How Western Culture can Create Healthier Teenagers: Re-evaluating the Storm & Stress of Adolescence

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Abstract

When I tell people how much I am enjoying motherhood, I am so often met with the response "oh just wait until they're teenagers". There seems to be a cultural fear that our perfect little babies will transform into monsters on their 13th birthday and that all we can do is batten the hatches and wait out the storm. In this paper, I will claim that the view of adolescents that we promote is a self-fulfilling prophecy. If Western society starts to view the period in a more positive light, we can elicit better outcomes for our youth.

I have worked with so many teenagers who are lovely and conscientious. They want to make the world a better place and want to make their families proud. Statistics echo my beliefs. Drug use, delinquency, and criminal activity has decreased amongst youth, while volunteering and involvement in climate & social justice movements has increased. The perception of teenagers being moody and rebellious is not ubiquitous. In cultures where this view is not promoted, teenagers have low rates of embodying these characteristics. This demonstrates that our negative cultural view of adolescents is a self-fulfilling prophecy. If Western culture begins to promote a more positive view of adolescents, we can improve the health and well-being of the youth we work with.

Keywords: Positive, Psychology, Adolescent, Development, Teenagers, Healthy, Western Culture, Canada

Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

My Journey as an Adolescent and a Parent

Adolescence as we know it is a social construction. The image of the rebellious, moody teenager that the media cultivates is not ubiquitous nor is it true. Rather, teenagers today are studious, kind, global citizens who want to make their parents proud and better their communities. Since the birth of my children in the last couple years, I can't count how many people respond to my enjoyment of parent by saying "oh just wait until they're teenagers." These aren't child psychologists or educators; these are other parents and friends of mine. It always rubs me the wrong way. How do we have any hope of raising decent teenagers if we are constantly talking about how terrible they will be?

I had a lot of good things going for me as a teenager. I had a solid, healthy relationship with my family. We went camping together, we watched *Survivor* together on Thursdays, we ate meals together daily, and generally enjoyed each other's company. I was an unremarkable student who worked at a pet store and had lots of artsy hobbies and a group of peers who were future-oriented and good influences. I can't say that I underwent a period of excessive moodiness or personality change which correlated with puberty (and my mother concours). However, I still went through a phase of rebellion and had more of a quintessential teenage experience after I graduated from high school. When I reflect on the "whys" of my rebellious phase, there aren't any that stick out. No trauma, no family strife, no overt anger… more just a general sense that I was *entitled* to rebel because I was a

teenager. My rebellion was short lived as I was soon away for university and had to work multiple jobs to afford life in the big city. I quickly reverted back to appreciation and respect for my parents and was back on track. But I often question whether the adolescent experiences of others were similar. Did other teenagers rebel simply because they felt that they *ought* to?

Developing my Interest in the Topic

I was walking along the Yukon River the other day, half-listening to the APA's podcast *Speaking of Psychology* while pushing my stroller, when I heard an idea which stopped me in my tracks: the notion that *we are creating adolescent problems by reiterating them*. It was an interview with Dr. Eva Telzer, an Associate Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at UNC Chapel Hill. She said: "stereotypes and views of adolescents are often self-fulfilling prophecies, so if I grow up in a culture that views adolescence as this time of risk-taking, I'm more likely to think that adolescence *is* a time of risk-taking, and therefore engage in more risk-taking" (Mills, 16:15). This greatly excited me to hear, and I contacted her when I got home asking for her to point me towards scholarship to back this idea up. She directed me to the work of Yang Qu, a developmental psychologist and professor at Northwestern University, who studies the adolescent experience cross-culturally and demonstrates that Telzer's "self-fulfilling prophecy" when it comes to adolescent stereotypes is in fact, true.

Connection to the Master of Education Coursework

Learning about the power of self-fulfilling prophecies was greatly validating for me, as I have been stringing together clues to prove this theory throughout my Master of Education degree. In many of our discussion forums, I have been part of conversations

regarding adolescents and mental health. It seems that many of us are especially concerned about how adolescents are doing during the COVID-19 pandemic. I have been reflecting on my own adolescence frequently during this degree and comparing it to what I have seen in the youth I've worked with over the years. There were many courses that left impressions on me regarding our youth and the images we see in the media.

