

Adolescence from a Social Science Perspective

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The article examines adolescence not as a universal biological transition, but as a complex social construction that varies according to historical, anthropological, and cultural contexts. Moving from the origin of adolescence in late 19th-century industrial societies to the contemporary late-modern scenario, the study investigates how structural uncertainty, social acceleration, and demographic shifts redefine youth transitions to adulthood. Drawing on a theoretical-critical review that integrates symbolic interactionism, the sociology of childhood, and Bauman's liquid modernity framework, the paper highlights the active agency of adolescents in constructing their identity and navigating multi-layered socialization processes. The updated study clarifies its core research objectives and methodological framework, providing a unified reading of adolescent identity while addressing cultural differences, biographical time, and social reflexivity.

Keywords: *adolescence, identity, socialization, agency, cultural differences, uncertainty*

Introduction: Definitions of Adolescence

What adolescence is a matter of definitions that vary from culture to culture? Generally speaking, adolescence is the stage of life between childhood and adulthood. It is a period of development in which young people move from a state of dependence to a state of independence, autonomy, and maturity, from being part of a family group to belonging to a peer group, until reaching the independent state of adulthood (Mabey and Sorensen 1965).

In Western society, the transition from childhood to adulthood, through adolescence, is much more than a linear sequence of change. Adolescent development does not follow the same path for everyone, but is the result of an interaction between the formation of one's identity and one's social context. It is a multidimensional process that involves a gradual transformation – or metamorphosis – of the child, who, as he or she becomes an adult, transforms into a new person. It is important to note, however, that the transformations involved in adolescence vary depending on the culture: for example, in some cultures, certain childhood roles remain similar into adulthood, while in other cases, even very young children routinely perform certain work-related tasks for the well-being of the family. Furthermore, in some cultures, the number of years dedicated to education before starting work is relatively limited. In these cultures, the transition from childhood to adulthood tends to be less demanding (Mead 2007). Under an anthropological lens, the transition from childhood to adulthood exhibits deep cultural variations. While traditional societies often mark this passage through clearly defined, event-centric rites of passage, contemporary Western societies present prolonged and de-synchronized transitions. From a demographic perspective, current structural

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trends - such as population aging, falling birth rates, and the extension of time spent in education and the family of origin - have reshaped the temporal boundaries of youth. This phenomenon, often described as emerging adulthood, transforms adolescence from a short transition into an elastic, extended life phase shaped by socioeconomic status, gender, and cultural background.

We could better describe adolescence if we defined it as a “social construct”, whose origins can be traced back to the late 19th century in the most complex societies. The Industrial Revolution and the profound social and economic changes that followed meant that a large number of young people found themselves in a situation they had never experienced before. Particularly in the bourgeois world, the increased importance of education until advanced ages and long periods of non-productive apprenticeship created a prolonged period of preparation for adulthood. Adolescence is, therefore, a process that extends over a significant period of life, but its duration is variable, and some young people move through it much more quickly than others. It presents many challenges, requiring them to address physiological, biological, psychological, and social changes. For these challenges to be met adaptively and effectively, significant transformation processes must occur within the young person, which must be analyzed by considering a series of inevitable biological, cognitive, psychological, social, moral, and spiritual stages.

The literature on adolescence, particularly extensive in recent years, offers many definitions, each of which favors a particular perspective. Each theoretical model possesses a certain explanatory potential, which is not always easily integrated with others. From a physiological perspective, for example, pubertal, somatic, and neuroendocrine changes take center stage during adolescence, typically described as a succession of developmental sequences. A similar concept of developmental stages has also played a central role in psychological sciences, and most contributions focus on growth phases. Psychoanalysis does not deviate from this vision and describes adolescence as a life cycle in a maturational sequence. The psycho-sociological perspective, however, is different, having given centrality to the transition from family to peer group, highlighting the difficulties in assuming adult roles. At this stage, socialization processes and forms of peer aggregation take on a critical role in facilitating the transition or decreeing its failure (Melucci and Fabbrini 1992).

