

Policy Seminar

Discussion of Institute of Psychiatry and Nuffield Research: Time trends in adolescent mental health.

Adolescents in distress: Britain on the slide?

Firstly I want to say that I am broadly in agreement with the findings of the research that highlights the current predicaments for adolescents. I think the research has made a considerable contribution to putting adolescent mental health issues at the centre of a wide public awareness. It helps to support the direction of some policy trends, for example the children's NSF which makes mental health everyone's business.

This research shows that over the past 30 years there has been a significant rise in conduct disorders (both aggressive and non aggressive), and probably a more recent rise in depression/emotional difficulties. I think it is also important to highlight the finding that comorbidity is common (Collishaw et al 2004).

Secondly I think the findings of the research resonate with clinical experience we have in the Adolescent Department, where we find ourselves working with considerable risks generated by and involving the young people we see. These clinical experiences include

1. some extreme difficulties presented by very disadvantaged young people(those who are looked after, leaving care, unaccompanied minors and others who have had very disturbed or deprived or abusive childhoods. For these adolescence is a most disturbing time.
2. a wide range of potentially damaging behaviours and states of mind; self harm and suicidal behaviour, eating disorders, drug and alcohol misuse, depression, violent episodes, problems with sexual relationships, etc.
3. Problems in terms of relationships with in the family, wider networks and peers. There are manifestly difficulties not only in becoming more separate during the adolescent process, but also in maintaining and sustaining emotional engagement with others – experiences in which maintaining contact of this kind can feel terribly exposing, and dependency on others can be experienced as humiliating.
4. There is now a great emphasis on the need to find 'contexts of belonging' in the diversities and pluralities of current social structures. Adolescence use to be thought of as involving a period of getting away from others/home. Now it is also characterised by the need to affirm belonging and contact with others. This is a major shift in the way that we ought to conceptualise the adolescent process, from say 50 years ago, when Erikson and others formulated ideas about identity formation.

Causes

The key question that is raised by this research is; why are adolescent difficulties getting worse? Why are there increased rates of conduct disorder, probably emotional difficulties? In the Nuffield Briefing Paper and the Journal paper, an agenda for

understanding the causes is being developed. These include: changes in the family, the process of adolescence (especially the lengthening of the period of adolescence - adult independence), inequalities in terms of socio-economic resource distribution, pressures from lifestyle expectations, stress in terms of educational attainment. I think I could say in passing that the Children's NSF deserves 2 cheers for making mental health everyone's business and 1 cheer should be withheld for the effect it has of splitting adolescence between children and adult services. The Health Advisory Review of 1995 had a better idea in proposing discrete adolescent services continuing to 25 years.

These are all arguments that have been developed widely already and are important. Additionally, we could say something about the apparent choices and uncertainties in the individualized post modern socio-cultural world.

These are pretty big subjects to discuss and I wish to limit myself to one aspect of the research that I have found particularly interesting; lying and cheating.

Lying and cheating

In a sense it is lying and cheating that is different. We know that adolescence is associated with all the other things highlighted here – fighting, stealing sexual misbehaviour – these have been associated with every wave of adolescent turmoil for the last 50 years. Each generation produces what Stan Cohen in 1973 called 'Folk Devils and Moral Panics'. Huddies, for instance. In fact although adolescence is sometimes thought of as a modern invention, the same complaints were heard in Shakespeare's time: A shepherd in 'The Winter's Tale' complains – in the mode of a tabloid I guess – about adolescents (or at least male adolescents):

“ I would there were no age between 10 and 23, or that youth would sleep out the rest, for there is nothing in the between but getting wenches with child, wronging the ancients, stealing, fighting”

But lying? I guess no self respecting mod, rocker or punk would feel comfortable with lying as an identifier.

In the research, the respondents to the survey were asked the question (in the SDQ) “Does s/he often lie or cheat?”. From the responses to this item it is possible to say that the increase in lying (along with stealing and disobedience – the 'non aggressive' conduct disorders) is significant.

It started me thinking. I thought first of my clinical experiences. This reflection led to the thought that actually the young people I see are impressively honest. Honesty takes courage, emotionally. For example:

I listened to a colleague talking in a clinical workshop about a case where the young man was finding it very difficult to face his feelings and his inner world. He seemed to be trying to find a way out of coming. He told the therapist that he could not come to the next session as he had an appointment elsewhere. This seemed to be a manifest lie. Patiently, as the session progressed, the therapist listened to and responded to his fear and anxiety about feeling exposed, and how humiliating it felt to feel dependent

on someone. Indeed how tortuous it was for this young man to talk to someone else and he eventually said that he had not talked as much as this to anyone in his life. He then found a way of saying that after all he could come to the following session, since the appointment he had was not in fact on the day he had thought it was.