In EDUC 5511 *Counselling Theories* & 5501 *Counselling Skills* I learned about narrative, feminist, and existential therapy, and the ways in which our stories are influenced by the power of dominant culture, which can be oppressive or inhibiting. This made me reflect on all the negative messages we get about adolescence from mainstream media and how we internalize those messages.

In EDUC 5551 *Introduction to Secondary School Counselling* I interviewed both a high school student and a high school counsellor. I was blown away by the intelligence and remarkability of the student I interviewed, who was a thoughtful and passionate global citizen who spent extensive time volunteering and giving back to her community. The interview took place in 2020 and she barely even mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic, which was contrary to the discussions taking place in our forums where everyone expressed vehement concern about children and adolescents. My thoughts were validated when I interviewed the high school counsellor in that course, who said that adult anxieties were creeping into every facet of children's lives and undermining their resilience (Famularo, 2020).

In EDUC 5501 *Counselling Skills* I was paired with a mother who immigrated to Canada as a young adult from South Asia. She discussed the differences between Canada and the culture she was raised in, which did not include expectations of emotional turmoil

in adolescence. She is raising teenagers in Canada and is trying to amalgamate her home culture with Canadian culture, and she really opened by eyes to the differences in expectations across different cultures.

In EDUC 5021 *Philosophy and History of Education* we learned about the ways in which culture and traditions are disseminated in different cultures. I was struck while reading about Confucious' *tao*,"The Way", that societies where the emphasis is on the family unit rather than individual seemed to produce adolescents who struggled less. I discuss this further in my *Areas For Future Study* section in Chapter 3.

In EDUC 5031 *Curriculum, Teaching and Learning* I reflected on my own theoretical lens and the ways in which I wish to approach my work in the future. I decided that I want to approach working with people from a critical lens, which is critical of the way we have been educated in the past, and critical of the messages we get from dominant culture. In Maxine Green's *Curriculum and Consciousness*, Michael Novak refers to parents, teachers, psychiatrists etc. as the "enforcers of reality" (Flinders & Thornton, 2017, p. 157) and this made me interested in exploring the ways that our view of adolescence is perpetuated by Western society.

Throughout my coursework I have pieced together the ways in which dominant culture paves the way for reality. In *Chapter 2, Literature Review*, I will explore how adolescents in Canada are doing in a variety of metrics regarding typical "troubled teen" factors. I will show where our current views on adolescence come from, and why they are perpetuated. I will review adolescent experiences in different cultures and demonstrate proof of how powerful self-fulfilling prophecies are. I will also explore the importance of biological views and how much of a role hormones and neurology play in adolescent

development. In *Chapter 3, Application*, I will explain how these factors (mental health, non-Western adolescent experiences vs. Western, biology) tie together to prove my claim that adolescence as we know it is a Western social construction, and what we can do about it. I will conclude on a hopeful note, stating the live-saving potential of changing our rhetoric, and the ways in which this message can help parents to raise healthier and more confident teenagers.

Significance

If Western society can internalize the message that I am conveying in this paper, I believe that we can begin to change a damaging and powerful narrative which is telling us that teenagers are *bad*. That it is *natural* and *biological* for teenagers to be angsty, risk-taking, and rebellious. Maybe my own narrative would have been different had society been telling me how great teenagers are, how resilient they are, how kind and conscientious they are, and how much potential they have rather than the opposite. This is more salient these days than ever when we are bombarded with the message that the *youth are not okay* throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. It feels like we are not even giving adolescents the opportunity or space to *try* to be okay.

Presenting the Argument

Scholarship on the adolescent period overemphasizes the potential for problems. A quick search in the PsychNet database for "adolescent disorders" merits tens of thousands more hits than "adolescent resilience" or "positive adolescent development". I claim that Western culture needs to change negative expectations of teenagers because focusing on the positive elicits better outcomes. I claim this based on my analysis of how Canadian youth are doing (using 2019 and 2020 data from Statistics Canada), the history of the

adolescent experience as we know it, archival research on adolescent experiences in non-western societies, and evidence of how strongly our expectations and stereotypes influence how we experience events.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