Attempts to synthesize the various contributions to reach a more unified approach that helps us understand a multidimensional phenomenon such as adolescence have multiplied and converge on the concept of the “Self”, which Cooley (1902) conceived as the self-reflective capacity of the subject, a mirror that reflects the social dynamics of interaction. For Cooley, the “Self” is a quality that derives from the socialization process that takes place within the family. This thought gave rise to the movement of symbolic interactionism, a theoretical orientation that has established itself in sociology and social psychology, especially in the United States, since the first half of the twentieth century, which emphasizes the formation of individual identity in the process of socialization. For Mead (1967), the “Self” is a reflected entity that each person constructs by appropriating the point of view of others who are important to them, while Goffman (1961) emphasizes how the “Self” does not simply originate from the processes of interaction between the “I” and “others”, but also from the type of significant structure that is organized around it,

that is, from the situation. The social situation is the generative fabric of the “Self”, the context within which identities are established and maintained through a process of social negotiation.

The English sociologist Musgrove (1964) considers adolescence as a contemporary invention similar to that of the steam engine. In 1765, Watt invented the steam engine, while Rousseau conceived adolescence in 1762. With the invention of adolescence, society found itself faced with two fundamental problems: how and where to place it in the social structure and how to make its behavior coincide with what is expected. Melucci and Fabbrini (1992) also talk about the invention of adolescence by adults, while Berger and Berger (1975) consider the term “adolescent” to be inappropriate, since the phenomenon of youth is broader than that of adolescence, but overall, this statement can also be applied to youth. In other words, the industrial revolution produced an institutional structure that gives space to youth.

The primary objective of this article is to analyze the adolescent transition not merely as a biological or universal event, but as a complex socio-cultural process that is historically situated and dynamically negotiated. To achieve this goal, the study addresses three main research questions:

1. How do late-modern transformations (such as liquid society, social acceleration, and the de-standardization of life courses) redefine identity construction and the 'Self' in adolescents?
2. How do anthropological and demographic dimensions intersect with cultural and social differences during adolescence and the transition to adulthood?
3. To what extent does youth agency allow adolescents to negotiate structural uncertainty and convert it into a biographical resource?

Theoretical Framework and Methodological Approach

The theoretical framework of this study rests on the integration of social constructivism, symbolic interactionism (Cooley 1902, Mead 1967, Goffman, 1961), and the sociology of childhood and youth (Prout & James 1997, Corsaro, 2003, 2018). These perspectives refrain from treating adolescents as passive recipients of socialization; instead, they acknowledge young people as active social actors endowed with agency, capable of interpreting, resisting, and renegotiating the meanings attached to their experiences.

From a methodological perspective, this article adopts a theoretical-critical approach based on a qualitative narrative literature review. The investigation relies on a systematic review and synthesis of classical and contemporary sociological, anthropological, and psychological literature. By critically comparing key theoretical paradigms - ranging from structural functionalism to late-modern critical theory (Bauman 2003, 2006, Leccardi 2005, 2016) - the study maps the multi-layered evolution of youth transitions and identity formation.

Liquid Adolescence

Contemporary adolescents exhibit certain specific characteristics that scholars identify with terms such as “patchwork” personality (i.e., an artifact consisting of the sewing together of different pieces of fabric, generally but not exclusively cotton, to create a personal or household object, with or without geometric patterns), “postmodern”, “palimpsest”, or “liquid” personality. Let's examine this last definition. Among the various theories that refer to the social and psychological condition of the postmodern adolescent, we find the definition of “liquid adolescence”, derived from the various analyses of Zygmunt Bauman, a Polish sociologist, who used the concept of “liquidity” in his numerous studies. This definition has been taken up and applied to postmodern adolescence by various authors, such as Casoni (2008).

