

# Adolescence

Carol R. Ember      Emily Pitek      Erik J. Ringen

December 8, 2017

## Abstract

Almost all societies recognize adolescence as a stage of human development. But while there are many commonalities across cultures for this stage, there are also many differences, ranging from the length of adolescence, expectations for behavior, and the presence of special rites of passage. This module explores what may cross-culturally predict and possibly explain the similarities as well as the differences.

## Contents

Adolescence	3
Is Adolescence a Human Universal?	4
Family and Peer Relationships	4
Learning/Socialization	6
Marriage and Sexuality	7
Adolescent Work and Play	8
Delinquency and Antisocial Behavior	10
Initiation into Adulthood	11
How Male and Female Initiation Rites Differ . . . . .	13
Explaining Male Initiation Rites . . . . .	13
Psychological Explanations . . . . .	13
Social Explanations . . . . .	14
Evolutionary Explanations . . . . .	15
Explaining Female Initiation Rites . . . . .	16
Menarche and Menstrual Taboos	18
Menstrual Taboos . . . . .	19
What We Do Not Know	20

## Adolescence

---

<b>Exercises Using eHRAF World Cultures</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Credits</b>	<b>20</b>
Photo Credits . . . . .	21
<b>Citation</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Glossary</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>22</b>

---

Your use of Explaining Human Culture indicates your acceptance of the [Terms of Use](#)

## Adolescence

The American writer and filmmaker Nora Ephron -Ephron (2006) once proclaimed, “When your children are teenagers, it’s important to have a dog so that someone in the house is happy to see you”. In the United States, if not in most of the industrial and post-industrial western world, it’s common wisdom that adolescents often feel disaffected and misunderstood by adults, while parents tend to associate adolescent years with conflict, rebelliousness, moodiness, and risky behavior (Arnett 1999). The view that “storm and stress” are characteristic of adolescence has a long history in western thought, but it gained prominence with the writings of G. Stanley Hall in the early 1900s. Margaret Mead -Mead (1928) was one of the first anthropologists to take issue with this prevailing psychological view; she found little evidence of conflict in her observations of Samoan adolescents (*Coming of Age in Samoa*). As we shall see, the research of Alice Schlegel and Herbert Barry (1991, 134–39), drawing on evidence from 186 nonindustrial societies, suggests that the experience of adolescence is indeed culturally variable; in fact, more often than not, antisocial behavior is not reported.



Figure 1: Adolescent girls talking and crafting together in Kenya. Credit: Zuraj Studios, CC BY-SA 4.0.

We can generally agree that adolescence is, as Bonnie L. Hewlett (2013) defines it: “an intense and challenging time of risk and change, of learning and growth, of biological and social development.” Adolescence exists as a *social* construct—a stage of life between childhood and adulthood—and as a *biological* construct

associated with the onset of reproductive maturation (i.e., puberty). How long social adolescence lasts varies among societies. In some, the transition into or out of adolescence is marked by a formal public ceremony; in others there are more subtle markers, such as changes in responsibilities. Likewise, biological adolescence eludes universal definition because puberty refers to a suite of changes over time rather than a single event. And while some societies use biological markers, such as a girl's menarche; others do not.

Cross-cultural studies of adolescence in nonindustrial societies can provide us with insights that are more valuable than simple definitions. They reveal universal patterns and variations in how societies view and manage adolescence. Moreover, they help us to understand some of the intended (and unintended) consequences of cultural practices surrounding childhood and adolescence. Here, then, is a summary of what we currently know about adolescence from cross-cultural research, followed by some still unanswered questions.

### Is Adolescence a Human Universal?

The short answer is “yes.” In their extensive cross-cultural study, Schlegel and Barry (1991, 33) found that almost all societies recognize adolescence as a distinct stage of development (typically characterized by a sharp transition from childhood, leading to new roles and responsibilities, property ownership, and courtship (1991, 139). In addition (1991, 34–35), adolescence:

- usually starts at or around puberty;
- is a relatively brief stage of life—commonly ending for males by age 18 and females by 16;
- almost always ends with marriage;
- is sometimes (in 25% of societies) followed by a “youth” stage before adulthood.
- is likely to end earlier in matrilineal societies than in patrilineal societies;
- is likely to last longer in neolocal and bilocal societies.

### Family and Peer Relationships

Adolescence in modern industrial societies is typically a period of preparation for independence from the original family unit. Young adults are expected to find work and separate living quarters with roommates, a spouse, or alone and, in time, establish a new family unit. In most nonindustrial societies, however, it is typical for young adults to continue to live with their parents or some other relative. Even married couples generally live with or near one set of parents (C. R. Ember and Ember 2015, 277). In nonindustrial societies, the family unit



Figure 2: Adolescent male Kastom dancers in Port Moresby, celebrating the Manus Province in Papua New Guinea. Credit: Graham Crumb, CC BY-SA 3.0.

usually provides the key attributes of adulthood: financial and social support, livelihood, and status (Schlegel and Barry 1991 p 44-45).

