The Same but Different: the culture in which our adolescents live

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Introduction

There would be some who argue that in order to understand youth you must study youth culture – those elements of social life that are unique to youth. However, I suggest that while the existence of a separate world may in part be true, what is also of concern and before the eyes of all, is how adolescents interpret the larger cultural world they share with adults. Adolescents engage in and interpret that larger cultural world with different cognitive and emotional capacities than most of the adults around them. Those differences in capacity make the same world a different place.

Drawing from a few major studies relative to youth and contemporary culture, I review elements of their findings and compile them in a manner that focuses on what I see as four related stressors that youth in the United States encounter. Those stressors are:

1. The poly-vocal nature of the contemporary world;
2. The over-scheduled life of children and families;
3. The isolation felt by teens, parents, and families overall; and
4. The marketplace's effort to target youth.

In this discussion I raise concerns for adolescents' efforts to find a personal sense of identity and purpose amid such stressors. I finish be asking how Christian communities might assist youth in that process.

1. A Poly-Vocal World

Religious education theorist John Westerhoff, writing in the early 1970's, helped us redefine the nature of religious formation by introducing the concept of formative "ecologies." By which he meant that whole environments assist in shaping a person, not simply formal educational efforts. Therefore when raising questions of what forms youth in faith, we must take into account the larger social environment that is instrumental in their formation. In his book *Will Our Children Have Faith*, Westerhoff noted the beginning of what he called "broken ecologies" away from the cohesive or homogenous ecologies of prior centuries.[1] The elements of social living that we could presume *worked together* to assist in healthy formation (civic life, schooling, etc.), are no longer as dependable because of the conflicting and even contradictory nature of their messages.

I would agree with Westerhoff on this point and find his analysis useful in attending to the challenges for teens today. Most people growing up in North America (and the West in general) through much of the twentieth century were formed in a relatively uni-vocal world. The various forms of leadership and influences that people lived amidst (e.g., government, church, civic, school, news media, and family) from the pre-Modern through to the late Modern period were basically speaking in voices that appeared generally unified. Or at least if not unified, were debating on the same stage. Civic and religious communities and families seemed to hold a lot of values in common and were structured to support those values. Furthermore, and perhaps

[1]John H. Westerhoff. *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976).

more importantly, civic and religious leadership were believed to be trustworthy, inspiring confidence and vision.

Youth growing up in a society, that presented clear and stable corporate identity and values, were able at an early age to come to their own sense of personal identity, values, and vocation.

What Westerhoff described as a new reality in the 1970's now appears permanent. Today the elements of formative ecologies are deeply fractured. Teens today have been living their whole lives in a poly-vocal world. The various voices surrounding them are frequently in loud disagreement with one another: government leadership at all levels; schools; parents; news and entertainment media of all kinds; and friends. More importantly, civic and religious leadership are often viewed with suspicion as self-serving, rather than trustworthy and visionary. Like adults, youth feel the stress of this disharmonious cacophony, but they may perceive it to be the norm rather than a social aberration.

Even adults struggle with the whirlwind that is our contemporary world, but they manage that whirlwind with considerably more resources (cognitive and emotional) than your average adolescent. Many adults have the wherewithal to find their way through the noise, still knowing who they are, what's important, and where they fit in. In a confusing and conflicting atmosphere it is hard to develop a sense of personal identity, values, and a sense of place or contribution. Since these are the primary tasks of the move from adolescents into adulthood, the conflicting atmosphere means it takes much longer to make that move and many are not negotiating it successfully.

2. Over-Scheduled Lives

Everyone today has a more crammed schedule than ever before, including kids. In *The Hurried Child* David Elkind writes about the increasing move to "hurry" children into age-inappropriate activities that add tremendous stress to the child and to the family overall. He argues that over scheduling instills in children a sense that their worth to their parents (teachers and coaches) is in their capacity to perform well in these various activities.

Elkind contends that it has always been the case that children of lower income households, and children whose families are living through crisis, "appreciate the need to take on adult responsibilities early" for the sake of family survival for they easily see the need. However in recent decades children of more affluent families, placed in schedule-filling activities or with surrogate parents, perceive the status as "clearly a reflection of parent and not child need."[2] Elkind argues it is that perception that "constitutes the major stress of hurrying and accounts for so much unhappiness among affluent young people today."[3] In *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* Chap Clark's findings from his own interviews with adolescents corroborate Elkind's. Clark found among youth a sense of abandonment, inspired by their feeling of being left on their own to raise themselves. Youth felt that by consistently scheduling them into

[2] David Elkind, *The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2001), p. 20.
[3] Ibid.

classes, programs, and camps their parents were passing them off to be raised by those who are paid to do so.

