

Perspectives on Adolescence in Multicultural Settings

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Aboriginal Adolescence: Maidenhood in an Australian Community.

By Victoria Katherine Burbank
New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988.

Becoming Nigerian in Ijo Society.

By Marida Hollos and Philip E. Leis
New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989.

"Getting Paid," Youth, Crime and Work in the Inner City.

By Mercer L. Sullivan
Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989.

The application of interdisciplinary perspectives to the study of contemporary social problems has long been an approach of the Social Work profession in both academic and practice settings. The book reviews which follow continue in that tradition by drawing on anthropological inquiry for a comparative and cross-cultural view of adolescents and their concerns. It brings to bear rich and detailed data about the complexity of the daily lives of young people who are experiencing the social problems we are attempting to understand and mediate.

Each of the three ethnographies in this essay addresses the plight of the youth amidst rapid social change and an increasingly uncertain and precarious economic future. The authors employed field research methods to examine the relationship between sociocultural context and adolescent behavior in three culturally distinct settings. Burbank used a sample of fifty-five adolescent girls, including three in-depth case studies in the multilingual Australian Aboriginal community of Mangrove; she delineates the experience of female adolescence and the social consequences of unregulated female sexuality. In their research, Hollos and Leis employed intensive observation of a primary sampling unit (PSU); it consisted of a bounded microcommunity of 30-40 households in two ethnic communities in Southern Nigeria. The authors examined the psychological and physical development of Ijo youth in the context of their nation's socio-

economic structure, their religion, and their family. Similarly, Sullivan relies on participant observation and the construction of life histories to investigate the lives of three groups of African American, Puerto Rican, and Caucasian adolescents respectively in the inner city. He examines the effects of social versus personal factors in the variation of career patterns in delinquency and seeks to illuminate the interaction of cultural and structural variables that account for it. Each work suggests that adolescence, as a stage of human development, is meaningful only when it is examined within the particular socioeconomic and political context in which it is experienced. Furthermore, the comparative perspective derived from these selections calls for a reexamination of the current status of youth as one comprised not only of "dependents" and victims, but of potentially active agents and powerful generators of well being.

Burbank examines the intersection of external and internal factors of social change as observed in the behavior of adolescent females and the indigenous system of marriage. Over a period of thirty years Mangrove was transformed from a community of nomads into a settlement. This transition was chiefly the result of the following external impulses: the establishment of Mangrove as a Protestant mission in 1952; the incursion of whites into Aboriginal territory in the 1960s; the predominance of a service economy supported by government funds in 1981; and the infiltration of western ideas and standards through enforced formal education. The persistent efforts of missionaries, schoolteachers, and government agents to assimilate the Aboriginal population into Australian society resulted in the eradication of early marriages and, consequently, in a drastic rearrangement of native social organization. The missionaries imposed the legal marriage age of sixteen on the settlement's dwellers; this intervention engendered the invention of maidenhood, a previously unknown life stage of three and four years in duration between the beginning of fertility and marriage. Concomitant to this newly created stage in the life cycle, were observed the rise in social integration of the sexes, premarital sex and pregnancy, the option to remain unmarried, and a decrease in arranged marriages. However, most threatening to the adult Aborigines are (a) their inability to control the sexual behavior of young women and (b) the implications of unregulated female sexuality on the marriage system and, ultimately, on the cultural fabric of this community.

The author posits that the assertion of young women to exert power in the selection of mates, sexual expression, and public behavior, in defiance of the law and parental wishes, poses unprecedented problems for the community of Mangrove. Female adolescence as a life stage is characterized by intergenerational discord concerning structurally "correct" marital unions, the option not to marry, the high rate of dissolution of marriages, the disruption of the system of kin classification, and the incipience of

mothers with dependent children that rely on welfare and on their own parents for financial support. Burbank contrasts urban western notions of individual autonomy and anonymity relative to social norms, and emphasizes the significance of even one person's behavior on communal solidarity in a small community. Most compelling is her argument that the behavior and values that this newly created cohort of adolescent girls expressed challenge the basic principles of local social organization and alter the structure of this community. Burbank's conclusion that "adolescent girls of Mangrove are vehicles of social change" (p. 124), suggests persuasively that the power of youth, especially that of females, as "culture makers" and agents of their world's destiny must not be underestimated.