**What are the most important family relationships of adolescents?** (Schlegel and Barry 1991)

- **Same-sex parent.** For an adolescent male, the father is the most important figure who teaches and controls his activities. For an adolescent female, the mother is the most important figure (1991, 38).
- **Older female kin.** Adolescent females have closer relationships with older female kin (excluding sisters) than adolescent males have with older male kin (excluding brothers) (1991, 38).
- **Older same-gender siblings.** Amount of contact and closeness with older siblings of the same gender is similar for adolescents of both genders (1991, 38).
- **Dominant fathers.** Among societies with male-centered households, adolescents are typically expected to obey the father; subordination is less expected in societies with female-centered households (1991, 58).

**What has cross-cultural research revealed about adolescent peer-relations?** (Schlegel and Barry 1991)

## Adolescence

---

- Peer groups are especially important at this time of life (1991, 68)). The peer group is more important for adolescents who are less involved with their family units (1991, 72).
- Adolescent males tend to spend more time with their peer groups than females do. Further, female peer groups are typically smaller and less significant than their male counterparts (1991, 42).
- In more socially complex societies, peer groups are likely to be larger, more similar in age, and more legitimized by the community than in less complex societies (1991, 79).
- In larger and more permanent settlements, peer groups are more likely to engage in collective religious rites (1991, 80).

## Learning/Socialization

Adolescents are essentially in training for the serious duties and responsibilities of full adult status: livelihood, property ownership, marriage, children-rearing, and housekeeping.



Figure 3: Boys reading together in Malawi, East Africa. Credit: Steve Evans, CC BY 2.0.

### What skills are most valued and instilled in adolescents, per cross-cultural research?

- The most important skill set emphasized for all adolescents is productive work; the second most important skill set for boys is physical prowess; the second most important skill set for girls is sexual attractiveness and capacity (Schlegel and Barry 1991, 171).
- In hunter-gatherer societies, religious skills and beliefs constitute the largest domain of adolescent learning (Garfield, Garfield, and Hewlett 2016, 28). Adolescents may play an important role in community rituals for the first time.

### What traits are most valued and instilled in males and females, per cross-cultural research? (Schlegel and Barry 1991)

- Aggressiveness, self-reliance, and competitiveness are more often stressed for males than for females. The qualities of fortitude, impulsiveness, obedience, sexual expression and restraint, conformity, trust, responsibility, and achievement are valued with little gender differentiation (1991, 166–67).
- Gender role differences are nearly universal, but girls and boys are socialized to similar degrees to attain their respective adult roles and duties (1991, 167).

## Marriage and Sexuality

We generally think of marriage as occurring in adulthood, but in the Schlegel and Barry sample of nonindustrial societies most marriages occur during adolescence.

- **The average age at marriage** is between 14–16 for females, and 16–20 for males (Schlegel and Barry 1991, 40).
- **Maidenhood** (length of time from a girl's menarche to marriage and sexual activities) increases in length with greater social complexity. It is absent or short for less complex societies, such as foragers, one to three years for horticulturalists or pastoralists, and five or more years in socially complex societies, such as agrarian states (Whiting, Burbank, and Ratner 1986; also cited in Schlegel and Barry 1991).
- **Premarital sex** is reported in a majority of nonindustrial societies, though marriage tends to occur earlier than in industrialized societies (Schlegel and Barry 1991).
  - Premarital sex among adolescents is generally expected to be confined to a limited number of partners. Promiscuity is rarely condoned (1991, 40).
  - Chastity is more expected of adolescent females in societies that practice dowry, indirect dowry, and gift exchange at marriage (1991,



Figure 4: Bride and groom in Assam, India. Credit: Steve Evans, CC BY 2.0.

113–14).

- Greater premarital sexual permissiveness among females is generally associated with lower social complexity (Broude 1981; cited in Schlegel and Barry 1991, 112).

## Adolescent Work and Play

As noted in the Learning/Socialization section, adolescence is usually characterized by a fairly dramatic change in responsibilities and, in particular, entails adult work.

In the vast majority of cultures, adolescents participate in the productive work of adults (Schlegel and Barry 1991, 41–45), typically alongside older family members. Because the family is the major unit of production, adolescent work, modelled by same-gender family members, contributes to the family's needs.

In contrast to work, adolescent play and leisure time activities occur among peers and distinctly apart from adults (Schlegel and Barry 1991, 67). Male peer groups tend to have task- or goal-oriented activities, such as sporting events or competitions, whereas female peer groups engage in less competitive activities, such as conversation and cooperative play.



Figure 5: Navajo women and girls shearing sheep together. Credit: NARA, license-free.

## Delinquency and Antisocial Behavior

We often think of adolescents as prone to getting into trouble. Of course, what constitutes “trouble” varies from society to society depending upon norms of expected behavior. In the United States and other Western countries, “delinquent” behaviors (activities we define as crimes) peak at about age 18; around the same time or shortly afterwards, automobile accidents and substance abuse also peak ([Arnett 1999](#)).