A Profile of Youth in Canada

To demonstrate whether our perceptions of adolescent experiences indeed influence our reality, we need to review a snapshot of Canadian youth today. Statistics Canada's 2019 Portrait of Canadian Youth starts off on a positive note, saying on the title page that "Today's youth are unlike any generation before! … [they are] diverse, connected, socially engaged, [and] educated" (Statistics Canada, 2019). There are over 7 million youth aged 15-29 across Canada (Statistics Canada, 2019). Canada's youth are socially and civically engaged. 67% of 15 to 30 years old's are members of a group, organization, or association, compared with 65% for the overall Canadian population. 48% of youth volunteer. 71% of youth said they donate to a charitable or non-profit organization. (Statistics Canada, 2019). Youth are more educated than ever; in 2016, 9% of men and 5% of women aged 25 to 34 had not completed high school, compared to 22% and 19%, respectively, in 1990 (Statistics Canada, 2019).

Some adolescents face serious mental health issues. Suicide is the second leading cause of death amongst Canadian youth, behind accidents (Statistics Canada, 2019). A 2016 survey done by Kids Help Phone Canada says that nearly one out of every five teens (22%) report that they seriously considered suicide in the last 12 months (p. 4). Smoking, heavy drinking, and cannabis use have generally declined (with the exception of a recent upswing in heavy drinking for some young women), however there are new challenges emerging,

such as increasing rates of opioid related hospitalizations (Statistics Canada, 2019) as well as increases in young adults (aged 20-24) using vaporizers or e-cigarettes in the last three years (Government of Canada, 2020).

Since COVID-19, youth are reporting a greater decline in mental health than the general population. In 2019 (pre-COVID-19), 60% of youth reported excellent or very good mental health, versus 40% in July of 2020 (Statistics Canada, 2020, p. 6). 15–19-year-olds have also increased their use of e-cigarettes and vaporizers between 2019 and 2021 as a means of stress relief (Government of Canada, 2020). As we continue to emerge from the pandemic, I am certain we will start to see more studies emerging on the ways which COVID-19 has exacerbated "storm and stress" factors of adolescence.

We can see from the statistics above that Canadian youth are a remarkable, hard-working group of people, but there are some serious issues that need addressing, especially regarding mental health and suicidality. If the media would stop promoting the idea that *the kids are not ok*ay, I believe that tour teenagers would stand more of a chance of actually being okay. Western culture needs to change negative expectations of teenagers because focusing on the positive will elicit better outcomes.

The History of the Modern, Western Adolescent

To consider how we could change our stereotypes to focus on positive youth development, we should explore where those stereotypes come from. I first read about the idea of adolescence being a social invention in Laurence Steinberg's 2017 book *Adolescence*. Steinberg introduces G. Stanley Hall, the "father" of the scientific study of adolescence. Hall takes a "biosocial" view of adolescence—believing that the hormonal and physical changes of puberty are the driving forces (Steinberg, 2017). The most

important legacy of Hall's view of adolescence is the idea that the adolescent period is one characterized by "storm and stress" (Steinberg, 2017); that the adolescent body is "tormented by physiological and emotional storm of hormonal changes" (Lesko, 1996, p.150), and thus "the hormonal renders the social inevitable" (Goldberg, 1973, p. 93). Steinberg goes on to explain the origins of the adolescent as we know it today, and the role that the media played in creating the image of the American teenager that now appears all over the world.

In his 2010 book *Teen 2.0, Saving our Children and Families from the Torment of Adolescence*, Robert Epstein describes how the modern adolescent is the creation of modern industrialism, before which young people simply worked side by side with their parents as soon as they were old enough to, as they still do in many regions of the globe. In pre-industrial societies young men frequently left the family to learn a trade, and couples married and had children young, often right after puberty (Epstein, 2010, p. 23). People had to grow up young to support their families and did not have the luxury of irresponsibility.

Since then, there have been vast numbers of restrictions placed on child labour and what a person should or should not be allowed to do (i.e. drink alcohol, vote…), and restrictions combined with the education system and big business have created and maintained the idea that adolescence is a distinct period from childhood or adulthood. Epstein claims that one of the primary historical forces "driving the artificial extension of childhood in America since the mid-1800s" (p. 71) is that women gained more of a voice in policymaking, and women have more nurturing tendencies than men and were inclined to remove children from arduous factory work (p. 71). This, combined with the

desire of leaders to "impose their moral standards on poor and working-class youth" (p. 72) meant that children were being removed from the workforce and put into schools. Children started spending less time with adults and parents and more time with peers, perhaps feeling less fulfilled and with more idle time on their hands. Epstein says that before these forces took place, "the troubled teen was a rarity in human history" (p. 72).

