



Adolescent Development

Longitudinal Research into
the Self, Personal Relationships
and Psychopathology

WIM MEEUS

ROUTLEDGE



Adolescent Development

This groundbreaking book provides students and researchers with a unique overview of the longitudinal study of the development of young people from the ages of 12 to 25. It offers a comprehensive introduction into the multiple theories on the development of the self, personal relationships and psychopathology in adolescence, alongside a non-statistical overview of the many longitudinal models used to study development.

The book includes key topics such as the development of the self, adolescent identity and personality; the development of parent–adolescent relationships; friendships and the understanding of others; and the development of psychosocial problems such as anxiety, depression, delinquency, aggression and substance use. Meeus highlights multiple findings showing how these processes are integrated and identifies eight fundamental patterns of adolescent development to help determine why most adolescents develop into mature and organized individuals towards the end of this life stage, while a substantial minority show an inability to mature.

It is essential reading for graduate students and researchers in adolescent development and anyone seeking to use longitudinal research methodology in the social and behavioral sciences.

Wim Meeus, Emeritus Professor of Adolescent Development at Utrecht University and of Developmental Psychology at Tilburg University, is an internationally recognized leader in the study of adolescent development. He conducted a series of long-lasting longitudinal studies into the development of young people. His key interests are identity and personality, personal relationships and psychopathology in adolescence. He is also a specialist in longitudinal models.

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Preface

When we ask people about events they remember the best or experiences that touched them the most they often come up with memories from their adolescent years. Similarly, when we ask people to list their ten favorite pieces of music, they will provide us with the hits of their teenage years. Also, many people describe adolescence as the best period of their lives. At the same time, parents describe adolescence as the most difficult period to rear their children. Together, these facts simply signify that adolescence is a key period in life and a very dynamic one.

This book aims to capture the dynamics of adolescent psychosocial development by providing an overview of existing longitudinal research into the adolescent self, personal relationships in adolescence and adolescent psychopathology. It brings together findings from longitudinal studies from multiple countries. Also, it offers an introduction into the multiple theories on the development of the self, relationships, and psychopathology in adolescence. The book is an extended version of my paper on adolescent psychosocial development published in *Developmental Psychology* in 2016. In addition, I used multiple ideas and notions of earlier publications of myself and members of Adolescent Development at Utrecht University and – to a lesser extent – Developmental Psychology at Tilburg University.

A key message of the book is that it is relatively easy to describe adolescent development, that it is more difficult to capture individual differences in development, and that it is very difficult to identify cause and effect in the developmental process in adolescence. The last issue is especially important, since very often claims are made about what causes what in adolescent development.

Research in the twenty-first century is group work, and that is especially true for longitudinal research. It is simply impossible to start and continue a longitudinal study without a group of dedicated people working on data collection and data management and a group of researchers. I was fortunate to have many great colleagues to work with me on a series of longitudinal studies. Two persons I would like to thank in particular for their contributions: Susan Branje for being a smart and always present companion in the continuation of our studies and Elisabetta Crocetti for taking up the identity

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issue again. The numerous contributions of my other colleagues can be found throughout the text and in the references.

I dedicate the book to my sons, Arthur and Merlijn, for teaching me the real thing of puberty, and to Truus, my love from Opatija and beyond.

Utrecht, February 2018

Wim Meeus

1 Adolescence as life phase and adolescents as group

Adolescence, in Latin *adolescentia*, comes from the verb *adolescere*, which means growing up. Growing up entails that adolescents have to master various developmental tasks: starting and completing education, making the transition to an occupational career, setting up their own household, finding and defining their identity, transforming child-like relationships with parents and friends into adult-like relationships, establishing relationships with an intimate partner, and becoming an informed citizen contributing to the solution of societal and political issues. The age period in which adolescents have to master these developmental tasks is between 10 and 25, depending on the society in which they are living. In general, adolescence lasts longer in societies that are more prosperous. This introductory chapter serves to introduce two perspectives on adolescence: that adolescence is a period of turmoil, and that adolescence is the formative period in life. I open the chapter by showing that the emergence of a long adolescence is a relatively new historical phenomenon.