### What do we know about antisocial or delinquent adolescent behavior cross-culturally?

Though not a universal pattern, male delinquency (e.g., interpersonal violence, theft) is most associated with the adolescent years. This pattern is not reported among females ([Schlegel and Barry 1991, 39](#)).

- Adolescent male antisocial behavior is not related to the degree of distance from or degree of conflict with parents.
- Adolescent boys who are organized into religious or military oriented groups are more likely to exhibit antisocial behavior. This finding goes against the common belief that antisocial behavior is more likely when groups of adolescents are engaging in leisure time rather than “constructive” activities ([1991, 137](#)).
- Antisocial behavior is more likely when a society names and institutionalizes peer groups ([1991, 137](#)).

Why these last two patterns? Schlegel and Barry ([1991](#)) p. 137 posit that adolescent misbehavior is a result of time spent away from adult companionship, rather than a result of peer activities per se.

- “Running away from home,” is an almost cliché form of delinquency in the United States, but it does seem to have analogs in nonindustrial societies, with such behavior recorded in over half of Schlegel and Barry ([1991](#)) sample societies for which information was available.
- Petersen (1988) linked running away in modern society with pervasive parent-child conflict; Schlegel and Barry ([1991](#)) p. 52 found no such link in nonindustrial societies.

### What are the antecedents of adolescent antisocial behavior? ([Schlegel and Barry 1991, 140–41](#))

Antisocial behavior is more likely when

- infant/child socialization is harsher;
- mother and infant do not share the same bed;
- the infant’s movements are restricted;
- fortitude is inculcated in the older child.

### **What are the antecedents of violent behavior in adolescent boys?** (Schlegel and Barry 1991, 143)

Violent adolescent behavior is associated with:

- low mother-infant contact;
- self-restraint inculcated in early childhood;
- conformity, competitiveness, and trust inculcated in adolescence;
- high peer cooperation and competition;
- severe punishment;
- antisocial and deviant behavior in adult men.

Schlegel and Barry posit that some societies may be teaching children conformity when there is a perceived threat of dangerous/deviant adolescent behavior. However, it is possible that the causal relationship works the other way around: parental harshness can provide a model for violence in adolescence and in later life. Cross-culturally, many forms of violence co-occur to form a “cultural pattern of violence” (C. R. Ember and Ember 1993, 2005).

### **What factors predict the relative absence of adolescent antisocial behavior?**

It is noteworthy that adolescent antisocial behavior was not a regular feature of most societies in Schlegel and Barry’s sample. Indeed, in nonindustrial societies, expectations/norms were most commonly violated in adulthood (1991, 138, 152).

- In societies that rely on the family unit as the primary source of income, social standing, and support, adolescents are less apt to individuate themselves from their families—thus, delinquency may be less appealing to adolescents among these societies (1991, 63).

## **Initiation into Adulthood**

In the United States and Canada, ritual social or religious markers of entry into adolescence and adulthood are increasingly rare. Many nonindustrial societies, in contrast, mark life stages with formal rites of passage. The ceremonies are often dramatic and may include such traumatic elements as seclusion, fasting, and painful or scary experiences. Other societies stage far less dramatic, ceremonial rites, but will at least bestow symbolic markers of a new status on initiates, such as a new hairstyle or a new name.

Given the wide variation in rites of passage to adulthood, Schlegel and Barry define them minimally as “some social recognition, in ceremonial form, of the transformation from childhood into the next stage (1979, 199).” Using this definition, some common patterns in initiation rites emerge (1979, 1980):



Figure 6: 9–10-year-old boys of the Yao tribe in Malawi participating in circumcision and initiation rites. Credit: Steve Evans, CC BY 2.0.

- A majority of nonindustrial societies have customary adolescent initiation rites.
- The ceremony is usually held at or close to puberty.
- Initiates always belong to single-sex groups.
- Initiation rites tend to be present in societies at the middle range of social complexity and absent with very high social complexity.

## How Male and Female Initiation Rites Differ

Some societies have initiation rites for only one sex; others have rites for both sexes. When ceremonies are held for both boys and girls, there are many similar elements. However, there are also significant differences (Schlegel and Barry 1979):

- **Number of initiates.** Ceremonies for girls are likely to be one individual at a time, whereas ceremonies for boys usually involve a considerable number of boys.
- **Infliction of pain** is more characteristic of ceremonies for boys.
- **Seclusion** from others is more typical of ceremonies for girls (usually associated with menstruation).



Figure 7: Kapsiki initiates: Rumsu, Central Africa. Credit: Wouter Van Beek, CC BY-SA 3.0.

## Explaining Male Initiation Rites

Explanations for male initiation rites are wide-ranging and encompass psychology, sociology, and evolutionary theory.

### Psychological Explanations

Psychological explanations postulate that some child-rearing customs inadvertently produce personality traits or psychological conflicts in boys that societies

view as problematic in adulthood. Initiation rites are designed, consciously or unconsciously, to fix these undesirable traits and reshape personalities into more socially acceptable forms.

