up in “developing” countries) constitute 90% of the world's youth (UNICEF, 2012). Second, majority world adolescents are woefully underrepresented in research samples and publications in adolescent psychology (Raffaelli, Lazarevic, Koller, Nsamenang, & Sharma, 2013). Third, as some of the many statistics in Diers's article illustrate, the lives of adolescents around the world differ vastly. For example, the current rate of secondary school completion in sub-Saharan Africa is 21% for girls and 28% for boys. To give another example, more than 25% of girls aged 15 to 19 are underweight in eleven of the world's countries (with the figure almost as high as 50% in India). Meanwhile, in another eleven countries, more than 20% are classified as overweight (almost 40% in Turkey) (UNICEF, 2012).

As we have argued elsewhere, a cultural-developmental approach that adds a cultural perspective to the developmental one — one that “bridges” the two (Jensen, 2011, 2012) — also holds the promise of new theories that are neither one-size-fits-all nor one-for-every-culture, but instead flexible and travelworthy. Only by taking a cultural perspective can we truly know what is universal in adolescent development, and only by including cultural diversity can we have an adolescent developmental science that has relevance and applicability to local conditions. Way's article, for example, is ultimately an analysis of contemporary American culture. She writes that “American culture, in other words, appears to foster the crisis of connection that the boys in my studies face in late adolescence and the crisis of connection that Americans are facing in the early 21st century” (p. 211). Way's analysis leads her to a cultural critique. But, of course, cultural analyses can also be sources of inspiration. As mentioned earlier, Kagitcibasi finds much to recommend cultures that foster the development of adolescents in both autonomy and relatedness.

Hosting the 2012 Biennial Meeting outside the United States was a first. Also for the first time (although not the last), the meeting had a theme. The theme was “Culture and Context.” We have discussed the importance of cultural breadth and now turn to context. In part, we simply wished to encourage attention to the many contexts of adolescent lives. Here, Way’s article focuses primarily on friends and peers, Kagitcibasi’s on families, and Diers’s on nonprofit organizations and government institutions. Additionally, as adolescents come of age, their lives are deeply shaped by intersecting contexts. Way, for example, discusses how her research found that American boys of Puerto Rican background were the most open to friendships into later adolescence. In other words, for these boys, the peer and ethnic contexts came together in a fairly unique way. Diers discusses how adolescent mortality and morbidity vary widely by world region, class, and gender. In fact, as children move into adolescence, gender roles and socioeconomic context increasingly interact with regional characteristics in shaping patterns pertaining to mortality and morbidity.

Going still further, we have also highlighted the theoretical importance of context for developmental processes. From a *contextual-developmental perspective* (Chen, 2012a), culture influences the individual through social interactions. In adolescence, peer groups mediate important links between cultural values and individual development. As noted, Way argues that male adolescent peers mediate cultural values about masculinity and the limits of male intimacy in ways that deeply affect friendships and individual well-being. Sometimes, adolescent peer groups also do more than mediate current culture. They can be in the vanguard of cultural change and the construction of new values through youth cultures (Chen, 2012b). Diers and UNICEF, in a sense, have this in mind when they emphasize that adolescents can “take control of their health and nutrition,” can train to be “agents of peaceful change,” and “can be effective in creating more relevant and effective services” (p. 219).

NOVEL SYNERGY

Our three goals of breadth in regard to development, culture, and context are exemplified and elaborated in these articles. The articles, however, also speak to one another in novel ways. Here, we will briefly mention a couple of examples of the synergies that stood out to us and then leave it to readers to discover and reflect on others. Both Way

and Kagitcibasi point to the perils of autonomy without relatedness. Relatedness and emotional intimacy constitute “basic needs,” according to Kagitcibasi (p. 223), and are “an inherent part of being human,” according to Way (p. 211). Their shared perspective invites a conversation about how relatedness and emotional intimacy interact with autonomy and separation in their joint contributions to youth development in social, cognitive, and health domains in modern societies.

On a connected note, all three authors put forth proposals for social change. Way, for example, highlights school intervention programs in Norway and Canada aimed at building emotional skills and positive social relationships. Kagitcibasi observes that schools, social workers, clinicians, and other health providers in Western Europe need to revisit notions of immigrant families being “enmeshed” and instead be more open to family models based not only in autonomy but also relatedness. Diers discusses linking UNICEF’s long-standing vaccination programs to new interventions with adolescents, for example, at points of contact with new adolescent mothers and their babies and as part of the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunizations aimed at 9- to 13-year-olds. She envisions an “intervention package” and “adolescent health cards” (pp. 218, 219). In our view, the three authors’ shared commitment to change and their quite specific and potentially far-reaching proposals serve as an opportunity for renewed conversations between adolescent researchers and practitioners.

CONCLUSION

This special section of *JRA* is driven by the presidential and keynote addresses given by Way, Kagitcibasi, and Diers. We therefore choose to end with their words on their aspirations for adolescents—and adults. Way writes, “If we listen closely, however, to both boys and girls during adolescence, we will begin to remember what we knew all along: What makes us human is our ability to deeply connect with others and we must figure out ways to strengthen these critical life skills in and out of school” (p. 211). Kagitcibasi advises that “...we can also aspire to contribute to adolescent well-being. Psychology, even more than other sciences, carries such a social responsibility” (p. 232). Finally, Diers avows, “a new frontier in child development stands on the horizon—the development of the adolescent. The world cannot afford to shrink from this opportunity, but rather must use its best research, investments, and institutions to accompany adolescents

on this journey—supporting, protecting and enabling them to imagine, create, thrive, and transform their families, their communities, and our world” (p. 221–222).

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