Adolescence: an extended life phase

The emergence of adolescence for all

Traditionally, adolescence has been defined as the period that starts with puberty and the entrance into secondary education, and ends with the transition from school to work. In modern Western societies, adolescence has become a life phase for virtually all young people. This emergence of adolescence for all is a relatively recent phenomenon, as can be easily demonstrated by differences in timing of the various important status transitions between 1950 and 2015, see Figure 1.1.

The Figure shows the timing of three key status transitions in 1950 and in 2015: transition from school to work, first sex and first marriage. For the Figure, I used aggregated data from the US (Finer, 2007; US Census Bureau, 2010), EU (Eurostat, 2015) and the Netherlands (CBS, 1975; De Graaf, Kruijer, Van Acker, & Meijer, 2012). The transition from school to work marks the age at which young people become available for the labor

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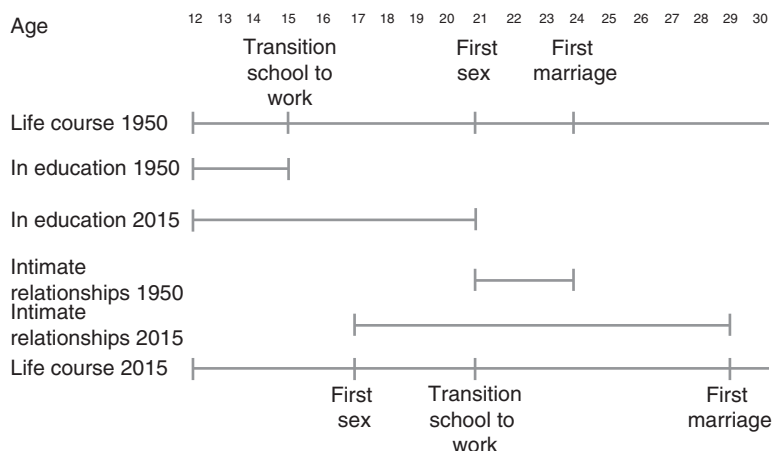


Figure 1.1 The emergence of adolescence for all: status transitions in 1950 and 2015.

market. The Figure shows that mean age of moving from school to the labor market was 15 in 1950, whereas it was around 21 in 2015. This implies an expansion of six years in the schooling period for young people. Consequently, the period of the formation of intimate relationships also has become substantially longer. I use two status transitions to describe the formation of intimate relationships. I take the age of first sex as the start of the formation of intimate relationships, and first marriage as the (at least temporary) end of the formation of intimate relationships. In the 1950s, this period was relatively short: around three years. In 2015, the formation of intimate relationships started considerably earlier, at age 17, and lasted longer, until age 29. Taken together, these findings indicate an enormous expansion of the period of the formation of intimate relationships: from three years to 12 years.

A limitation to these figures is that they come from a limited number of Western countries. Therefore, the exact figures should be considered with caution. The core meaning of the figures, however, does not lie in their exactness, but in the trends they indicate. These trends show that the emergence of adolescence is due simply to an enormous extension of the educational period and the period of the formation of intimate relationships. In turn, this is due to the growing wealth of countries. Growing wealth leads to more resources for the schooling of the younger generation, and subsequently to a longer period of exploring intimate relationships and making final choices at a relatively high age. Both trends also show that the emergence of adolescence for all is a relatively recent historical phenomenon.

Sub stages of adolescence

Since it has become a much extended period in life, adolescence can now be divided in various sub stages: early adolescence (ages 12–14), middle adolescence (ages 15–17), late adolescence (ages 18–20), and post adolescence (ages 21–23). This also implies that it is incorrect to mix up adolescence and puberty. Puberty is simply a sub stage of adolescence: early adolescence.

In each of these sub stages some developmental processes and the completion of some developmental tasks are salient (see Table 1.1). Early adolescence is the period of physical development and the transition from primary to secondary education. Middle adolescence is the period of starting to go out, first intimate partner and first sex, and of the transition from secondary to tertiary education for adolescents of lower socioeconomic status. In late adolescence, young people of higher socioeconomic status leave the parental home to make the transition from secondary to tertiary education, whereas young people of lower socio-economic status make the transition from school to work. In post adolescence, young people of lower socioeconomic status leave the parental home, and young people of higher socioeconomic status make the transition from school to work. Taken together, the developments in the various domains nicely illustrate how adolescent development unfolds, and, additionally, show socioeconomic differences. Adolescents with low socioeconomic status move earlier to tertiary education and from tertiary education to work than adolescents with higher economic status, and leave the parental home later. So, with the exception of leaving the parental home, adolescents with low economic status develop faster. This pattern has also been found for first intimate partner and first sex (Hovell et al., 1994). Note that the sub stages of the Table come from research in Western countries; therefore, the exact figures of the timing of the sub stages should be considered with caution.

