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Child Development Perspectives Journal Q&A: Analyzing the Stereotypes of Adolescence

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Stereotypes of adolescence: Cultural differences, consequences, and intervention

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In Western cultures, adolescence is often viewed as a time of rebellion and irresponsibility. A new article published in the journal *Child Development Perspectives* synthesized recent research on stereotypes of adolescence using an interdisciplinary approach which integrates developmental psychology, cultural psychology, and neuroscience.

The findings highlight the importance of avoiding the "one-size fits-all" assumptions about teen stereotypes across different cultures. In particular, the research suggests that how children navigate the adolescent years is driven in part by social constructions of this phase of development and calls for more attention to change negative stereotypes of adolescence at the policy and societal levels.

The Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) had the opportunity to chat about this important research and its implications with author Dr. Yang Qu from the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University in the United States.

SRCD: What contributed to your interest in this area?

Dr. Qu: I developed a keen interest in teen stereotypes when I started to study cross-cultural differences in adolescent behavior and experiences. While there are many similarities in how children navigate the teen years across cultures, decades of research in psychology and anthropology have also revealed substantial cultural and individual variation during this critical period. This is very intriguing and leads me to explore the underlying reasons behind such differences. It became increasingly clear to me that in order to understand what contributes to cultural differences in adolescent development, it is important to study teen stereotypes. These widely held, oversimplified beliefs about teenagers are shaped by the cultural context in which youth live in. As shown in recent work in this area, youth's internalized teen stereotypes act as self-fulfilling prophecies and guide their affect, cognition, and behavior. Therefore, teen stereotypes, together with many other sociocultural factors, provide important insights into what contributes to differences in adolescent trajectories.

SRCD: Please describe your process for synthesizing the recent research on adolescence stereotypes.

Dr. Qu: In this article, I tried to provide readers with a clear picture of the research on adolescent stereotypes, by synthesizing the seminal works of the past with the cutting-edge research of today. For example, decades ago, the pioneering research led by Dr. Christy Buchanan and her colleagues in the 1990s revealed that American parents and teachers often view the teen years in a negative light. Yet the story doesn't end there. Recent research on adolescent stereotypes build upon early work and expand in multiple ways, such as assessing teen stereotypes across cultures, examining how youth's internalized teen stereotypes contributes to their behavioral, psychological, and neural development over time, as well as developing experimental interventions to change youth's teen stereotypes. By including both historical landmarks and the latest frontiers of research, my intent is to provide readers with a comprehensive understanding of this fascinating field.

SRCD: Please describe the different factors which impact adolescence stereotypes.

Dr. Qu: There are various factors that influence teen stereotypes. For example, cultural norms and values may shape such stereotypes. As I summarize in this article, recent cross-cultural studies not only identify differences in teen stereotypes in Western and non-Western regions, but also highlight important heterogeneity in non-Western regions in a globalized world. The cultural transmission of teen stereotypes may occur in youth's everyday life, as parent, teachers, and peers convey their teen stereotypes to youth via expectations and interactions. As recently noted by scholars (e.g., Kendall-Taylor & Fuligni, 2022, Newsweek), it is also important to pay attention to how the media portrays adolescents. When the society and media begin to view teens in a more positive light, there will be more positive messages about them that may further promote youth's flourishing.

SRCD: Can you explain the experimental interventions you recommend to help change teen stereotypes and promote positive youth development?

Dr. Qu: We are interested in developing culturally informed interventions that foster positive views of teens among youth, parents, and teachers. We have developed a brief counter-stereotyping intervention to change youth's teen stereotypes and promote their positive development (Qu, Pomerantz, & Wu, 2020). In our intervention, the stereotype of teens as irresponsible was first described to youth as a commonly held belief among adults and in the media. This stereotype was then countered with the fact that teens frequently exhibit responsible behavior. Youth were subsequently guided to generate their own examples of responsible behavior among teens that they had observed, which helped them to deeply process the idea of

teen responsibility through personally meaningful and relevant instances.

Across two studies of over 400 Chinese youth, this counter-stereotyping intervention successfully changed youth's stereotypes of adolescence, such that they saw teens in a more positive light. More importantly, as reflected in their reports of both intentions and daily behavior, children in the counter-stereotyping intervention showed increased school engagement and decreased risky behavior, compared to those in the control condition who listed typical attributes of teens. Findings from this research not only establish the causal link between youth's teen stereotypes and their adjustment, but also provide a foundation for future large-scale school- and family-based interventions.

SRCD: Do you have recommendations on future work in this area?

Dr. Qu: In this article, I suggest four directions for future work in this area. First, to achieve a comprehensive understanding of cultural variation in teen stereotypes, it is critical to compare across a broader range of countries and across various ethnicities and socioeconomic statuses. The value of these cross-cultural studies goes beyond documenting how teen stereotypes vary across cultures; they also unveil how such differences in teen stereotypes contribute to cultural differences in adolescent development, which provide important insights into cultural construction of this developmental phase.

Second, despite some initial evidence discussed in this article, how stereotypes of adolescence in social contexts (e.g., teen stereotypes conveyed by parents, peers, teachers, and social media) influence adolescent development remains largely unexplored. Hence, it is crucial to employ various methods (e.g., surveys, interviews, and experiments) to explore the process by which teen stereotypes within the social environment influence adolescent adjustment.

Third, more effort is needed to investigate how youth's teen stereotypes evolve over the course of adolescence and whether the influence of such teen stereotypes on adolescent development vary across time. It is critical to take a holistic and dynamic perspective to explore how youth's teen stereotypes influence their behavioral adjustment and brain development over a long period of time. For example, future work is needed to explore the complex processes among youth's teen stereotypes, behavioral adjustment, and brain development, unveiling developmental processes across belief, behavioral, and brain levels.

Finally, a key endeavor is to develop culturally informed interventions that foster positive views of teens among youth, parents, and teachers. The progress in this area will provide evidence-based insights that inform educational practices and scalable interventions in diverse cultures.

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