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ADOLESCENT EGOCENTRISM

Egocentrism is a central concept in the developmental psychology literature with important implications for adaptation and mental health. Despite its negative moral connotation, it is not related to egoism. Genetic epistemologist Jean Piaget introduced egocentrism (or centration) and described it as a normal phenomenon during the course of human development. Egocentrism is defined as a heightened focus on one's self and it takes several forms in ontogeny. During adolescence, egocentrism is regarded to be associated with pubertal changes and important developmental tasks, such as the acquisition of new mental capacities, the process of separation from parents, and the formation of individuality. Research has shown that egocentrism may be at the root of a wide variety of typical adolescent behaviors and disturbances. In this entry we will briefly describe the two main theoretical models for the interpretation of adolescent egocentrism, namely the cognitive model and the psychodynamic "New Look" model. References to research evidence concerning the two models will also be made. Finally, conclusions about current understanding of adolescent egocentrism will be drawn.

The Cognitive Model of Adolescent Egocentrism

The concept of egocentrism was introduced and described by Jean Piaget during the first decades of the twentieth century. The basic premise of the Piagetian conceptualization of egocentrism is that it is a differentiation failure between the self and the world, a negative by-product of any emergent cognitive system, from the sensori-motor to the formal operational stage. More specifically, in the beginning of each cognitive stage, the developing and not yet crystallized

abilities lead the individual to excessive assimilation (i.e., excessive adaptation of the world to one's self), and this constitutes an egocentric error.

During adolescence in particular, formal operations – a term used by Piaget to describe the structure of thought during this age period – offer the capacity for self-reflection, high abstraction, production of all possible combinations, hypothetico-deductive reasoning, conceptualization of possibility, and projection to the future. According to Piaget, these new cognitive abilities are parallel or complementary to affective changes during adolescence. Adolescents are preoccupied with ideals, construct “theories” or “systems” (usually naïve ones) about the self and the world, and begin to build a life plan and to adopt adult roles. Also, they express the wish to change the society in which they live. It is during this process that cognitive egocentrism emerges: in their attempt to adjust the environment to their ego, adolescents experience a relative failure to distinguish their own constructions from the point of view of the society which they hope to reform through these constructions. Adolescents believe strongly in the originality and power of their thoughts and in their capacity for a radical transformation of the world. Adolescents' writings (especially diaries) and intimate confessions are often full of such beliefs, which could be misunderstood as signs of messianism and pathological megalomania. Piaget postulated that peer group participation as well as preparation for a profession and entrance into the professional field facilitate the process of decentering, which is a continuous refocusing of perspective and signifies the decline of egocentrism.

Following Piaget, psychologist David Elkind in his 1967 paper elaborated further on adolescent egocentrism. He supported the view that pubertal changes (which he called “physiological metamorphosis”) are the cause of an excessive self-focus, which, in combination with the newly developed capacity to reflect on one's thoughts and feelings as well as on the thoughts and feelings of others, becomes the source of a differentiation failure: the adolescent assumes that others are as preoccupied with his or her appearance and behavior as he or she is.

Elkind introduced two related, yet distinct, manifestations of adolescent egocentrism: the imaginary audience and the personal fable. The imaginary audience is the adolescent's tendency to believe that he or she is at the center of others' attention, either critical or admiring. Adolescents often react to an audience of their own construction, anticipate others' reactions and feel that they are under the constant critical scrutiny of others. The imaginary audience is hypothesized to explain various adolescent behaviors, such as heightened self-consciousness, wish for aloneness and privacy, shyness, daydreaming, (e.g., anticipating others' reactions to one's own death), preoccupation with appearance (e.g., long hours spent in front of a mirror), attention-getting behavior (e.g., faddish dress and preferences), tendency to conform to peer group norms, engagement in delinquent acts (e.g., vandalism) motivated by the desire to impress an audience, etc.

The personal fable is a natural outcome of the imaginary audience. If the adolescent is such an important person to other people, he or she must be special, omnipotent, and invulnerable. This inner belief may account for typical adolescent behaviors, such as keeping of a diary, short-lived romantic affairs, risk-taking behavior (e.g., use of substances, reckless driving, sexual intercourse without contraception). Whereas the imaginary audience is an under-differentiation failure, the personal fable is the result of over-differentiation. According to Elkind, the two forms of adolescent egocentrism may be useful in the treatment of common adolescent disturbances. For example, delinquent behavior is likely to be reduced if we help the adolescent differentiate between the real and the imaginary audience of his or her acts.