In his 2001 article *We Know Some Things*, Laurence Steinberg describes how preeminent and influential psychoanalytic theorists prior to the 1970's took hold of the notion of the "troubled teen" and perpetuated it, telling parents to "expect oppositionalism and defiance from their teenagers" (p. 3), a view that was shot down by a series of empirical studies in the 1960s and 1970s which found that approximately 75% of teenagers actually had happy and pleasant relationships with their parents and the remaining 25% had pre-existing family difficulties which preceded adolescence (e.g. Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Kandel & Lesser, 1972; Offer, 1969). Steinberg goes on to make a crucial point regarding the creation of modern adolescence: "there has remained a dramatic disjunction between what is being said in academic circles and what is being sold to parents through popular media" (p. 4). I can see how media and big business have money to gain by maintaining the idea of adolescence as a distinct—and troublesome—period.

Adolescent Experiences in Non-Western Societies

We can see the ways that stereotypes and dominant social forces influence reality by examining how other regions and cultures interpret adolescence. "Adolescent psychology is a Eurocentric enterprise" is the opening line to A. Bame Nsamenang's contribution to the 2002 book *The World's Youth: Adolescence in Eight Regions of the Globe*.

Our images of what constitutes a teenager are not ubiquitous. After the end of the Second World War, American teenagers enjoyed a period of affluence in the late 1940's and early 1950's (Fasick, 1994; Hine, 1999; Steinberg, 2017). Advertisers began to see the potential of marketing towards this new affluent group, and publications such as *Seventeen* magazine began perpetuating the image of the independent, risk-taking teenager that we are familiar with today (Osgerby, 2008; Palladino, 1996; Steinberg, 2017).

While we may believe that adolescents everywhere undergo a period like this, Larson et. al., (2009) argue that this image is used in some cultures as an example of what *not* to be. Adolescents in the non-Western world have different circumstances, cultures, and traditions, and this image of the *Seventeen* teenager that we have been sold is not always salient. Expectations of rebellion and emotional turmoil, or separation from family, are often not part of the international adolescent experience (Larson, 2002; Schlegel & Barry, 1991).

The importance placed on friendships and autonomy from family among Western youth is far less relevant in Arabic and South Asian countries (Booth, 2002; Verma & Saraswathi, 2002). Rather than partying and rebelling, preparing for the college entrance exams is the central experience of middle-class youth in India, as well as teens in East Asian countries (Lee & Larson, 2000; Verma, Sharma, & Larson, 2002). In fact, rather than living up to our stereotypes, Adolescents in many parts of the world are showing unprecedented abilities in creating software, developing artistic talent, providing service to their communities, and contributing to political causes (Heath & Smyth, 2000; Lewis, 2001; Yates & Youniss, 1999). In many regions outside of the West, adolescence is viewed as a

period of productivity rather than trouble (e.g., Brown, Larson, & Saraswati, 2002; Schlegel & Barry, 1991, Steinberg, 2014).

 In 1991, Alice Schlegel and Herbert Barry III published their momentous volume *Adolescence: An Anthropological Inquiry* where they reviewed researched on young people which had been conducted in 186 preindustrial societies. Their findings echo Larson's. Most of the cultures did not even have a word for the period we call adolescence, and if they did it was as innocuous referral to a time after puberty and before marriage (Epstein, 2010, p. 80). Epstein (2010) takes his readers through Japan and China, The Arab World, Russia, Morocco, Latin America, India Sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia examining the history of adolescence in the regions and whether our idea of the tumultuous teenage period has infiltrated, and to what extent. We see that in many of these regions and cultures, Western influence and the ideas of adolescent strife have not managed to usurp traditional roles and family values. Larson and Epstein's research does seem to point towards a strong correlation between Western media, industrialization, and teenage "storm and stress".