The lie emerges in this case as an attempt to defend against a potentially painful emotional state. The problem of making and maintaining emotional contact is important in this example. It is important to think about the relational malaise that lies at the root of this kind of difficulty – how intimate relationships are for some people so inhibited, shallow or flat. In this case, and in others, loss plays a very important part – the death or absence of parent figures is particularly difficult for adolescents. It is also true that parents who themselves have suffered problems within their primary relationships will have difficulty parenting their children. To ascertain how far this plays a role in current adolescents difficulties we need to go beyond the kind of information generated by the SDQ, to look in detail at adolescents' lives. For the young man in this case example, we would want to know about his early experiences, how the capacity for intimacy and knowing about his own and others' states of mind and emotions has been promoted (or impaired) by the process of containment. How aware were others, and particularly his parents of his emotional needs and the communications of these at a non verbal level, the kind of communication that stirs up feelings in others. How available were others for making sense of these communications, letting themselves be affected by them. We can see in his therapy that his therapist can offer this service, and that he can respond to it, somehow talking more about himself and facing the truth a bit more. This is not easy – in a psychic sense we are all liars to some extent.

A second clinical example of lying occurred to me in thinking with a colleague about a teenage asylum seeker. It is so well known that unaccompanied minors lie about their age that it is a stereotype. However, faced with persecuting authorities that are entrapping, we also know now something of why this happens and how it is done in the service of attempting to survive. Literally.

Having made this political connection in my mind I then found I recalled the Private Eye cover at the time of the recent election. Blair, talking to a latency aged boy, says 'Now you know what happens to little boys who tell lies, don't you' "Yes", replies the little boy brightly, "they become prime minister"

A great deal has been made of the lack of trust in politicians, and I think this gives us a way of thinking about authority, from the perspective of adolescence. Contemporary authority (and I think Andrew Cooper has written very clearly about this) relies on inspection, audit, target setting as a way of covering up the lack of internal confidence and personal authority, or trust in expertise, especially professional expertise. In the absence of confidence in one's judgment, and confidence in professional judgment, everything has to be inspected. This leads to anxious, uncertain and – conversely – omnipotent authority and organizations that is extremely persecuting. In fact the persecution can be thought of as projecting the fear of the person in authority on to the other.

Education is a particular case in point, and it brings me to my last anecdote on lying and cheating. I recently visited a junior school to meet with the head teacher to

consider a place for my daughter. Somewhat apologetically I asked if she could tell me why the published data for the school had worse scores this year. She discussed this with me very cogently and then looking me in the face said 'It's tempting to cheat you know, but we don't, we talked about it and said we won't. I know others do'. Exactly. Cheating is in the fabric of the organization of society, it is at the heart (if that is the right word) of New Labour. Adolescents learn about it at home and in school. Lying and cheating occurs when one is threatened internally and externally. When authority is persecutory, lying and/or compliance (or identifying with the authority figure) are inevitable.

Of course the other thing to say about education and the adolescent experience is that from the age of 7, there are yearly tests. Children are 'audited' annually. This is not simply stressful (as it is often said) but it is actively undermining of independent thinking, development and growth. In horticultural terms it is like digging up a plant to see the roots.

Truth:

The opposite of lying and cheating is facing the truth, and through this generating honesty. This means primarily, facing the emotional difficulties that are part of growing up, and especially, in adolescence when the developmental tasks are huge and the quality of change massive, the difficulties are potentially profound and intense.

Adolescence is essentially turbulent; the upsurge of feelings, and the sense of being thrown out of balance are central. One of my patients, a 14 year old boy expressed succinctly the idea of catastrophic change at puberty when he said *that though he was growing it was not a problem for him, but he had two friends who did have problems, because for one of them his bones were growing faster than his muscles and ligaments, and with the other friend it was the other way round; his muscles were growing faster than his bones. One of them was very stiff and the other was very floppy.*

There are many interpretations that may be made about this. The one I wish to make is that a disaster is indicated, in which two qualities that had been in synchrony with each other until puberty are now violently opposed to each other. It is also the case that there may be a 'lie' (in inverted commas) in the form of denial and projection on to others of his problems).

Facing these intense feelings for adults with responsibility for adolescents is daunting. The task of parenting adolescence is itself demanding emotionally and mentally, since adolescents, despite perhaps protestations to the contrary, have great need of parents, who can contain the intensity of emotions and make contact in a negotiable way. Parents need to be able to move between times when they act as 'temporary recipients of projections' and times when they allow the adolescent more space to 'work it out for herself'. The difficulty of parenting lies in having the emotional and mental flexibility to move between these different modes, and bearing the intensity of feelings, which are projected on to parental figures. Anderson sums up this difficulty:

‘Sometimes it feels as though all the unwanted feelings, hopelessness, incompetence, and fear on the one hand, and responsibility and worry without the power to go with it on the other, are left with the parents’ (1999 page 166)

Robin Anderson also poignantly said that parenting adolescents, like parenting a baby, inevitably leaves a scar – we can’t do it without feeling marked and changed in some way. We need to help people working with adolescents to develop this capacity: I think this is the challenge for a truthful social policy.

In one sense there is a danger in marking adolescents of this generation as different from the past –the generation of our own adolescence. It is easy to forget the pain and turmoil, to forget that we may have had a narrow escape. We often idealise and demonise adolescence. Theodore Jacobs put it clearly, if mildly, when he said:

“ adolescence, is ‘ a time of awkwardness, of disproportions, of frightening sexual maturation, of pimples, and of new and untried feelings. Nothing is set. Nothing is solid. Everything is in flux and change’. The aim with adolescence, is to get past it and then, not to look back.”

Remembering may be the first duty for policy making.

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