Clark goes on to assert that the organizations that in times past were intended and focused on the care and nurturance of youth are now focused increasingly on the agendas of the adults running them. He includes in that list schools, organized sports, music, dance, art, camping, religiously based youth programming, and even family life. Clark writes:

> For youth-directed organizations, institutions, and systems, the shift in focus was not immediate; in fact, it evolved over several decades. But as society in general moved from being a relatively stable and cohesive adult community intent on caring for the needs of the young to a free-for-all of independent and fragmented adults seeking their own survival, individual adolescents found themselves in a deepening hole of systemic rejection.[4]

While Elkind and Clark are both critical of parents for being self-interested rather than on the lookout for what is best for their children, I would contend that many parents believe themselves to working for their children's betterment. They are looking to develop their children's interests and fill their time with good, character-building activities. They are also concerned that kids have too much free time, which may leave them open to destructive influences. Clark is generally uncritical of the larger social environment in which parents make the choices they do.

It is true that family members today spend less unstructured free time together than they have in generations past. Thus there are fewer occasions for conversation and interaction that is not interrupted by, or mediated through, phones, MP3 players, computers, television, and other distractive media. But the changes in family interaction have to be seen in the larger context of broader social changes in order to make some valuable sense of them.

3. Isolated Families

Since the Industrial Revolution family life has been radically changing. In prior centuries people depended on relatively stable and overlapping networks of extended family members and neighbors to raise children. A few factors contributed to the loss of those networks. One is that families became smaller and more mobile. Work was no longer tied to the land but to industries that valued mobility and interchangeability, causing people to relocate from stable rural settings to more transient urban settings for jobs and opportunity. While this shift has been upon us for centuries, those moves were relatively local until the recent past. Only a few industries would or could relocate employees across great distances. But now with the proliferation of nation-wide and global companies, long distance moves have come to be expected. Today young parents are seldom in the communities wherein they themselves were raised, often having moved away from those communities upon completion of high school. With such moves, the networks of the extended family and community are left behind necessitating greater dependence on the nuclear family (parents and older children) for childcare.

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[4] Chap Clark, *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), p. 33.

Other factors come from more recent changes that have put new pressures on the nuclear family. One is the large number of women entering the workforce and staying even when raising children. A second change is dramatic increases in household consumer consumption. Both realities contribute to employment outside the home being a primary factor shaping family life. While Elkind would argue that stress around employment is primarily caused by job insecurity, Juliet Shor would argue that the ever increasing rate of household consumption drives adults, and even teens, to increase their work hours to keep up with their demands for consumption.[5] Families, even middle and upper middle class families, have both parents working long hours outside the home. Commitments to outside employment and the immediate household leave less time for involvement in civic, church, social commitments or even children's school. All these factors contribute to real isolation among families, with each concerned with its own survival and less likely to interact in any meaningful way with those outside. By now many families accept this insularity as normal.

In the absence of organic networks of care, parents attend to the needs of their children by engaging their children in supervised and scheduled activities. While Elkind and Clark would argue that the parents' reasons are primarily self-serving, I would argue that most parents claim a variety of sound reasons.[6] For one there is a desire to contribute to the child's growth and enjoyment. Another reason is that named above, the proliferation of households where both parents are working (or there is only one parent) results in fewer home settings where a mature adult is present during working hours. Finally, there is a suspicion of people not well known. The media attention to cases of abuse, abduction, and violence, as well as concerns for non-custodial parents, have contributed to an overall sense of suspicion of not only strangers, but also neighbors and those we believe we know well.[7]

Unable to attend to all the nurturance of their children on their own, within their own limited schedules, parents "farm out" the job to various paid personnel (teachers, coaches, instructors, therapists) who hold appropriate credentials and are clear of criminal charges. Clark contends that the teen can sense the stressful atmosphere that has been fostered "for their benefit." Clark states:

> We have evolved to the point where we believe driving [to endless activities] is support, being active is love, and providing any and every opportunity is selfless nurture.[8]

Clark charges that adults are more focused on their own survival and their own agendas (work, relationships, money, health, childcare, eldercare, etc.) and youth are left increasingly on their own to raise themselves.

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[5] Elkind's argument can be found throughout chapter two of *The Hurried Child*. Juliet Shor's *Born to Buy: the Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture* (New York: Scribner, 2004) looks to contemporary marketing and advertising and its effect on youth and families. She begins her discussion of the influence of the marketplace on children by recounting rises in consumption among Americans, p. 9.

[6] Elkind, p. 29.

[7] Elkind makes the claim that media attention to violence may not increase violent acts as much as it increases our expectation for violence to occur around us. Pp. 17-18.

[8] Clark, p. 46. This work is the analysis of a qualitative study Clark conducted with what he calls "normal" teens (as opposed to "at risk").

While I do not agree with Clark wholeheartedly on his assessment of the adult's motives, I do think an important finding in Clark's research was the perceptions of youth of the situation. They perceived – and took it as normal even if difficult – that they were on their own to take care of themselves. Clark explains the response of youth when he writes:

> The young have not arrogantly turned their backs on the adult world. Rather, they have been forced by a personal sense of abandonment to band together and create their own world – separate, semi-secret, and vastly different from the world around them.[9]

Patricia Hersch, in her own book *A Tribe Apart*, writes of the isolation of youth that is foisted on them, but also embraced by youth out of their own need to survive. In response they create their own world for protection, social guidance, and belonging.[10]

We can see this isolation of families and youth all around us. We leave kids to themselves. Even with youth who are in our own immediate family, we back off, not wishing to interfere in the parents' efforts to raise their children. Seldom do we consider that at bottom both parents and their offspring need a wider circle of concern to turn to for support, insight, and camaraderie in order to thrive.

