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Storm and Stress

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G. Stanley Hall, a monumental figure in the field of child and adolescent development, described adolescence as suggestive of some ancient period of “storm and stress.” Hall’s recapitulation theory of human development predicted storm and stress to be the norm of adolescence, rather than an exception, because each individual has to go through the major evolutionary stages, with the period of adolescence recapitulating the time from savagery to civilization. Adolescents have to experience pubertal changes and juggle myriad tasks to overcome chaos and become stable, responsible adults. This process of breaking the old moorings to attain higher levels will inevitably incur storm and stress. However, the sky will clear up after the storm is over—for most adolescents, the outcome is optimistic.

The school of psychoanalysis also upholds this storm and stress view of adolescence. According to Freud’s psychosexual developmental theory, the onset of puberty marks the beginning of the genital stage, directing the psychic energy to genitally centered sexuality. The battle between the sexual pleasure-seeking id and the morally inhibiting superego puts the ego under tremendous tensions and pressures. Adolescents’ need to end their infantile sexual lives associated with their parents, and their urge to find new love objects for true affection and for relief of sexual tension, pushes them to resolve the renewed Oedipus complex. Conquering these conflicts in the process of rebirth is the source of stress and turmoil. As Anna Freud put it, the upheaval in adolescence is a reflection of internal conflict and psychic disequilibrium.

The figurative term *storm and stress* has been easily accepted by the general public and frequently reinforced in literature and media. Although popular, this view has been criticized for its biological determinism that leaves no room for cultural variations. Margaret Mead’s claim that coming of age was relatively easy for Samoan girls challenged for the first time the assumption of universal storm and stress in adolescence, alerting the researchers to the impact of culture and the possibility of different developmental paths in adolescence. Mead also contended that that storm and stress in adolescence cannot be considered a biological inevitability. Instead, the adolescent’s affliction results from growing up in the American society, where there are conflicting standards and pressure on the adolescent to make his or her own choices on matters of importance. Although Mead’s conclusions have been questioned and her methods criticized, contemporary researchers recognize the importance of sociocultural influences.

While the classical notion of storm and stress persists as a myth, the empirical data have suggested that adolescence is a relatively peaceful period for the majority of adolescents. To balance the negative implications associated with storm and stress such as adolescents’ mood swings and rebellious behaviors, positive interpretations of these expressions have been provided. For example, adolescents’ questioning the authority of adults, demanding autonomous decision making, and exploring various possibilities might very well be the results of their cognitive achievements. Jeffrey Arnett has modified the traditional storm and stress view of adolescence to incorporate both individual differences and cultural variations. Not all adolescents experience storm and stress, but storm and stress is more likely during adolescence than at other ages. Modernization and globalization tend to increase the likelihood of storm and stress. Coleman’s focal theory of adolescence disagrees with the assumption in the storm and stress view that all issues come at once for an adolescent’s attention and resolution so that high levels of stress are inevitable. It proposes that different themes come into the

focuses of individuals at different times as they develop during adolescence.

In summary, the traditional storm and stress view of adolescence is characteristic of only a small group of adolescents, and it attributes the inevitable storm and stress to the biological mechanism only. Current researchers are developing more balanced, interdisciplinary theories that typically view adolescence as a period during which the adolescent tries to understand his or her biological, cognitive, social, and emotional changes as a function of a developing person adapting to a changing world, and to reorganize these experiences into a coherent, healthy identity.

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