 By looking at the Statistics Canada data from 2019 and 2020, we can see that Canadian youth are an amazing bunch, but they struggle with mental health and risk taking. We can see where the idea of the "troubled teen" came from, and how the media and big business benefits by reproducing this idea. We can also see that the image of the rebellious, risk-taking teenager is not ubiquitous worldwide, and many cultures actually hold a positive conception of the adolescent period. These factors should make us consider how much our expectations influence our reality. This brings us back to my argument, that our [Western] culture needs to change negative expectations of teenagers because focusing on

the positive will reduce the mental health issues and risk-taking we have come to expect from the period.

Positivity and The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

We can see the ways in which our words influence our reality by examining the benefits of positive adolescent development and reviewing studies that have been done on the power of self-fulfilling-prophecies. The literature focusing on the benefit of strengths-based approaches to working with adolescents has burgeoned in recent years (e.g., Lerner, von Eye, Lerner, Lewin-Bizan, & Bowers, 2010; Lewin-Bizan, Bowers, & Lerner, 2010), and strength-based programs have demonstrated improvements in adolescent self-conceptions, sense of responsibility, attentiveness, and considerateness (Coatsworth & Conroy, 2009; Larson & Angus, 2011; Salusky et al., 2014l; Steinberg, 2017). Being optimistic has been linked to a wide array of positive consequences (Carver et al., 2009, 2010; Peterson and Steen, 2009; Seligman, 1991).

There is a large body of work illustrating that the more youth see themselves as irresponsible, the more they are at risk for "storm and stress" through their adolescent period (e.g., Buchanan & Hughes, 2009; Cheung & Cimpian, 2016; Qu, Pomerantz, Wang, 2020). This is part of a larger body of evidence demonstrating the powers of self-fulfilling prophecies in our lives (i.e. how powerful our perceptions of stereotypes really are) (e.g., Ambady, Shih, Kim, & Pittinsky, 2001; Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990; Darley & Fazio, 1980; Helms et al., 2014; Paluck & Shepherd, 2012; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Rosenthal & Rubin, 1978; Snyder & Stukas, 1999; Zou et al., 2009).

In 2020, Yang Qu, Eva Pomerantz, and Guohong Wu conducted a study with the intention of answering the key question of "whether it is possible to change youth's beliefs

when they already have deeply rooted ideas about what it means to be a teen" (p. 199). This study aimed to counter the stereotypes of the irresponsible adolescent to determine if more positive views lead to more constructive behaviours. Youth who were exposed to the counterstereotyping intervention indeed began to see the adolescent period as more of a time of "being responsible, fulfilling family obligations, engaging in school, and refraining from risk taking" than did the control group (p. 208).

This echoes the results of an earlier (2009) study conducted by Christy Buchanan and Johna L. Hughes which examines whether negative expectations impact behavior and relationships during adolescence. In this study, Buchanan and Hughes surveyed parents and adolescents, examining whether "each perceiver's expectations predicted later behaviour" (p. 265). The findings demonstrated that negative, stereotypical expectations for adolescents in the domains of risk-taking, rebelliousness and alienation did predict parallel behavior and attributes 1 year later (p. 279).

These two studies are monumental in demonstrating the power that language and behaviour have on shaping the adolescent experience. It is evident that the more society and families repeat the old "troubled teen" adages, the more they ring true. This explains why other cultures do not experience the same degree of "storm and stress" as we do in Western cultures. Our society tends to blame hormones and brain development for teenage risk-taking and irresponsibility. In the next section, I will explore to what degree this is true.

Arguments for the Biosocial View

We can see that society and culture has a lot of power in shaping our narratives, however that is not to say that biology plays no part in adolescent development. The