The imaginary audience and the personal fable subside towards the end of adolescence. Elkind argued that the capacity to test hypotheses against reality gradually reduces the adolescent's false assumptions about the reactions of the real audience. Moreover, further development of intimacy, mutuality and sharing of confidences – a critical developmental task

during adolescence, according to psychiatrist Erik Erikson – reduces adolescents' belief in their speciality, omnipotence, and invulnerability.

The cognitive developmental interpretation of adolescent egocentrism has received only partial empirical support. The expected peak of egocentrism in the first phases of the formal operational stage and the expected decline when these abilities have been consolidated was found in few studies. In other studies, no association between formal operations and egocentrism was found. Unexpectedly, in some investigations egocentrism emerged during the concrete operational stage. Similarly, research data on age-related differences are contradictory. According to Piagetian theory, egocentrism appears in early adolescence (11-12 years), peaks in middle adolescence (14-15 years) and declines during the end of adolescence, as a consequence of the maturation of formal operations and the establishment of interpersonal intimacy. This decline was found in a number of studies. However, there is also the unexpected increase with age, as well as the finding that emerging adults (young people 18-25 years' old) experience increased egocentrism when facing important life transitions (e.g. college entrance). And, finally, no association was found with age in other investigations.

Furthermore, consistent gender differences in the experience of the imaginary audience and personal fable phenomena are incongruent with a cognitive interpretation of adolescent egocentrism. Nevertheless, gender differences emerge in many studies, with the most frequent finding being that females exhibit more imaginary audience ideation than males and males admitting more personal fable concerns than females. This finding seems to express females' greater emphasis on connectedness, in contrast to males' greater emphasis on agency and power. However, it is not consistent across all investigations and all dimensions of the imaginary audience and the personal fable.

The “New Look” at Imaginary Audience and Personal Fable

The rather weak empirical support of the cognitive model led psychologist Daniel Lapsley and his colleagues to the formulation of an alternative theoretical model for the interpretation of adolescent egocentrism, namely the psychodynamic “New Look” model. According to this model, the imaginary audience and the personal fable are not regarded as negative and undesirable manifestations of cognitive egocentrism (i.e., the outcomes of a differentiation failure). The imaginary audience is conceptualized as object relational ideation or interpersonal fantasies; the personal fable includes the adolescent’s feeling that he or she is unique (therefore no one can understand him or her), omnipotent (i.e., having special authority, power or influence) and invulnerable (i.e., incapable of being harmed or injured, even immortal).

Both constructs are regarded as healthy coping mechanisms of a narcissistic nature that the adolescent employs in order to deal with the stressful developmental demand for the psychological separation from parents and for his or her individuation. This is the “second individuation process”, a term named after the psychoanalyst Peter Blos, and further analyzed by psychologist Ruthellen Josselson. Blos did not use the term “separation” but Lapsley, who adopted Blos’ theory, added it, and argued that imaginary audience is a form of object relational ideation that enables the adolescent to maintain connectedness in imagination, during the course of separation. The imaginary audience helps adolescents cope with the anxiety arising from the de-idealization of parents, the grief for their loss, and the separation anxiety. This manifestation of adolescent egocentrism consists in quasi relationships – trial actions, as Blos called them – that prepare adolescents for the formation of mature interpersonal bonds and for their gradual reconciliation with the parental ego. According to Blos, these are “make-believe” relationships that lack genuine quality. They express the adolescents’ hunger for close relationships, and have an intense emotional character, either pleasant (e.g., adolescents fantasize that they become

famous stars), or unpleasant (e.g., adolescents fantasize that others make critical comments for their appearance), or both (e.g., adolescents fantasize a “crush”, or how others would react to their death).

In the “New Look” model, the personal fable is an internal representation of the self-observing ego (a term used by Blos) as uniquely special, omnipotent, and indestructible. The personal fable reflects the adolescent’s attempt to form, through visions of the self (as Josselson named them), stable self-boundaries and to restore self-esteem. In other words, the adolescent deals with the narcissistic trauma caused by the separation from parents, through denying the need to depend on them.