Perspectives on adolescence

Turmoil everywhere: adolescence in social sciences and the public eye

Stanley Hall (1904) was among the first psychologists to describe adolescence as a period of storm and stress. He borrowed the term from the eighteenth-century literature movement called ‘Sturm und Drang’ and used it to describe adolescence as a period in which a loss of self-control (storm) goes together with an increasing sensitivity to stimuli from the environment (stress). Although not necessarily correct (Meeus, 1992, and see, for a recent commentary, Hollenstein & Loughheed, 2013), the notion of Hall has become very influential in the description of adolescence in social sciences and the mass media. I offer a couple of examples to illustrate my point.

Table 1.1 Sub stages of adolescence

<i>Developmental domains</i>	<i>Early adolescence (ages 12–14)</i>	<i>Middle adolescence (ages 15–17)</i>	<i>Late adolescence (ages 18–20)</i>	<i>Post adolescence (ages 21–23)</i>
Physical development	– Puberty			
Personal relationships		– Going out – First intimate partner – First sex	– Leaving parental home ²	– Leaving parental home ¹
School and work	– From primary to secondary education	– From secondary to tertiary education ¹	– From secondary to tertiary education ² – From school to work ¹	– From school to work ²

Notes

¹ For adolescents from lower socioeconomic status.

² For adolescents from higher socioeconomic status.

Absolute beginners: the young always welcome the new

This notion was introduced by the German sociologist Karl Mannheim (1928) who wrote that, more than any other group, young people were willing to embrace and adopt new trends in society. In the Netherlands, the sociologist and historian Prakke (1959) adopted this notion and coined it as the ‘seismographic function of youth’: when societal arrangements or common behaviors or attitudes change, young people will be the first to note and to embrace the new. And indeed, young people were the first to advocate a new sexual morality in the 1960s, to adopt new styles of pop music, for instance rock and roll in the 1950s, beat in the 1960s, punk in the 1970s, and dance in the 1990s, to adopt social media such as Facebook and Twitter in the 2010s, and to support radical political movements, for instance the Red Army Faction in Germany in the 1970s, and more recently IS and the Occupy movement. All these events revolted society, and adolescents were and are very visible as a group that carried the changes.

‘Don’t trust anyone over 25’: generation gap

The prolongation of the adolescent years created adolescence as a separate life phase for the vast majority of young people. So, the invention of adolescence for all, created a socially and demographically very visible social category: youth. Of course, youth has always been a visible category in modern history, but only recently did it become a category of huge proportions. Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) and research into social categorization (Rabbie & Horwitz, 1969) explain what happens when a new social category arises. The new category creates its own identity: a group consciousness, a differentiated set of norms and attitudes, patterns of social behavior, and preferences for clothing, music, consumption and spending leisure time. In other words, a youth cultural identity. The creation of the new social category leads subsequently to comparison with other social groups and to identification with its own group. Social comparison between groups entails two steps: the discovery of intergroup differences and the evaluation of them. Typically, groups tend to rate the characteristics of the in-group to be superior to those of the out-group. In the case of youth, adults serve as the preferred out-group, and for most adolescents youth is distinct from, and superior to, adults, which leads to the well-known generation gap. The generation gap has expressed itself in an enormous variety of youth cultures that criticized present-day society and the way it has been built by adults. Although most young people leave the idea of the generation gap behind when they are between the ages of 20 and 30, a minority of them belongs to more radical youth subcultures and is convinced that life after adolescence is no longer worth living. These young people refuse to become adult and to adopt conventional

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adult roles. However, for the majority of young people ‘live fast, die young’ is not an absolute rule, but more a sentiment that expresses the eternal longing to be young. They often embrace adolescence as the best time of their lives.

No future ...