biosocial view of adolescents that we have come to be familiar with, the "storm and stress" period characterized by G. Stanley Hall in his 1904 *Adolescence*, in not unimportant. Many of Hall's findings echo our current beliefs about adolescents and still ring true. For example, Hall said that "the curve of despondence starts at eleven rises steadily and rapidly till fifteen, then falls steadily till twenty three" (1904, vol. 2, p. 77). Research does support the notion that depression peaks in early adolescence and then falls after the midteens (Peterson et al., 1993). Hall said that adolescents become depressed because of "Suspicion of being disliked by friends, of having faults of person or character that cannot be overcome, the fancy of. . .hopeless love" (1904, vol. 2, p. 78). "Suspicion of being disliked by friends" sounds an awful lot like current discussions around the way that Facebook and Instagram "like" reciprocity affects teenage mental health. Hall and modern researchers also agree that risk behavior in adolescence usually takes place with friends (Hall, 1904; Maxwell, 2002; Prinstein, et al, 2001; Sieving et al, 2000). There is evidence that "the neural regions involved in affective processing and reward seeking (e.g., the amygdala and ventral striatum) develop faster than the neural system related to cognitive control (e.g., the prefrontal cortex)", contributing to potentially heightened emotional dysregulation in adolescence (Casey et al. 2008 as cited in Qu, 2020).

So, there are studies supporting aspects of Hall's beliefs that biological processes can influence adolescent development, however there are also many critics of this idea who argue that biology is only one of many influencing factors and a focus on the biological neglects to recognize the socially constructed and individual aspects, as well as the powerful dominant forces involved (e.g. Fausto-Sterling, 1985; Goldberg, 1973; Larson, 2002; Leder, 1990; Lesko, 1996).

Biology *can* contribute to "storm and stress", but it can also lead to positive outcomes when the changes occur in supportive environments (Dahl, Allen, Wilbrecht, & Suleiman, 2018; Patton et al., 2018; Steinberg, 2014). So, when we hear people attribute teenager risk-taking, moodiness, and rebellion to hormones and brain development, we can see that it is a lot more complex than that and that there are other contextual factors to be considered first.

Canadian teens are struggling with mental health. The media reinforces the idea that the adolescent period is one of strife and risk-taking. Adolescents in other cultures do not struggle as much as we do, and studies demonstrate the veracity of self-fulfilling prophecies. Biology can account for some of the reasons why teenagers struggle, but there is clearly more to the story. It is evident that Western culture needs to change negative expectations of teenagers, because promoting more positive ideas will improve adolescent mental health and well-being.

Chapter 3: Professional Application

Introduction

In this paper, I claim that Western society needs to change negative expectations of teenagers because focusing on the positive elicits better outcomes. In my Literature Review section *A Profile of Youth in Canada*, we can see that the biggest issues facing youth are struggles with mental health and suicidality. In the section *The History of the Modern, Western Adolescence* we can see where our current view came from and how it is perpetuated by the media. In the section *Adolescent Experiences in Non-Western Societies*, we can see that our images of what constitutes adolescence are not ubiquitous. In the section *Positivity and the Self-fulfilling Prophecy* we can see how much our words influence our reality. And finally, in the section *Arguments for the Biosocial View*, we can see that biology is a factor in adolescent development but is only a part of the story. When we amalgamate these ideas, it is clear that Western Society needs to begin to change this negative narrative to help create a new and more positive view of the adolescent period in order to improve mental health.

The Real Story

As my literature review shows, we continue to perpetuate a negative perception of adolescence which isn't ubiquitous. I consider the multitude of negative perceptions of teenagers in movies (Superbad; Dude, Where's My Car?; Suburbia; Breakfast Club; Dazed and Confused; Amewrican Pie; Requiem for a Dream; Thirteen; American Pie; Kids; Less

Than Zero; Virgin Suicides; Detroit Rock City; Donnie Darko;… to name a few), as well as

the messaging we are getting in the mainstream news, with headlines like 'They're Barely

Hanging on': Teenagers reflect on mental health amid COVID-19 pandemic (Lieberman,

2021), These drugs are killing our kids': Why teen brains are more vulnerable to fentanyl

and opioid addiction (Kalaichandran, 2017) and Teenagers' brains 'linked to recklessness'

(Mosley, 2011). Speaking as a parent myself, I can see how little practical guidance is

accessible to parents. We leave the hospitals with these precious little bundles and then are

left to sift through which approaches we feel we ought to take when it comes to discipline,

sleeping, feeding… everything! There are so many conflicting ideas and approaches to

parenting marketed to us. We are inundated by headlines, opinions, pseudo-science, and

agendas. It is here where I again appreciate Laurence Steinberg's ideas about the

dichotomy between what is being said in academia versus mainstream culture. The

preeminent scholars in the field of adolescent psychology (see *Chapter 2: Literature

Review*) are focused not on the "survival" the period; but rather *why* we view the period the

way we do, and what is *actually* happening.