We find ourselves in an era in which theorists of social development – be they sociologists, philosophers, historians, or otherwise – signal a paradigm shift in the constitution of subjectivities, both individual and collective, which is often defined through the contrast between the terms “modern” and “postmodern”. Within the spectrum of various critical theories, which in some way reference the postmodern description of the current social and human condition, the metaphor of “liquidity” coined by Bauman (2003, 2006, 2009) has been chosen to relate it to adolescence. Let's see why. The sociologist compared the concepts of modernity and postmodernity to the “solid” and “liquid” states of society, respectively. According to Bauman, in modernity, morality is the coercive regulation of social action through the proposition of universal values or laws from which no reasonable person can escape. However, we cannot speak of a single postmodern morality because the end of the “grand narratives” of the twentieth century, that is, ideologies, has made the claim to absolute truth impossible. Thus, we find ourselves faced with a landscape inhabited by many coexisting moralities. Hence the metaphor of “liquidity”, contrasted with the social organization that is constituted through solid and solid principles of value. Postmodern man is deprived of a morality, a collective container, and, consequently, an absolute and unique code of social behavior. Uncertainty is his defining characteristic. Reading Bauman, it is easy to compare his description of the subject to the condition of contemporary adolescents, as the sociological specimens most indicative of the ongoing process of transformation. The condition of adolescence, due to its intrinsic characteristics of vitality and precariousness, clearly signals the impact of socio-cultural transformations on individuals. In this scenario, adolescence becomes the target population for investigating future social developments in their entirety, thus a sort of indicator of the “discomfort of modernity”. The crisis regarding the certainty and solidity of social and identity organizers therefore seems to define the condition of adolescence.

Plebani (2003) sees the problem of constructing youth identity as closely related to the historical and cultural moment in which it is considered. In the postmodern era, in which the foundations of traditional truth are in crisis, in which reality takes on an irrepressible character of contingency, while at the same time offering a surplus of opportunities, new forms of individuation and identification emerge, with a major shift in the ethical sphere.

Vegetti Finzi and Battistin (2000) see uncertainty as the term that best defines this period of life: adolescents' behavior is uncertain, as are parental roles, reference values, the temporal boundaries of adolescence, and even the possible psychological interpretation of it. The weakening of consolidated certainties, on the one hand, has led to an increase in the individual's sense of precariousness, but on the other, it has transformed the field of belonging, no longer characterized by exclusivity, but by plurality and mobility. This applies to belonging in both the private and social spheres. However, when uncertainty increases beyond a certain threshold and almost becomes identified with everyday life, the traditionally understood capacity for planning, that is, the long-term "life plan", is inevitably compromised (Leccardi 2005). The social acceleration and climate of uncertainty that characterize the "second modernity", in addition to challenging "long-term projects", also tend to modify the temporal structure of identity, influencing the processes of construction of the "Self".

Crespi (2002) highlights how young people are predisposed to react to the lack of certainty by developing responses that neutralize fears about the future, clearly expressing a tendency to embrace unpredictability. The new generations, therefore, seem to take into account the possibility of even sudden changes in direction and to develop responses in "real time", reacting to the unexpected. The speed and social rhythms of late modernity with which young people live allow them to "seize the moment" and address opportunities as they arise. For the new generations, the uncertainty of an unplanned future implies a predisposition to identify possible solutions from time to time. The innovative aspect that seems to characterize the new generations is represented by the "ability to accept the fragmentation and uncertainty of the environment as an inalienable fact, to be transformed into a resource thanks to a constant exercise of awareness and reflexivity" (Leccardi 2005, p. 57).

In contemporary society, this condition of liquidity is further amplified by the pervasive presence of digital environments and social media platforms (such as Instagram, TikTok, and digital communities). Recent studies emphasize that digital spaces function as a 'digital social mirror' where adolescents actively perform identity exploration, seek validation, and navigate online feedback (Pérez-Torres 2024). Rather than being mere tools for communication, digital platforms provide an expanded arena for self-presentation and role experimentation. However, active engagement in these platforms also exposes youth to continuous social comparison, context collapse, and the risk of identity fragmentation, requiring new forms of social reflexivity and digital literacy to convert online experiences into meaningful identity resources (Pérez-Torres 2024, Kochetova & Klimakova 2025).