This behavioral pattern reflects the grim variation of ‘live fast, die young’ and refers to an emotion that is latently present in all youth generations: there is no decent place for us in society. A benign and recent example of this sentiment can be observed in recent discussions in European countries where young people complain that pensions for the elderly are too high, which will deprive them of a decent pension when they retire. Another example is that of young Brits criticizing the adult vote for Brexit in 2016, thereby jeopardizing the future of the younger generation. A harsher example could be observed in the suburbs of Paris in 2007–2008. In long-lasting riots, young people of these disadvantaged districts expressed their feelings of no future in severe violence. Recent sociological research (Heinsohn, 2003; Weber, 2013) suggests that ‘no future’ feelings and violence become more prevalent when the relative size of the male youth generation is big (over 20% of the general population), youth unemployment is huge and expectations for the future are high. This theory of the ‘youth bulge’ predicts chances of youth violence in the near future to be highest in African countries south of the Sahara, South Asia, and the Middle East.

The ‘no future’ sentiment is more than a fiction. The notion of generational inequality makes it clear that chances of young people to get their fair share of societal affluence are limited. This can be amply demonstrated when we look at unemployment figures: in times of economic crisis, youth unemployment always rises more sharply than unemployment in the general population. At this moment, the second decade of the twenty-first century, we observe this very high level of youth unemployment in, for instance, Greece, Italy and Spain.

Identity crisis

This concept was introduced by Erikson (1968) in his epigenetic chart of lifelong development. Erikson considered moving from identity diffusion to identity achievement to be the key developmental task of adolescence. According to Erikson, the experience of an identity crisis is an inevitable part of this transition. In later research, the notion of identity crisis was substituted by the notion of moratorium in two distinct ways. First, adolescence was defined as a psychosocial moratorium, a period in which adolescents had time to make important life choices and find a personal identity. Second, moratorium was defined as a psychological state: a period of high uncertainty and feelings of crisis about the self (Marcia, 1966). In

this way, Eriksonian thinking and subsequent identity research contributed to defining adolescence as a period of turmoil and crisis.

Mental disorders: emergence and peak in adolescence

Thirty years of research on developmental psychopathology have clearly shown that adolescence is a critical period for the emergence and peak of mental disorders. Anxiety disorders (especially generalized anxiety symptoms, Nelemans et al., 2014b), mood disorders, schizophrenia, and substance use all emerge in adolescence and peak in various periods of adolescence (Lee et al., 2015). Again, these findings identify adolescence as a period of turbulence.

Adolescence as the most difficult period for parents

The generation gap, adolescent ‘no future’ beliefs, adolescent identity crisis, and the emergence of mental disorders in adolescence make parenting adolescents a challenging task. How should parents guide their adolescent children when they become critical towards them, when they experience a crisis about who they are, and when they develop aggression, delinquency, or depression? That the challenge of parenting adolescents is more than an adult fable has been demonstrated in a nationwide study on parenting in the Netherlands by Rispen, Hermanns, and Meeus (1996), see Figure 1.2. The Figure clearly demonstrates that parents see puberty and adolescence as the most difficult period of child-rearing.

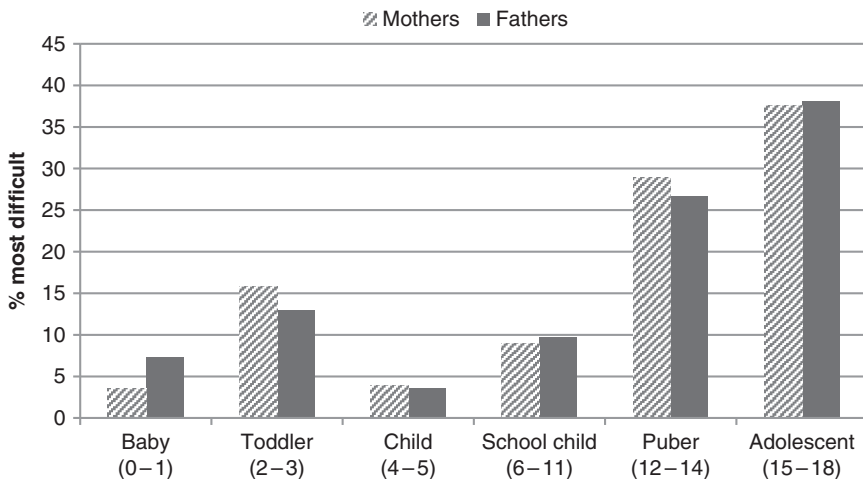


Figure 1.2 The most difficult rearing period according to parents. Data taken from Rispen, Hermanns, and Meeus (1996).