When we look at the overview of youth in Canada provided in the literature review,

we can see that mental health is a big issue for adolescents. If the Kids Help Phone statistics

from my literature review are true—that one in five teens seriously considered suicide in

2016—and we consider that mental health has declined since the pandemic (see *Chapter 2:

Literature Review* section *A Profile of Youth in Canada*) we have a serious problem on our

hands. And risk-taking behaviour (sex, drugs, alcohol, reckless driving, etc.) is an ongoing

issue. It is fair that parents are anxious about this period. But I believe that we can see

some answers within our problems, and we can explore the research from other cultures

and the studies demonstrating the ways that our perceptions and language create our reality. If we can shift the way we portray adolescents and find out what other cultures are doing differently, we can begin to create a new narrative which will ultimately help parents and teenagers fare better through the period.

Changing the Narrative

Western Society needs to shift its negative view of adolescence because focusing on the positives could save lives. The most practical way we can address the mental health issues that our kids are facing, is by refuting the dated (1904) claims that G. Stanley Hall made about teenage "storm and stress" and starting to promote a more holistic vision of our youth. We can see that hormones and neurological development can account for some of the moodiness and risk-taking behaviour that we have come to associate with the period, but by looking at other cultures, we can see that it is only a small part of the story.

Robert Epstein's 2010 book *Teen 2.0: Saving Our Children and Families from the Torment of Adolescence* includes 5 chapters which greatly influenced my reflection while writing this paper. The chapters are: *Young People Are Capable Thinkers, Young People Can Love, Young People Are Tough, Young People Are Creative, and Young People Can Handle Responsibility*. These chapters have also influenced the way I will parent. Epstein says that we reach the peak of our reasoning ability in our early to mid-teens (p. 172), and even argues that intelligence peaks at 13 or 14 (p. 172). He goes on to give examples of the remarkable feats that teenagers around the world are accomplishing, a few being: creating inventions to combat climate change, sailing around the world solo, leading armies to victories, and excelling in Olympic sports. Imagine if these were the sorts of stories that were promoted on our social media and the news, rather than the old "troubled teen" views

that I discuss in *The History of the Modern, Western Adolescent* section of my Literature review. We need to start shifting our focus to circulate the stories like these, which emphasize what our kids are capable of.

When we analyze adolescent experiences in non-Western societies and review the studies demonstrating the power of the self-fulfilling prophecy (see *Chapter 2: Literature Review*), we can see that cultures which view adolescents as irresponsible and risk-taking end up having adolescents that are irresponsible and risk-taking. To improve the mental health of our teenagers, we need to stop promoting the "troubled teen" stories and start promoting the "remarkable teen" ones. This makes me optimistic as a parent because I feel as though I have some control. When we discuss the biological elements— the neuroscience and hormones—I feel powerless. However, changing my language and deciding to focus on the "remarkable teen" stories rather than "troubled teen" ones… that is manageable for me and makes me excited. If we begin to promote Qu, Pomerantz & Wu's "counterstereotyping interventions" (see *Positivity and The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy* section of my Literature Review) we can begin to elicit better mental health outcomes for our teens.

Areas for Further Study

To effectively counsel children and parents about how best to approach the adolescent period, I would like to take this research further to see what factors other than media and stereotypes influence adolescent development. In my Counselling Skills course, I worked extensively with a woman who immigrated to Canada as an adult from South Asia. When I asked her about whether she experienced a tumultuous adolescence, she laughed at me and said something along the lines of "I wasn't even allowed to think my own thoughts

as a teenager!". This led me to wonder about the correlation between individualistic societies and challenging adolescent periods, and the potential protective factors of authoritarian parenting styles. When I think about my own peers and adolescence, the teens who seemed to fare the best through the period were ones who spent lots of time with their families and the ones who had more fulfilling obligations and responsibilities outside of school (volunteering, being a part of a church group, working on the family farm, working a job, etc.). So, what are the reasons beyond the influence of stereotypes which influence adolescent development? Is there more there regarding familial obligations, authority, or responsibility that we could study and extrapolate from to have better outcomes? I hope to study these subjects further to have a more well-rounded perspective on how parents and educators can make a difference in the lives of teenagers.