Socialization and Adolescent Identity

Sociology's interest in the topic of adolescence is more recent than that of other disciplines; only recently has the term "sociology of childhood" been used, referring to the branch of sociology that deals with childhood and adolescence. At least initially, sociology seemed to follow in the footsteps of psychology, but sociological studies conducted tended to separate the different phases of the life course and

examine the specificities of each. Adolescence thus becomes a different and discontinuous state of life compared to adulthood, characterized by its own cultural specificity. From the earliest sociological studies, it was noted that adolescents are characterized by not having a permanent place within the structure of the social division of labor: “youth is a social entity that cuts across almost all social classes” (Cavalli 1980, p. 520). This social entity, typical of modern societies, is made up of those who have completed compulsory schooling and are not yet firmly established within the structure of the division of labor. In this diminished tension towards adult status, adolescence thus emerges as a condition, as a situation of waiting for an unimaginable outcome in which “unpredictability depends on the practically unlimited number of possible outcomes” (Cavalli 1980, p. 524), contrary to what happened previously, when for the majority of young people “the transition between childhood and adulthood was a gradual process without interruption, adult roles were learned and experienced early, almost always through the imitation of family or parental models” (Cavalli 1980, p. 520). In this regard, “aside from the variability of the phenomena in which it manifests itself, the youthful condition remains a suspended process, hesitation, absence of finality and identity, but also an often erratic search for finality and identity” (Cavalli 1980, p. 526). The consequences of the emergence of this new social entity have been assessed differently, but from the earliest studies there has been considerable agreement in emphasizing that adolescence fails to be effectively integrated, either in terms of values or social structure, in the absence of profound cultural and social transformations. Throughout the 1980s, young people and adolescents were variously defined as the “silent generation” (Inglehart 1983), the “everyday generation” (Garelli 1984), the “generation without fathers or teachers” (Ricolfi and Sciolla 1980). Even in the 1990s, they were still referred to as the “ecstatic” or “invisible generation” (Diamanti 1999). Thus, this strand of literature aims to emphasize the lack of role models in which young people find themselves living and the resulting attitude of flexibility and attention to the present, along with the exploitation of social relationships.

The tendency to make reversible choices, the loss of a sense of the future, and the complicit relationship with an increasingly collaborative family during the transition to adulthood are all signs of an adaptation strategy to the uncertain situation young people find themselves experiencing. Therefore, caution is needed in negatively characterizing the condition of adolescence. Invisible, silent, and ecstatic young people are the reflection of parents and educators who don’t know how to be adults, who have lost the responsibility of their adult roles (Diamanti 1999). Rather, the condition of adolescence is the product of the spirit of our times, incapable of valorizing and promoting adolescents’ abilities and skills, of making them social subjects (Ferrari Occhionero 2001). These positions highlight how the lack of clear and transparent expectations lies behind the youth issue and the negative image of young people, rather than generational conflict, which is instead part of the mechanism of generational dynamics whereby young people are very clear about the rules they transgress and are aware of what they are getting into (Cavalli 1985).

Given this interdependence, some sociological thought is geared toward highlighting the positive elements inherent in adolescence. According to Moro (1989), adolescents are growing citizens, individuals with developmental responsibilities,

but at the same time holders of rights with respect to which the adult world should adopt an attitude of promoting participation.

Despite the observations made on the possibility of understanding children as holders of subjective rights that can actually be exercised in their own right, there is now a general tendency to consider the centrality of the child and the adolescent in the processes of socialization through the introduction of the idea of the minor as an active subject capable of proposing transformations in the life of society and the vision of childhood and adolescence as social constructions (Prout and James 1997, Corsaro 2003, Favretto and Scivoletto 2003).