Although psychological explanations vary, the main theories (Whiting, Kluckhohn, and Anthony 1958; Burton and Whiting 1961) begin with a socialization pattern found in a number of cultures: a very close relationship between a mother and baby combined with relatively high father-absence. About half of the societies in the anthropological record practice exclusive mother-child sleeping. Infants sleep in the same bed with their mothers during the nursing period and the father sleeps elsewhere. The mother-child closeness is presumed to continue in daytime as well. Cross-cultural tests that control for these early relationships find:

- Exclusive mother-child sleeping and a long **post-partum sex taboo** of a year or more predicts male initiation rites with one of the following elements: genital surgery, seclusion from women, painful hazing by adult males, and tests of endurance and manliness (Whiting, Kluckhohn, and Anthony 1958; replicated by C. R. Ember and Ember 2010, using the Whiting, Kluckhohn and Anthony definition of male initiation).
- The psychological interpretation of initiation rites is supported when studies use other measures of mother-child closeness, father-child distance, and initiation rites (Schlegel and Barry 1980; Kitahara 1982a).

### Social Explanations

Other researchers have put forth explanations of male initiation that focus on the presence of certain types of social groups and/or the need for certain types of collective action. Frank Young (1962, 1965) suggested that the presence of strong male solidarity groups in a society requires a dramatic initiation rite that will inculcate new members into adult male roles quickly. In Young's view, the stronger and more cohesive the male organization, the harder it is for young males to know what is expected of them and, thus, initiation rites will be more dramatic. Cross-cultural studies that control for social solidarity groups have found that the presence of exclusive male organizations predicts male initiation rites (Young 1962).

Is the relationship between male organization and a society's initiation rites causal? Young himself, as well as others, raised the possibility that male organization and initiations are simply part and parcel of forming strong groups. For example, fraternities are strong in-groups and almost always have dramatic initiation rites.

- The more a male solidarity group is institutionalized, the more dramatic are male initiation ceremonies (Young 1965).
- Initiation rites are more likely to occur in the presence of **unilineal descent groups**, as well as where members of such descent groups are

involved in socializing a child (Cohen 1964).

Cohen suggests that initiation rites are therefore a means by which society can socialize a child within the boundaries of the kin group and promote the identity and values of the culture.

- Male initiation rites are more likely where there are exclusive male community work groups (Kitahara 1982a).
- Societies emphasizing obedience in childhood are more likely to have harsh male initiation, particularly involving genital surgery (Schlegel and Barry 2017).
- Strongly polygynous societies are more likely to have harsh male initiation ceremonies.

Why? The more polygyny there is, the more difficult it is for young men to get married. The collective power of older men is invoked in harsh ceremonies (Schlegel and Barry 2017).

For a critique of both Young's and Cohen's theories, see Paige and Paige (1981) pp. 15-17.

Other social explanations consider the presence of warfare. One theory posits that male initiation ceremonies may serve as “basic training” in warring societies—particularly nonstate societies that lack specialized armies. Initiation rites have many elements in common with basic army training: separation from family, change in appearance, tests of fortitude and bravery, bonding with peers, and acceptance of authority.

- The relationship between warfare and male initiation has inconsistent support (M. Ember 1967; C. R. Ember and Ember 2010).
- Harsh rituals, however, are marginally significantly predicted by warfare (Schlegel and Barry 2017).
- Evidence suggests that warfare may increase the likelihood of male initiation rites (as defined by Whiting, Kluckhohn, and Anthony) when psychological conflict is also present. The psychological predictors—exclusive mother-child sleeping and the long post-partum sex taboo—do predict more strongly in the presence of warfare (C. R. Ember and Ember 2010).

### Evolutionary Explanations

Although there is no necessary evolutionary progression in any particular society, there is a general trend throughout history from simpler to more complex social systems. And initiation rites appear to follow some general evolutionary trajectories (Schlegel and Barry 1980).

- Most foraging societies, which tend to be less socially complex, have female initiation ceremonies. The ceremonies appear to convey that females are

highly valued.

- In middle-range societies, particularly non-state societies with extensive agriculture, initiation rites are common for both sexes, but held separately by gender.
- In more complex societies with intensive agriculture and high levels of political organization, initiation ceremonies are generally absent.

If we examine evolution from an individual perspective, initiates incur serious risks, particularly when rituals involve scarification or surgery. According to evolutionary principles, there must be a reproductive advantage to offset the costs. Sosis, Kress, and Boster (2007) theorize that initiations identify individuals who are committed to the group and subsequently will have access to “reproductive gains via increased reputational status and group-wide benefits achieved through successful collective action (p. 235).” The authors posit that more costly rites should therefore be seen among groups that risk exploitation by free-riders and where groups offer substantial benefits to members. Two primary categories of collective problems that initiations may work to solve are resource acquisition and warfare. Sosis, Kress, and Boster (2007) found that cross-culturally:

- Societies with warfare (either internal or external) have more costly rites.
- Permanent body alterations are more likely when the society engages in external warfare, and nonpermanent markers are more likely with internal warfare.