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Adolescence as the formative period in life

Next to the voice describing adolescence as a period of turmoil, another consistent voice can be heard: the voice saying that adolescence is the formative period in life. This simply means that during adolescence individuals mature from children with relatively immature behavioral tendencies to adults with a stable notion of self and stable behavioral patterns. As shown early in this chapter, adolescence has become a very extended period of life in Western societies, allowing young people a long time to mature into stable individuals. We can look at adolescence as a formative period in two ways: as a period of continuous individual development, or as a period with various sub stages.

Continuous development

This approach assesses continuity of individual development in various domains across adolescence. This book adopts longitudinal research to study continuity of development and focuses on various aspects of psychosocial development: the self, personal relationships, and problem behaviors.

THE SELF

Three bodies of longitudinal research on the adolescent self are available: on identity, personality and self-concept clarity.

Identity Erikson (1968) named identity formation as the key developmental task of adolescence. To become mature individuals, adolescents have to achieve a clear and continuous sense of who they are, and to adopt clear commitments in various life domains: education, work, interpersonal relationships and ideology. Marcia (1966) used Erikson's ideas to develop the identity status model. This model defines identity in terms of commitments and the way in which individuals handle them. Marcia distinguished between four statuses: identity achievement (individuals with strong commitments after having explored alternative ones), foreclosure (strong commitments without exploration of alternative ones), moratorium (weak commitments and strong ongoing exploration of various alternative ones), and diffusion (weak commitments and no exploration of alternatives). This model spawned an enormous amount of research from the 1960s onward (see, for reviews, Berzonsky & Adams, 1999; Bourne, 1978a, 1978b; Côté & Levine, 1988; Meeus, 2011; Meeus, Iedema, Helsen, & Vollebergh, 1999; Van Hoof, 1999; Waterman, 1988), and also inspired the emergence of dual cycle models of identity formation from the beginning of the present century. Whereas Marcia's model only addressed the process of identity formation, the dual cycle models distinguish between the process of identity formation (exploring

alternative commitments and choosing one) and the process of identity maintenance (being active or non-active in maintaining chosen commitments). The most prominent dual cycle models are those of Luyckx and colleagues (Luyckx, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006; Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2006) and Meeus and Crocetti (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; Meeus, van de Schoot, Keijsers, Schwartz, & Branje, 2010). Next to these models of personal identity, I will also discuss longitudinal research into political identity.

Personality Although personality psychologists for a long time have assumed that personality was stable across the life span, ‘set like plaster’ (James, cited in Costa & McCrae, 1994), recent research into personality has uncovered substantial developmental changes in adolescence (Klimstra, Hale, Raaijmakers, Branje, & Meeus, 2009). Most longitudinal research into adolescent personality development assumes that personality can be subsumed in five personality traits: the Big Five. The Big Five personality traits are extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness to experience. Extraversion refers to dominance and activity in interpersonal situations; agreeableness is the willingness to maintain positive and reciprocal relationships with others; conscientiousness indexes organizational and motivational aspects of a person’s behavior; emotional stability is the ability to deal effectively with negative emotions; and openness to experience refers to how a person deals with new information at a personal and experiential level. I discuss both variable-centred and person-centred longitudinal studies into adolescent personality development. Variable-centred studies address the development of single Big Five traits in (samples of) individuals, whereas person-centred studies focus on the development of configurations of these traits within individuals.

Self-concept clarity (SCC) is the extent to which beliefs about the self are clearly and confidently defined, stable over time, and internally consistent (Campbell et al., 1996). So, SCC refers to the structure of the self-concept, regardless of content. Longitudinal studies into adolescent development of SCC have addressed both long-term development across years (Crocetti, Rubini, Branje, Koot, & Meeus, 2016) and short-term development across days (Schwartz et al., 2011).

PARENTS AND ADOLESCENTS

Systematic longitudinal research is available on three parent–adolescent topics: quality of relationships, parenting, and information management. Some longitudinal research is present on empathy development: the fundamental capacity to sympathize with others and to understand them.