The renewed interest in childhood and adolescence is marked by the emergence of a new approach to study. While until a few years ago, children were viewed in sociological studies as objects of care or recipients of educational processes, recently the landscape has been enriched by the position that considers children and adolescents as active subjects. Indeed, sociological thought has viewed childhood and adolescence as closely linked to the family and socialization practices.

As highlighted in the English literature, on this topic it is now possible to envision a theoretical space in which children can be positioned as active social beings, capable of constructing and creating social relationships, rather than cultural objects as in classical socialization theory (Prout & James 1997). The outcome of this shift is a conception of childhood and adolescence as a set of actively negotiated social relationships through which the first years of human life are constructed. Behind this shift lies a departure from the positions expressed by functionalists and an embrace of a phenomenological perspective that enables the study of society by starting from the living conditions of social subjects, rather than by their division into groups or categories. The subject is inserted into a broader context of social relations that conditions them but, at the same time, provides meaning to their actions. The subject is therefore not the direct result of social structures and roles; nor does acknowledging a social character to the subject and the limits of the decision-making field within which they operate mean considering them a sort of puppet manipulated by external forces. Thus, socialization can be defined as “the process through which the helpless child gradually becomes a self-aware, prepared person, capable of effectively using the specific capabilities of the culture into which he or she was born” (Giddens 2000, p. 30). Central to this definition is the idea of considering individuals’ ability to act consciously to influence their own life context, and thus socialization loses its connotation of “cultural programming”, through which the child passively absorbs stimuli from the surrounding world.

We need to think of the image of the social actor as subject to social demands and capable of renegotiating roles and social conventions, that is, endowed with an identity that is simultaneously social, defined by recognition, and personal, defined by the expression of individual preferences (Sciolla 2000). In this regard, Dubar (2004) discusses social identity as the articulation of two transitions: one internal to the individual and the other external between the individual and institutions. These transitions contribute to establishing a sort of identity tension, resulting from the attribution of identity by institutions and the active incorporation of identity by the individual. In this way, identity becomes the subjective and objective outcome of the various socialization processes that, together, construct individuals and define

institutions. Identity configurations, the product of strategies implemented to reduce the gap between the two transitions, constitute relatively stable but evolving forms: “social identity is not transmitted from one generation to the next; it is constructed by each generation based on the categories and positions inherited from the previous generation but also through the identity strategies implemented in the institutions that individuals experience and which they contribute to concretely transform” (Dubar 2004, p. 148).

Through this definition, social identity, while maintaining a fluid and negotiable character, demonstrates a strong anchoring that prevents individual disorientation and the loss of social ties (Favretto 2004). In late-modern socialization, the interaction between individual agency and institutional expectations increasingly plays out within hybrid physical-digital peer cultures. Recent empirical reviews demonstrate that it is the quality and authenticity of social engagement on digital platforms - rather than the sheer amount of time spent online - that shapes identity commitment and self-concept clarity in adolescence (Pérez-Torres 2024). Peer groups operate as horizontal agents of socialization where identity is constantly displayed, evaluated, and renegotiated in real time.

Therefore, starting from studies on socialization, it is possible to affirm that identity is the product of a strategy: it is a process of self-organization and the construction of a life plan in which the individual must fulfill two tasks. The first, cognitive, task is linked to knowing how to locate oneself within one's social and cultural system; the other concerns the commitment to continually choosing between different alternatives in different fields of choice (Tonolo 1999).