Why? In societies with frequent internal warfare, alliances are constantly shifting and individuals have more mobility across groups. It makes sense that individuals within such communities would not partake in rituals that leave permanent markers of membership in a particular group. Conversely, since societies engaging in external warfare would be more concerned with uniting internal groups, permanent markers could be seen as reinforcing unity.

- Foragers, who generally cooperate significantly, have more costly rites than non-foragers.

### Explaining Female Initiation Rites

Female rites typically take place when a girl begins menstruation. In addition to emphasizing fertility, the majority of female rites may be intended to stress the importance of reproductive maturity. But while females the world-over experience menstruation, not all societies have these rites.

#### What we know about female initiation rites:

- They are more likely to occur in **matrilocal** and **bilocal** societies—as opposed to **patrilocal** or **neolocal** societies (Brown 1963; Paige and Paige 1981, 112–18; Schlegel and Barry 1980; Kitahara 1983)



Figure 8: Four Baila girls being escorted to an initiation ceremony in Casamanka, Senegal. Credit: KaBa, CC BY 3.0.

Why? Brown (1963) suggests that female initiation rites serve to announce a change in status from girlhood to adulthood in societies where girls do not regularly move from the household in which they grew up. This is particularly true in matrilineal societies, where females stay at or near home upon marriage. In bilocal societies females live near home about half the time.

Nevertheless, matrilineal and bilocal residence are not particularly strong predictors of female initiation, since such rites are very common, whereas matrilineality is relatively uncommon (Driver 1969; Kitahara 1983, 1984). Brown herself notes that a substantial number of patrilineal societies hold female initiation rites, but of a very different sort that involves considerable pain (extensive tattooing or genital operations, now more commonly known as female genital cutting).

- Painful female rites tend to occur in societies that also have painful male initiation rites (Brown 1963).

Keep in mind that painful female initiation rites are relatively uncommon, as we noted above. Perhaps, then, the two types of rites need two different explanations.

- Societies with extensive menstrual taboos are associated with individual female puberty rites (Kitahara 1984). See the discussion below.
- Socially simpler societies are more likely to have female initiation rites (Schlegel and Barry 1980).

## Menarche and Menstrual Taboos

Thus far we have discussed the social markers of adolescence across cultures. Biological adolescence is harder to define and study because, as mentioned, it refers to puberty—a suite of changes and not one single event. However, we can easily identify and research one biological event cross-culturally: menarche. Menarche, the onset of menstruation, is both biologically and socially important in the lives of adolescent girls around the world. It signals that a girl is reproductively mature and ready, if only physically, for initiation rites or marriage.

While large-scale comparative studies on menstruation are relatively scarce with the exception of Whiting's -Whiting (1965) cross-cultural study on the age of menarche and cross-national study by Thomas et al. (2001) we do know that:

- The genetic factors influence the onset of menarche (e.g. Johnston 1974; Kaprio et al. 1995; Graber, Jeanne, and Warren 1995; Towne et al. 2005).
- Certain physical attributes also determine menarche. For example, females with a higher proportion of body fat (see, e.g., Freedman et al. 2002; Frisch and Revelle 1970, 1971) generally have an earlier menarche.

- Intense physical activity generally appears to delay menarche (see, e.g., [Malina 1983](#); [Chavarro et al. 2004](#)), as does acute illness ([Van den Berghe, de Zegher, and Bouillon 1998](#); cited in [Karapanou and Papadimitriou 2010](#)).
- Social-environmental conditions such as diet, socioeconomic status, and war may also play a role in affecting menarcheal age. Some comparative country data suggest that higher quality diets may speed up the onset of menarche (see, e.g., [Merzenich, Boeing, and Wahrendorf 1993](#); [Berkey et al. 2000](#); [Thomas et al. 2001](#)), while poverty ([Eveleth and Tanner 1976](#)) or living under war conditions increases the age of attainment ([Tahirovic 2000](#); cited in [Karapanou and Papadimitriou 2010](#)).
- Paradoxically, some types of stress may even accelerate the onset of menarche across cultures. These include psychosocial stressors, such as anxiety, fear, anger, grief, and sadness ([Ellis 2004](#)) and customs that produce early infant stress. [Whiting \(1965\)](#) examined the relationship between menarche and early infant stress, an event in the first two weeks of life that involves pain (such as ear piercing), shaping (such as stretching or pushing a limb for cosmetic purposes), and/or separation from the mother. He found significant relationships between physical stress (pain, shaping) and/or emotionally stressful mother-infant separation customs and the earlier onset of menarche. No effects were found for diet or amount of sunshine.

Previous research, supported by many more studies, links both short-term physical and emotional infant stress to greater adult height, consistent with the idea that short-term stress accelerates growth ([Landauer and Whiting 1981](#)).

### Menstrual Taboos

In many societies menarche triggers taboos that females (and others in relation to them) must observe. These range from avoiding certain activities during menstruation to the extreme of going into seclusion in a menstrual hut.

- Menstrual taboos are found more frequently in communities where males are dominant and tightly organized ([Young and Bacdayan 1965](#)).