Summary

When we look at how youth in Canada are doing versus how youth in other cultures are doing and consider how important our language is in shaping reality, we can see how important it is that we begin to shift our narrative. Canadian youth are a remarkable and intelligent group of people, but we can see that mental health issues are concerning. By changing the way we view the adolescent period, and considering where our viewpoints come from, hopefully we can see the importance of promoting "remarkable teen" stories over "troubled teen" stories. While biology is a factor in adolescent development, it is not the only one. As a society we need to change the way we talk about teenagers. Doing so could have enormous potential in reducing teenage suicides and mental health issues.

Conclusion

We undermine the strengths and resilience of our adolescents by projecting negative stereotypes. If Western Society begins to change the narrative to focus on positive adolescent experiences, we can save teenage lives and improve mental health.

Throughout my Master of Education degree, I have been considering my own adolescent period and comparing it to the personal and professional experiences of my peers. I have had a unique graduate school experience in that it took place mostly during the COVID-19 pandemic (2019-2022) and I have been able to be a part of discussions with other professionals who are working on the frontlines in healthcare and education. There has been a lot of negative and fearful rhetoric surrounding the mental health of children and adolescents in our discussion forums. I understand why, but I cannot help but keep coming back to the idea I heard in my EDUC 5551 *Secondary School Counselling* course when I interviewed a school counsellor of 30 plus years. He said that the "over sensitization of mental health of kids" "underestimates the resiliency of kids to respond" (Famularo, 2020). Watching adolescent mental health decline over the last few years has made me feel as though I am witnessing self-fulfilling prophecies in action.

In *Chapter 1: Introduction*, I discussed my experiences as a new parent, which occurred synchronously to my Master of Education Degree and the COVID-19 pandemic. These three events in my life made me reflect a lot on mental health, and especially the ways in which children are influenced by adult language and anxieties.

In *Chapter 2: Literature Review* I delve into the history of why we view adolescents in the way we do, whether the stereotypes are true in Canada, and how adolescence in

other cultures compares. I also discuss the power of self-fulfilling prophecies; how our language and media come to shape our reality. I conclude the Literature Review with section 4, *Arguments for the Biosocial View*, where I discuss how important biological ideas about neurological development and hormones are to the "troubled teen" narrative.

In *Chapter 3: Application*, I discuss how important it is that Western Society start shifting its focus to promotion of "remarkable teen" stories rather than the "troubled teen" ones, because doing so could reduce adolescent mental health issues, suicidality, and risk-taking. In this chapter I discuss how these ideas makes me feel optimistic as a parent, because I feel like I have some control over shaping the ways in which my own kids will view and ultimately experience their adolescence.

Current statistics regarding Canadian youth demonstrate that many of the stereotypes of teenagers we see in the media are not particularly salient, however the mental health issues emerging are alarming. The media plays a major role in creating and maintaining the idea that the teenage years are volatile, and there is evidence that negative stereotypes ultimately become reality. Biology is important, but it is only one piece of the puzzle. We can see when compare adolescent experiences with non-Western societies that there is more to the picture than just biology.

Western societies can play an important role in changing this narrative by recognizing the strengths and resilience of teens rather than potential for problems. Counterstereotyping interventions could save lives. The implications of changing our rhetoric could be a vast reduction in typical teenage problems. If we begin to switch the narrative to focus on the positive potential of teenagers, we can begin to reduce mental health issues and other "storm/ stress" factors. In this paper, I have demonstrated how

much control we have over shaping our own stories. Our anxieties and narratives become our children's. I honestly believe that my own adolescence could have been different if I had been exposed to more "remarkable teen" stories versus "troubled teen" stories.

This paper ties into the myriad of research and ideas about adolescent development. Family issues, addictions, and disorders are amongst the main subjects of adolescent-focused journal articles that come up in the APA Psychinfo database. This paper contributes something a little different to this field, a little more hopeful, and a little less daunting: the idea that we have power and agency to change this story. I hope that we can start to view our adolescents as the responsible, creative, and innovative people they are to improve mental health, reduce suicidality, and decrease the "storm and stress" of adolescence.

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