

Strategies for Reducing Adolescent Alienation

James Mackey

Three dimensions of youthful alienation are explored. The author suggests ways of reducing the gulf between adolescent society and the adult world.

The subjective feelings inherent in alienation are real and growing in many adolescents. Recent public opinion polls, for example, report that between 1966 and 1976 there was a 30 percent increase in the level of alienation in the American public. It is reasonable to assume that adolescents are affected at least as much as the rest of the population. Therefore, it is important that educators initiate investigations of the form and consequences of adolescent alienation. No social institution has more to gain by understanding alienation than the educational estate.

For eight years I have attempted to build a theoretical construct that defines the primary dimensions of adolescent alienation. The inquiry consisted of five parts. First, a set of distinct descriptions of alienation was distilled from the literature. Second, a series of propositions regarding subgroups of alienated adolescents was deduced from the dimensions. Third, an attitude scale measuring the dimensions of alienation was developed. Fourth, the attitude scale was administered to a large and diverse sample of early adolescents and the dimensions of response analyzed to provide an empirical redefinition of adolescent alienation. Fifth, the validity of the

dimension measures was investigated by comparing the pattern of group differences to the pattern expected from the conceptualization of alienation.¹

Analysis demonstrated that adolescent alienation could be characterized by three independent and measurable dimensions: (a) *personal incapacity*, the feeling of not having the skills needed to succeed; (b) *guidelessness*, the rejection of the conventional rules for succeeding; and (c) *cultural estrangement*, the rejection of the predominant criteria for success.

Offered here are some strategies of instruction that could allay adolescent alienation. The suggestions are not intended to sketch a definitive portrait of the solution, but to trace the barest outline. The three dimensions of adolescent alienation, *personal incapacity*, *cultural estrangement*, and *guidelessness*, are used to organize the discussion.

Personal Incapacity

The major ingredient in *personal incapacity* is the adolescent's feeling of incompetence in dealing with his social world. All early adolescents feel incompetent under certain circum-

¹ For comprehensive discussion of the psychometric properties and the research potential of the attitude scale see: James Mackey and Andrew Ahlgren. "Dimensions of Adolescent Alienation." *Applied Psychological Measurement*, Spring 1977.



"From the major league athlete to the rock musician, the respected person for the adolescent is one who displays great ability." Photo: Michael D. Sullivan.

stances, but the feelings are more intense in students who score high on the *personal incapacity* scale.

It is impossible to overemphasize the importance adolescents place on competence. The idols of adolescents are always highly skilled individuals. From the major league athlete to the rock musician, the respected person for the adolescent is one who displays great ability. The importance that competence plays in adolescents' lives is illustrated by Edgar Friedenberg's comment that, "A youngster who does not know what he is good at will not know what he is good for; he must know what he can do in order to know who he is."²

Adolescents who feel incapable of controlling their environment and who possess a high sense of *personal incapacity* need to develop skills and tools that make them effective individuals able to cause change in their environment by their actions.

The schools can develop instruction sequences that eliminate *personal incapacity* in a

variety of ways. The implications of the research—that an adolescent feeling a high sense of *personal incapacity* feels unable to control his/her social environment—provide the foundations for these strategies. A viable curriculum would consist of a series of interrelated learning experiences constructed to help adolescents negotiate their surroundings. Specifically, the students can examine those aspects of life closest to them and most amenable to their control, such as their family and community.

In the community, for example, "personally incapacitous" adolescents can provide service to custodial institutions such as day care centers and citizens' homes. These enterprises are sorely in need of assistance, provide opportunities for meaningful work, and can assist in adolescent competence building. Working with the youngest and oldest members of society may contribute to breaking down the rigid age segregation that characterizes American life.

Grim consequences will result from a failure to respond to the adolescent's feelings of personal incapacity. Studies by Melvin Seeman and his students demonstrate that the feelings inherent in personal incapacity are an important variable in the learning process.³ Seeman's studies affirm that if a person does not believe that his/her performance makes a difference in the ultimate outcome, that person will not invest any effort in learning content that purports to improve his/her performance. The implications for educators are direct and relevant, suggesting that most curricula have little effect on the "personally incapacitous" student. This student's perception of the world influences him/her to believe that his/her performance makes no difference in the final outcome. Thus, a necessary antecedent to any educational program should be an attempt to assuage feelings of *personal incapacity*.

Cultural Estrangement

The primary component in *cultural estrangement* is the adolescent's lack of commitment to

² Edgar Friedenberg. *The Vanishing Adolescent*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1959.

³ Melvin Seeman. "Alienation, Membership, and Political Knowledge: A Comparative Study." *Public Opinion Quarterly*, pp. 353-67; 1966.