Why? [Young and Bacdayan \(1965\)](#) suggest that these taboos amount to a form of institutionalized discrimination practiced where males are dominant. Another possibility their research supports is that menstrual taboos reflect overall social rigidity.

- The degree of elaboration of menstrual taboos is associated with increasing lengths of the postpartum sex taboo ([Stephens 1962, 99](#)).
- Greater sexual anxiety is associated with more elaborated menstrual taboos ([Stephens 1962, 94](#)).

Why? Using a psychoanalytic approach, Stephens suggests that certain conditions, such as the long post-partum sex taboo, are likely to increase a boy's attachment to his mother and create rivalry with the father. This sets up unconscious anxieties in men, including fear of genital injury. Blood from a female's genital area would presumably be very anxiety-arousing and would be avoided.

- Societies more dependent on hunting have menstrual taboos ([Kitahara 1982b](#)).

Why? Kitahara points to evidence that herbivores commonly have an aversion to menstrual blood whereas omnivores and carnivores tend to be more aggressive in the presence of menstrual blood. Therefore, hunters may find it advantageous—and safer—to restrict women who are menstruating.

### What We Do Not Know

- Most of the research on nonindustrial societies focused on time periods in the past. How much has adolescence changed with formal schooling and the greater entry of most societies into a more commercial economy?
- Has recent globalization altered the way societies define adolescence?
- Some societies value fatness in females; others value thinness. Does valuing fatness predict earlier menarche?
- Has the age at which a society defines the beginning of adolescence changed as a result of earlier menarche in more recent times?
- What factors predict adolescents' rebelliousness cross-culturally? Specifically, how does neolocality explain variation in conflict?
- How do cross-cultural results on adolescence in nonindustrial societies compare with research done at the national level in industrial and postindustrial societies?

### Exercises Using eHRAF World Cultures

Explore some texts and do some comparisons using the [eHRAF World Cultures](#) database. These exercises can be done individually or as part of classroom assignments. See the [Teaching eHRAF Exercise on Adolescence](#) for suggestions.

### Credits

We appreciate Tulin Duda's editorial suggestions.

### Photo Credits

- Kenyan adolescent girls crafting. 2015. Photograph by Zuraj Studios, distributed under a CC BY-SA 4.0 license. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ak55-Busy\\_afternoon.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ak55-Busy_afternoon.jpg)
- Kastom dancers. 2011. Photograph by Graham Crumb, distributed under a CC BY-SA 3.0 license. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Moresby-kastom-dancers-2.jpg>
- Boys reading, Malawi. 2005. Photograph by Steve Evans, distributed under a CC BY 2.0 license. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Malawi\\_n006\\_\(5976509\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Malawi_n006_(5976509).jpg)
- Indian wedding party. 2004. Photograph by Steve Evans, distributed under a CC BY 2.0 license. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Assam,\\_India\\_Wedding\\_Party\\_\(1413597\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Assam,_India_Wedding_Party_(1413597).jpg)
- Navajo women shearing sheep. n.d. Held by the National Archives and Records Administration, public domain. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Navajo\\_women\\_shearing\\_sheep\\_-\\_NARA\\_-\\_530946.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Navajo_women_shearing_sheep_-_NARA_-_530946.jpg)
- Initiation ritual, Malawi. 2005. Photograph by Steve Evans, distributed under a CC BY 2.0 license. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Initiation\\_ritual\\_of\\_boys\\_in\\_Malawi.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Initiation_ritual_of_boys_in_Malawi.jpg)
- Kapsiki initiates, Rumsu. 2014. Photograph by Wouter Van Beek, distributed under a CC BY-SA 3.0 license. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Just\\_initiated\\_boys\\_in\\_Rumsu.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Just_initiated_boys_in_Rumsu.jpg)
- Female Baila (Jola) initiates, Senegal. 2007. Photograph by KaBa, distributed under a CC BY 3.0 license. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:DiolaBaila.JPG>

### Citation

The summary should be cited as:

Carol R. Ember, Emily Pitek, and Erik J. Ringen. 2017. "Adolescence" in C. R. Ember, ed. *Explaining Human Culture*. Human Relations Area Files, <https://hraf.yale.edu/ehc/summaries/adolescence>, accessed [give date].

### Glossary

**Bilocal** a pattern of marital residence in which two residence patterns (usually matrilineal and patrilineal) are about equally frequent.

**Matrilocal** a pattern of marital residence in which couples typically live with or near the wife's parents.

**Neolocal** a pattern of marital residence in which couples typically live apart from their kin.

**Patrilocal** a pattern of marital residence in which couples typically live with or near the husband's parents.

**Post-partum sex taboo** a taboo on sexual intercourse between a wife and her husband for a period of time after the birth of a child. The period of abstinence may range from a few days to 4 or 5 years. Cross-cultural studies usually deem a year or more to be a long taboo period.

**Unilineal descent groups** kin groups formed on the rule of descent, which stipulates that an individual's membership is assigned at birth through the line of descent of either the mother (matrilineal) or father (patrilineal).