4. Focus of the Marketplace

So if youth understand themselves to be on their own, and parents and other adults are leaving them alone more and more, who is raising our kids? Sociologist Juliet Schor, in her recent research on the marketplace, *Born to Buy*, argues that teens and young children are the focus of tremendous market research and pressure. Market pressures are having a dramatic effect, not just economically, but emotionally on the lives of children and families. Increasingly the marketplace is targeting youth, who have disposable cash of their own as well as significant influence on their parents' spending. Shor names multiple influences on children and youth found in contemporary marketing efforts. They are:

- The marketing of "cool;"
- Age compression (targeting younger audiences for products that are designed initially for older audiences);
- Anti-adultism (creating an image of adults as "the bothersome, the nerdy, the embarrassing, and the repressive" [11]); and
- Dual messaging (sending one message to youth while presenting a different one to parents).

These serve to separate children from their parents, encouraging youth to see themselves as more savvy consumers than their parents. In large part youth are not reflective buyers, looking to the immediate than to the long term consequences of spending. They are not immune from the

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[9] Clark, p. 44.
[10] As referenced by Clark, p. 54.
[11] She credits Nickelodeon for the most influential in creating this image of adults that serve as a perfect foil for youthful desires. Shor, p. 53.

images market forces wish to impose on them, but they look to the marketplace to show them who they should be.[12]

David White in *Discernment With Youth*, argues that since youth are subject to explicit and implicit marketplace messages throughout their day, the values of the consumer culture are becoming their primary value system.[13] He argues that the marketplace is happy to tell them:

- Who they are – consumers and commodities;
- What will make them happy and give life meaning – "cool" products;
- What their value is – in their capacity to buy and sell; and
- What it takes to be mature – the ability to know what you want as consumers.

White argues that the commodity-minded world in fact does not want a mature consumer, but one who is focused on self-interest and entertainment. Furthermore, the marketplace wants to distract teens from their deeper, God-given human longings, with products and services they can purchase.

Appropriate ministerial responses

While these same stressors may be very alive for adults living today in the United States, they represent higher hurdles for youth coming to investigate their sense of self in that environment. The primary developmental task of adolescents is to find out who they are, where they fit in and with whom, and what they are to do with their lives. The effort it takes to come to answers on those questions is intensified by a noisy and busy world, in which adolescents are isolated from adult communities, and families from one another, and a world in which market place voices are happy to provide for them an identity and a purpose. Adolescents are only just coming to develop the cognitive and emotional skills that this environment demands. All of the authors named above note levels of stress, confusion, isolation, apathy, and self-centeredness in the youth they have encountered.

Clark asserts that what youth most desperately want, even if they are loath to admit it, is to spend time with adults who care about them without being paid for their time or interest. To a great degree adolescents need adults around them who act like adults. That does not mean that adults should have all the answers. It could mean that adults maturely address the questions, share insights on how these challenges of life are addressed, and clearly demonstrate in word and deed their concern and love. David White argues that what we don't need to do is entertain youth. What we do need to do is help them use the tools of our religious traditions to both see and navigate through the challenges of life.

Our churches are one of the few remaining places in U.S. society were youth and adults (who are not paid to be there) mix. The mix primarily happens in our worship spaces, but we

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[12] Shor uses an extensive example of marketing companies studying youth in order to sell to them more effectively. This is called the "feedback loop." The result is that youth, exhilarated by the attention, happily sell themselves back to the market that's looking to shape them. Shor writes: "Although there's a democratic veneer to the feedback loop, that perspective obscures the fact that giant businesses orchestrate, control, and profit from the process." P. 50.

[13] David White, *Practicing Discernment With Youth: A Transformative Ministry Approach* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005). Primary discussion of chapter two.

seldom capitalize on that mix. Christian Smith, in *Soul Searching,* reported that youth who had one or more significant relationships with adults in their congregations were more likely to be involved and articulate about their faith. Furthermore, youth who were active and connected to faith communities were by and large healthier in their outlook and activities.[14]

What I would like to investigate in the RIG session at REA/APPRRE is how we might better create networks within our church communities that assist youth to engage with adults in meaningful ways. Yet our assistance of youth would be shortsighted if we did not also aid families in creating networks of support. Furthermore, we would be remiss if we also did not take this moment as a chance to critique the market economy that seems to deeply influence us, as adults and teens, as we make decisions for our lives. Bringing youth in on a reflective process with adults would offer them insight into the tools and skills thoughtful adults use to navigate this noisy and conflicting world.

[14] "More highly religiously active teenagers are doing significantly better in life on a variety of important outcomes than are less religiously active teens." Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 28.