American values. Highly culturally estranged students feel that, although Americans flourish physically, they are starved emotionally. The adolescent ideology incorporates the belief that dehumanized cultural institutions control American life. The culturally estranged adolescent's response is a vote against institutions and a demand for a new definition of the social order.

It is expedient that the schools develop programs to allay cultural estrangement. Failure to provide the necessary skills and opportunities for culturally estranged adolescents to examine change and possibly develop commitment to American society, in whatever form it may evolve, will sentence these adolescents to be prisoners of the society that they feel estranges them. Although it is impossible to develop a complete catalog of the skills and opportunities the schools should provide for the culturally estranged student, the barest list would include the following items.

Culturally estranged adolescents would benefit from learning experiences that are presented in an intellectually honest way, devoid of cant and cliché. The myth, hyperbole, and hypocrisy that make up much of the curriculum need to be either set aside or subjected to the ruthless, no-holds-barred examination that characterizes the best investigative reporting. Culturally estranged adolescents need opportunities to analyze and to be involved in serious social issues. Closeted in the restrictive culture of adolescence, their perceptions are muffled. Opening them to new ideas can take place only in a school where there are no closed areas of inquiry.

There are a variety of possible activities that could be used to decrease cultural estrangement. It seems desirable, for instance, to allow culturally estranged adolescents to participate in social action projects. Working with a local governmental agency may cause an adolescent to examine his/her often simplistic view of American culture and values. Participating in informal seminars on consumer practices in settings outside the school can build a view of society that no classroom can accomplish.

There are also appropriate in-school activities that can be used to reduce cultural estrangement; participating in school governance and being involved in curricular and instructional planning in the school are two examples.

Above all, culturally estranged students



"Working with the youngest and oldest members of society may contribute to breaking down the rigid age segregation that characterizes American life." Photo: Charlene Rothkopf.

need, both in and out of school, the chance to be involved, opportunities to escape the confining world of adolescence, and real-life situations with which to test their embryonic social theories.

Guidelessness

The root fact of *guidelessness* is the adolescent's feeling that the rules of conduct have collapsed. That early adolescents are susceptible to this feeling is not surprising. In childhood, individual morality is generally defined by the collective consciousness of the family. Children are seldom involved in conflict-filled decision making. But with the advent of adolescence, as the child emerges upon a different stage, a new drama unfolds. Now the adolescent actor has new roles to play often involving the improvisation of an entirely new social dramaturgy.

An effective instructional program for reducing *guidelessness* would contain three essential components: (a) an attempt to develop knowledge about social rules; (b) orientations that involve the building of goals that the adolescent is com-

"Culturally estranged adolescents need opportunities to analyze and to be involved in serious social issues."
Photo: Michael D. Sullivan.



mitted to realize; and (c) opportunities for the reality testing of these goals.⁴

Adolescents can learn about the nature of social rules by analyzing the enactment of rules close at hand. These studies must involve, ultimately, a study of the form and function of rules in the large institutions that impinge upon adolescent lives. But before adolescents begin probing the dynamics of large organizations, certain preparatory activities should be used to hone their skills. These initiatory activities embody investigating what Erving Goffman calls the "norms of co-mingling"; a domain containing the face-to-face interactions of everyday life, such as family meals, encounters with clerks, life in classrooms, crowds, and couples.⁵ Instructional techniques, such as role playing, process observation, and interviewing, could be used in this study.

A bridge between small and large scale societies could be built by the study of the school. Guideless adolescents could benefit from sequential activities that explore the governing process in their schools. Complex social and political processes are carried out every day in the school. By studying the schools, adolescents may encounter many of the social rules and functions that dominate the larger society.

The latter two components of a program for ameliorating guidelessness could be accomplished by programs of ethical analysis and moral education. In these situations, students would be encouraged to analyze the process of rules through a series of concrete moral dilemmas. They would

be encouraged to develop and discuss dilemma-like situations from their own lives. The scheme that Lawrence Kohlberg constructed might serve as a framework for these discussions.

The rough contours of adolescence were traditionally made smoother by the existence of clearly-defined social rules and adult models to emulate and react against. These conditions no longer operate so neatly in contemporary society. In many quarters, to maintain that schools have a responsibility to deal with alienation is considered quaint and unrealistic. Perhaps this claim has some validity. Nevertheless, if the feeling of social disintegration inherent in adolescent alienation is not grappled with by the schools, its extent will deepen, leading to a further expansion of the gulf between adolescents and adults. ⁶

⁴ Warren Breed. *The Self-Guiding Society*. New York: Free Press, 1971.

⁵ Erving Goffman. *Relations in Public*. New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1971.



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