## References

- Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen. 1999. "Adolescent Storm and Stress, Reconsidered." *American Psychologist* 54 (5): 317–26. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.54.5.317>.
- Berghe, Greet Van den, Francis de Zegher, and Roger Bouillon. 1998. "Acute and Prolonged Critical Illness as Different Neuroendocrine Paradigms." *The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism* 83 (6): 1827–34. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1210/jcem.83.6.4763>.
- Berkey, Catherine S., Jane D Gardner, Lindsay A. Frazier, and Graham A. Colditz. 2000. "Relation of Childhood Diet and Body Size to Menarche and Adolescent Growth in Girls." *American Journal of Epidemiology* 152 (5): 446–52. <https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/152.5.446>.
- Broude, Gwen J. 1981. "The Cultural Management of Sexuality." *Handbook of Cross-Cultural Human Development*, 633–73.
- Brown, Judith K. 1963. "A Cross-Cultural Study of Female Initiation Rites." *American Anthropologist* 65 (4): 837–53. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1963.65.4.02a00040>.
- Burton, Roger V., and John WM Whiting. 1961. "The Absent Father and Cross-Sex Identity." *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly of Behavior and Development* 7 (2): 85–95.
- Chavarro, J., E. Villamor, J. Narváez, and A. Hoyos. 2004. "Socio-Demographic Predictors of Age at Menarche in a Group of Colombian University Women." *Annals of Human Biology* 31 (2): 245–57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03014460310001652239>.
- Cohen, Yehudi A. 1964. "The Establishment of Identity in a Social Nexus: The Special Case of Initiation Ceremonies and Their Relation to Value and Legal Systems." *American Anthropologist* 66 (3): 529–52. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1964.66.3.02a00020>.
- Driver, Harold E. 1969. "Girls' Puberty Rites and Matrilineal Residence." *American Anthropologist* 71 (5): 905–8. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1969.71.5.02a00120>.
- Ellis, Bruce J. 2004. "Timing of Pubertal Maturation in Girls: An Integrated Life History Approach." *Psychological Bulletin* 130 (6): 920–58. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.130.6.920>.
- Ember, Carol R., and Melvin Ember. 1993. "Issues in Cross-Cultural Studies of Interpersonal Violence." *Violence and Victims* 8 (3): 217–33.

- . 2005. “Explaining Corporal Punishment of Children: A Cross-Cultural Study.” *American Anthropologist* 107 (4): 609–19. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2005.107.4.609>.
- . 2010. “Explaining Male Initiation Ceremonies: New Cross-Cultural Tests and a Catalytic Model.” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 41 (4): 605–16.
- . 2015. *Cultural Anthropology*. 15th ed. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Ember, Melvin. 1967. “Still Another Interpretation of Male Initiation Ceremonies.” Presented at the 66th annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Washington, DC.
- Ephron, Nora. 2006. *I Feel Bad About My Neck: And Other Thoughts on Being a Woman*. New York, NY: Knopf.
- Eveleth, Phyllis B., and James M. Tanner. 1976. *Worldwide Variation in Human Growth. International Biological Programme Synthesis Series*. Vol. 8. Cambridge University Press Archive.
- Freedman, David S., Laura K. Khan, Mary K. Serdula, William H. Dietz, Sathanur R. Srinivasan, and Gerald S. Berenson. 2002. “Relation of Age at Menarche to Race, Time Period, and Anthropometric Dimensions: The Bogalusa Heart Study.” *Pediatrics* 110 (4): e43. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.110.4.e43>.
- Frisch, Rose E., and Roger Revelle. 1970. “Height and Weight at Menarche and a Hypothesis of Critical Body Weights and Adolescent Events.” *Science* 169 (3943): 377–79. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.169.3943.397>.
- . 1971. “Height and Weight at Menarche and a Hypothesis of Menarche.” *Archives of Disease in Childhood* 46 (249): 695–701. <https://doi.org/10.1136/adc.46.249.695>.
- Garfield, Zachary H., Melissa J. Garfield, and Barry S. Hewlett. 2016. “A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Hunter-Gatherer Social Learning.” In *Social Learning and Innovation in Contemporary Hunter-Gatherers*, edited by Hideaki Terashima and Barry S. Hewlett, 19–34. Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-4-431-55997-9\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-4-431-55997-9_2).
- Graber, Brooks-Gunn, Julia A. Jeanne, and Michelle P. Warren. 1995. “The Antecedents of Menarcheal Age: Heredity, Family Environment, and Stressful Life Events.” *Child Development* 66 (2): 346–59. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.1995.tb00875.x>.
- Hewlett, Bonnie Lynn. 2013. *Adolescent Identity: Evolutionary, Cultural and Developmental Perspectives*. Vol. 7. Routledge Studies in Anthropology. London: Routledge.
- Johnston, Francis E. 1974. “Control of Age at Menarche.” *Human Biology* 46 (1): 159–71.
- Kaprio, Jaakko, Arja Rimpelä, Torsten Winter, Richard J. Viken, Matti Rimpelä, and Richard J. Rose. 1995. “Common Genetic Influences on BMI and Age at Menarche.” *Human Biology* 67 (5): 739–53.
- Karapanou, Olga, and Anastasios Papadimitriou. 2010. “Determinants of Menarche.” *Reproductive Biology and Endocrinology* 8 (1): 115. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1477-7827-8-115>.