As Lapsley argued, the imaginary audience and the personal fable express, in the intrapsychic level, the two basic themes of the separation-individuation process, namely, connectedness/communion and self-assertion/agency, respectively. In the interpersonal level, the separation-individuation process is evident in the actual changes taking place in intra-familial relationships.

Earlier research (before the formulation of the psychodynamic model) had already revealed links between ego identity, which includes the individuation process, and egocentrism. In the process of identity exploration, experimentation and commitment, research evidence has indicated that concerns about the self and demands from the social milieu are likely to lead adolescents to excessive preoccupation with the self and what others think of them, thus to heightened self-consciousness. Moreover, the novelty of the experience during the search for an identity arouses feelings of uniqueness, omnipotence, and invulnerability.

Empirical tests of the “New Look” model conducted by psychologists Lapsley, Luc Goossens, and Lesa Rae Vartanian showed that the imaginary audience in the form of object relational ideation is associated mostly with separation concerns (e.g., separation anxiety), whereas the personal fable with individuation issues (e.g., dependency denial, self-centeredness).

The imaginary audience in the form of self-consciousness is high among adolescents who experience low support from parents, classmates, and close friends, whereas the personal fable is high among adolescents experiencing high support. It appears, then, that heightened self-consciousness may reflect the vicissitudes of the separation-individuation process, whereas the personal fable is likely to serve a self-protective function during this process.

More recent research by Lapsley, Aalsma and colleagues showed that the personal fable is a “plural”, multifaceted construct with differential implications for adolescent well-being. During late adolescence, omnipotence positively predicted self-worth, coping, and adjustment and counterindicated depressive affect and suicidal ideation, whereas personal uniqueness positively predicted depression and suicidal ideation. Therefore, a moderate degree of narcissism may be adaptive during this age period, as it is related with less pathology in the separation-individuation process (i.e., problems in differentiation, excessive use of splitting as a defense mechanism, relational disturbances). Also, Goossens and his colleagues found that omnipotence and invulnerability are related to lower levels of depression and loneliness. All these findings imply that the various facets of the imaginary audience and the personal fable may be differentially related to separation-individuation outcomes and to mental health in general.

Current knowledge on adolescent egocentrism indicates that the imaginary audience and the personal fable (as well as their dimensions) are significant experiences of adolescents, and are associated with key developmental issues of this age period, such as social cognition, separation-individuation, ego identity, narcissistic concerns, and risk-taking. A shift has taken place from the conceptualization of egocentrism as a faulty perception of the self and other towards understanding of the imaginary audience and the personal fable as adaptive responses to normative developmental challenges.

However, more research is needed in order to disentangle the complex links of the imaginary audience and the personal fable with new cognitive capacities, pubertal development

(i.e., pubertal status and timing), interpersonal and social demands (in the contexts of family, peers, and school), and cultural values and expectations. Furthermore, various measurement and methodological limitations need to be addressed. Existing measures are based on different conceptualizations of the imaginary audience and the personal fable, creating a conceptual confusion, which has to be reduced. For example, Elkind's *Imaginary Audience Scale* assesses self-consciousness in front of a critical audience, whereas Lapsley's *New Imaginary Audience Scale* measures object relational ideation in relation to a predominantly admiring audience. Lapsley's *New Personal Fable Scale* assesses uniqueness, omnipotence, and invulnerability. A more detailed exploration of invulnerability by the same researcher and his colleagues, distinguishing between danger invulnerability (i.e., in relation to physical risks) and psychological invulnerability (i.e., in relation to psychological distress) in the framework of a developmental model of adolescent narcissism, is a promising advance in this field.

The imaginary audience and the personal fable have important implications for health promotion during adolescence, as Lapsley postulated. Although earlier research has indicated, albeit with some mixed results, that these twin ideations may be responsible for adolescents' reckless and health-compromising behavior, more recent findings, such as those briefly reported above, imply, for example, that moderate levels of omnipotence and invulnerability may serve a self-enhancing function. For this reason, health promotion programs should attempt to reduce danger invulnerability rather than other forms.

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See also: Adolescent Risk-Taking Behavior; Adolescent Substance Use; Childhood and Adolescence: Overview; Cognitive Development, Stages of; Juvenile Delinquency; Separation-Individuation; Social Cognitive Theory; Object Relations Theoretical Framework; Psychodynamic Theoretical Framework

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