Consensus Conference on the Mental Health of Emerging Adults

Making Transitions a Priority in Canada

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Defining emerging adulthood as a stage of life
AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL LENS ON THE WORLD OF EMERGING ADULTS

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WHO ARE EMERGING ADULTS?

Theme and policy question(s)

DEFINING EMERGING ADULTHOOD AS A STAGE OF LIFE

What are the critical characteristics and experiences that need to be considered in defining emerging adulthood as a stage of life?

What do we know about the mental health status of emerging adults, their needs and opportunities to improve outcomes?

Objectives

The goal is to:

- Help describe emerging adulthood through an anthropological and sociological lens.

- Understand the cultural challenges facing emerging adults imposed through competing social demands.

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Emerging adulthood is the passage to an "ego-identity" with the obligation to self-actualize. It implies a new relation of an individual to society and to self. Emerging adults are required to reconstitute social relationships.

EA identities are built along **4 dimensions**: (1) full autonomy; (2) faithfulness to oneself; (3) the right to have a pleasurable life; (4) the quest for security.

EAs live in a neoliberal society characterized by **3 imperatives** : (1) competition; (2) consumption; (3) communication. "Normal" adults are able to adjust to these dominant dogmas.

The contradictory demands of our society create insecurity and anxieties among many emerging adults. « Who am I? » is often rephrased in the terms of uncertainty and precarity.

Anthropological Changes

Traditional societies used to propose collective guidelines, common values and shared parameters for the socialization of children and adolescents. This is changing.

Ethnographers: we live in a fluid space that gives birth to the "society of identities" meaning individuals have the opportunity to escape homogenizing norms which historically framed identity. That loss of norms can be costly.

Other social scientists: Mutating societies are on the verge of collapsing due to the loss of common values, solidarity and the "belonging-together" which are disturbed by the coexistence of multiple, parallel systems of norms.

KEY WORDS: Fluidity, Diaspora, Globalization, Syncretism, Creolization.

This means that we need to reconstruct the common horizon which is now open and plural.

An Ethnographic Diagnosis

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Prominent scholars have described recent history as:

- A time centred around the "souci de soi" - care of the self (Foucault);
- An "era of vacuum" which provokes a "destandardisation of identities" (Libovetsky);
- An age of a "narcissistic return of the subject"(Lasch).

And have described the human condition as:

- An "uncertain and depressed subject" that translates in a « laziness of being oneself » (« fatigue d'être soi ») (Ehrenberg) ;
- A « negative individualism » (Castel);
- A « profound crisis of interiority »; an « unfinished identity » (Balibar).

The question of SUBJECT, IDENTITY and PERSON are at the core of "the uneasiness – the malaise of modernity" (Charles Taylor).

A Sociological Diagnosis

There is "a growing individualisation of fates" in societies which have passed from shared systems of meaning to pluralism. Individuals live in an "over-modernity" which creates a danger for the integrity of individual identity and for the "being-together". - MARC AUGÉ

There are significant gaps in the common systems of reference. Plurality offers an occasion for the possible emergence of new forms of personal and social identity. Individuals can select from the multiple and heterogeneous elements provided by the society. - ELLEN CORIN

The proliferation of signs, symbols and representations may lead young people to build identities by combining a plurality of elements. This surplus of meaning is also shaping the imaginary and psychic life of youth, and clinicians have to be aware of that.

THE PARADOX: On one hand, a deficit and a lack of integration; On the other hand, a surplus and an overflow.

THE MEANING: Young people are trapped between "too much" and "not enough".

Impacts of Family Reconfiguration

 Multiple parental figures organize the life of children and adolescents. Family reconstruction – after separation or divorce, families with adopted children or with children born via MAP are as common as traditional families. Children are confronted by the fragility of their complex environment, eg. short duration of father-mother relations; reconstruction of the trans-generational continuity; recomposition of parenthood relations (uncle, aunts, cousins).

Kinship cannot be disconnected from alliance(s): Blood, name and social presence (step-mothers and step-fathers) contribute to the complexity of identity construction. Children have to reorganize their relations to their siblings on new grounds, eg. may be of a different blood or may have a different family name.

Non-differentiation of gender roles: By refusing to reinforce gender-based stereotypes some parents tend to homogenize their rearing practices, eg. banishing toys, objects and games traditionally linked to masculinity (trucks, guns) and femininity (Barbies). Is that the way to go?

Between Virtual and Reality

Virtual, long-distance connections may impact close relationships. Are the "1000 friends" on Facebook the same as the friends in class or in the gang? Is there still the ability to distinguish clearly between the virtual and real worlds? Is it possible that video games overstimulate aggressiveness and sexual behaviors?

The virtual space is experienced continuously: Internet, twitter and other technologies provide instantaneous access to others all over the planet. Youth may feel invaded by so many demands. It is too much, too fast and simultaneously never enough.

Time is lived in an accelerated manner: Overstimulation coming from virtual sources may destabilize the inner world and lead youth towards an expectation of immediacy in their real social life. Hyperactivity may emerge.

MAJOR CHANGES IN CULTURAL VALUES

Creolisation of values, norms and behaviours. Living in a "Global Village" offers a great variety of identification models which may contribute either to an enrichment of individuality or to disorientation in the person.

The crumbling of spiritual values. The decline of established religious institutions has created some disorientation in the emerging adult's quest for ideals; these ideals are sometimes replaced by new sets of often esoteric beliefs (extremist ideologies; sects).

Banalisation of violence and sexuality. A number of emerging adults develop either anti-social behaviours or self-destructive ones.