- Kitahara, Michio. 1982a. "Male Puberty Rites: A Path Analytic Model." *Adolescence* 17 (66): 293.
- . 1982b. "Menstrual Taboos and the Importance of Hunting." *American Anthropologist* 84 (4): 901–3. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1982.84.4.02a00180>.
- . 1983. "Female Puberty Rites: Reconsideration and Speculation." *Adolescence* 18 (72): 957–64.
- . 1984. "Female Physiology and Female Puberty Rites." *Ethos* 12 (2): 132–50. <https://doi.org/10.1525/eth.1984.12.2.02a00030>.
- Landauer, Thomas K., and John W.M. Whiting. 1981. "Correlates and Consequences of Stress in Infancy." In *Handbook of Cross-cultural Human Development*, edited by Ruth H. Munroe, Robert L. Munroe, and Beatrice Blyth Whiting, 355–75. New York: Garland STPM Press.
- Malina, R. M. 1983. "Menarche in Athletes: A Synthesis and Hypothesis." *Annals of Human Biology* 10 (1): 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0301446830006141>.
- Mead, Margaret. 1928. *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychology Study in Primitive Youth for Western Civilization*. New York, NY: William Morrow and Co.
- Merzenich, Hiltrud, Heiner Boeing, and Jürgen Wahrendorf. 1993. "Dietary Fat and Sports Activity as Determinants for Age at Menarche." *American Journal of Epidemiology* 138 (4): 217–24. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.aje.a116850>.
- Paige, Karen, and Jeffery M. Paige. 1981. *The Politics of Reproductive Ritual*. Berkeley, Ca: Univ of California Press.
- Schlegel, Alice, and Herbert Barry III. 1979. "Adolescent Initiation Ceremonies: A Cross-Cultural Code." *Ethnology* 18 (2): 199–210. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3773291>.
- . 1980. "The Evolutionary Significance of Adolescent Initiation Ceremonies." *American Ethnologist* 7 (4): 696–715. <https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.1980.7.4.02a00060>.
- . 1991. *Adolescence: An Anthropological Inquiry*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- . 2017. "Pain, Fear, and Circumcision in Boys' Adolescent Initiation Ceremonies." *Cross-Cultural Research*, 453–63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1069397116685780>.
- Sosis, Richard, Howard C. Kress, and James S. Boster. 2007. "Scars for War: Evaluating Alternative Signaling Explanations for Cross-Cultural Variance in Ritual Costs." *Evolution and Human Behavior* 28 (4): 234–47. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2007.02.007>.
- Stephens, William N. 1962. *The Oedipus Complex: Cross Cultural Evidence*. New York, Ny: Free Press.
- Tahirovie, H. F. 2000. "Changes in Menarcheal Age in Girls Exposed to War Conditions." *American Journal of Human Biology* 12 (4): 503–8. [https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6300\(200007/08\)12:4%3C503::AID-AJHB10%3E3.0.CO;2-H](https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6300(200007/08)12:4%3C503::AID-AJHB10%3E3.0.CO;2-H).
- Thomas, Frédéric, Francois Renaud, Eric Benefice, Thierry De Meeüs, and

- Jean-Francois Guegan. 2001. "International Variability of Ages at Menarche and Menopause: Patterns and Main Determinants." *Human Biology* 73 (2): 271–90. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hub.2001.0029>.
- Towne, Bradford, Stefan A. Czerwinski, Ellen W. Demerath, John Blangero, Alex F. Roche, and Roger M. Siervogel. 2005. "Heritability of Age at Menarche in Girls from the Fels Longitudinal Study." *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 128 (1): 210–19. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajpa.20106>.
- Whiting, John W.M. 1965. "Menarcheal Age and Infant Stress in Humans." *Sex and Behavior*, 221–33.
- Whiting, John W.M., Victoria K. Burbank, and Mitchell S. Ratner. 1986. "The Duration of Maidenhood Across Cultures." In *School-Age Pregnancy and Parenthood: Biosocial Dimensions*, 273–302.
- Whiting, John W.M., Richard Kluckhohn, and Albert Anthony. 1958. "The Function of Male Initiation Ceremonies at Puberty." In *Readings in Social Psychology*, 3rd ed., 359–70. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.
- Young, Frank W. 1962. "The Function of Male Initiation Ceremonies: A Cross-Cultural Test of an Alternative Hypothesis." *American Journal of Sociology* 67 (4): 379–96. <https://doi.org/10.1086/223162>.
- . 1965. *Initiation Ceremonies: A Cross-Cultural Study of Status Dramatization*. New York, NY: Bobbs-Merrill.
- Young, Frank W., and Albert A. Bacdayan. 1965. "Menstrual Taboos and Social Rigidity." *Ethnology* 4 (2): 225–40. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3772731>.