From the individual's perspective, the need to process the conditions of uncertainty in which one lives and transform them into resources for action is increasingly pressing, precisely because the cognitive map handed down to us by previous generations and the institutions that confirm it are completely inadequate for the new demographic structure of the population and the new needs and behaviors that derive from it. Uncertainty arises from the fact that not only can one not identify stably over time, but at any given moment one cannot completely identify with just one of the parts and, therefore, must choose (Melucci and Fabbrini 1992). The risk, in this case, is the spread of individualistic attitudes and behaviors aimed at the pursuit of happiness through consumption, the collection of situations, the culture of self-realization with the consequent proliferation of ethical codes, behavioral pluralism and, in general, an increase in the scope of individual freedoms (Bauman 1998). However, it is necessary to remember that identity and the "Self" arise only in part from an individual process of adaptation and are instead linked to social actions and collective practices: they are rooted within a collectively produced culture (Corsaro 2003).

At this point, two categories emerge through which to analyze the condition of youth: that of reciprocity and that of time. As Abrams argued, in evaluating the historical and sociological relationship between the individual and society, “we must concentrate all our efforts on freeing ourselves from dualistic thinking, on escaping the allure of the belief that the individual has an essence different from that of society, or, conversely, that society and the individual constitute separate realities” (Abrams 1983, p. 277). If society is understood as a historically produced

configuration of interdependent individuals, “socially organized time becomes the common element in which social structure and identity are mutually generated” (Abrams 1983, p. 280). Time constitutes the dimension that traverses, connects, and unifies society and the individual, understood as different levels of a single human existential reality. Social time is a network of rules, and individuals, through the development of strategies, transform social time into individual time. The ways in which this transformation occurs are contained in individuals’ ability to manage their own time, that is, to transform social time into a living space within which to construct their own subjectivity (Cavalli 1985). “The analytical starting point here is biographical time, understood as that unitary temporal dimension that emerges as the outcome of the processes through which individuals relate to the past, live their present, and look toward the future. Personal identity, just like life time, is in fact the outcome of the dialectical relationship between permanence and changeability, between continuity and discontinuity, between past, present, and future” (Leccardi 2009, p. 76). Young people live their life phase in a social climate in which they have the right to choose who they become. A phase marked by the difficulty of identifying points of reference that help them escape uncertainty (Leccardi 2009). “In any case, the choice of these paths is never separated from the history that each person has behind them and from their concrete social belonging” (Smelser 1987, p. 67).

Conclusions

The analysis presented in this study demonstrates that adolescence cannot be reduced to a universal biological passage or a simple linear sequence toward adult autonomy. Instead, the evidence confirms that adolescence is a complex socio-cultural construction deeply intertwined with the structural transformations of late-modern societies. The primary theoretical findings indicate that the de-standardization of life trajectories and the pervasive climate of systemic uncertainty have transformed the youth transition into an open, highly reflective, and non-linear process. In this context, adolescents emerge not as passive or disoriented actors, but as active social subjects endowed with agency, capable of constantly renegotiating their identity and 'Self' within formal and informal socialization networks.

The theoretical contribution of this article lies in synthesizing heterogeneous analytical lenses - spanning symbolic interactionism, the sociology of time, and the social constructivism of youth - into a unified framework. By integrating the anthropological and demographic dimensions of cultural variation with the analysis of late-modern “liquidity”, this paper offers a holistic interpretation that moves beyond deficit-based or pathologizing views of youth, emphasizing instead the adaptive capacity and social reflexivity of contemporary adolescents.

Naturally, this study presents certain limitations. Given its qualitative and theoretical-critical nature, the analysis relies primarily on literature synthesis without incorporating primary empirical data. Furthermore, while addressing anthropological variations, the core discussion focuses predominantly on Western post-industrial societies and does not fully detail the specific impacts of digital technologies and social media platforms on contemporary youth socialization.

Building upon these considerations, future research should focus on comparative and intersectional empirical investigations. Specifically, studies should examine how socio-economic background, gender, and ethnic origin intersect with digital spaces in shaping adolescent identity. Additionally, further research is needed to explore how recent demographic shifts - such as falling birth rates and prolonged cohabitation with parents - interact with evolving labor market dynamics to redefine the institutional and experiential boundaries of adulthood.

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