In their work, Hollos and Leis also demonstrate that adolescence, as a phase in the life cycle, cannot be understood independent of the socio-cultural context in which it is experienced. The researchers examine this relationship by presenting a probing analysis of the plight of youth vis-à-vis national and international economic and political forces. Since its independence in 1960, Nigeria has been transformed from a colonial, agriculturally based economy to an independent, industrializing nation. Isolated villages have been incorporated to the national political system through an increase in income from oil; communication networks have expanded by the building of roads and the emergence of radio and television; and faster types of water transports have resulted in greater linkages with external political and economic systems. The previously egalitarian and relatively autonomous societies are now marked by social differentiation, political hierarchy, and incipient dependency that involves daily labor for low wages and insufficient food production. Consequently, the local system of beliefs is also in a state of transition; rituals associated with local deities are gradually replaced by Christian forms of religious behavior. Most critical is the consequence of "an economizing of the mind," a state whereby the values and expectations of the youth for a standard of living are inexorably shaped by local participation in a global economy.

Against the backdrop of rapid economic development and political integration are the young people who, like the Aborigines in Burbank's study, are confronted with a newly recognized stage of development. Not unlike adolescents the world over, the Ijo are ill-prepared for the sudden surge of sex hormones that announce the onset of puberty; uncertain about the points of transition between the end of childhood and the attainment of adulthood; and intimidated by the implications of growing up in a society in which their future is perceptively precarious and unpredictable. The authors determine that while the physiological changes that occur at adolescence are universal, the social and cultural responses to these

changes vary according to distinct cultural systems. Not unlike adolescents of the west, the lives of these two groups of young people are affected by the choices they perceive available to them in a rapidly changing and threatening socioeconomic environment. However, in contrast to western culture where the transformation from adolescence to adulthood emphasizes a movement from dependence toward individualism and autonomy, the Ijo rely on both "independence of individual action" as well as traditional patterns of behavior that emphasize the importance of kin ties and communal interdependency (pp. 156-157). This study demonstrates the necessary function of the extended family for young people as a "secure buffer" against rapidly changing and uncertain economic and political conditions, and a source of security with one's identity as "an inalienable link of a larger group" (p. 157).

Sullivan's work demonstrates the intersection of individual, economic, and sociocultural factors in the etiology of crime and delinquency among adolescents in the inner city. He discusses economy and culture as the emergent products of social interaction that constitute neither "a mere aggregation of individual behavior nor a mysterious force existing outside of individuals and driving their behavior" (p. 242). This research indicates that distinct patterns of criminal behavioral observed in each of the neighborhoods corresponds to differences in the social context of each group more significantly than might be accounted for by the personal characteristics of the participants. Moreover, the study reveals the following tenets: (1) the motivation for criminal behavior reflects the youth's perception of a restrictive social structure and lack of economic opportunities; (2) delinquent behavior reflects cultural meanings of an active and creative social production that is embedded in the social relations of their respective communities; and (3) the development of criminal behavior among youth results from an interaction between the environment and the psychological profile of the participants. A detailed description and analysis of the youth's neighborhoods, education, employment, and the transition to criminal activity illustrates the foundations of culture and economy as the products of patterned interactions, and as the structures that emerge from patterned interactions among individuals. Consistent with the studies discussed above, Sullivan's work also demonstrates the importance of viewing the behavior of adolescents both as a response to economic and political constraints as well as a display of culturally meaningful and resourcefully adaptive activity.

Although each of the works that is discussed here focuses on a distinct group of adolescents that were observed in a variety of cultural settings, they share the following three themes that address the problematic status of youth in a rapidly changing world system: (1) With exception of the one group of Caucasian adolescents in Sullivan's work, the subjects of each

study are all members of an ethnically distinct and socioeconomically and politically subordinate segment of their nation's population; thus, questions of identity, "dual consciousness," and dual membership in both an ethnic community and a host society are considered. (2) The process of bringing youth to adulthood and the task of preparing adolescents for the future are in question as observed in the overt defiance of Aboriginal adolescents against in-group norms, the turmoil that Ijo youth experience as a result of rising standards of living and decreasing economic opportunities, and the delinquency observed among young people in the inner city. (3) The notion of youth as key agents of change and potential producers of well being is demonstrated by (a) the power of Aboriginal females to challenge the Law and alter indigenous social organization; (b) the ingenuity of Ijo youth to embrace economic development and national politics without surrendering in-group solidarity, communal ties, and familial loyalties; and (c) the creativity, skill, and courage that inner city youth exhibit in their strategies, albeit illegal, to combat poverty, cultural marginalization, and political disaffection. The motifs derived from these works translate into implications for programmatic action toward the empowerment and well being of the young.

This comparative perspective on the plight of youth in a changing world suggests that the apparatus of Child Welfare must consider the following recommendations: (1) Reaffirm kin group interdependence and community ties; precarious economic conditions and alienating structures of power behoove that children are embedded in secure kinship and community networks and are ensured that they "have people behind them" (Hollos and Leis 1988: 154). (2) Promote cultural equilibrium between subordinate ethnic segments of society and the nation state; youth whose history and heritage are at variance with national standards of economic and political participation are in dire need of empowerment so that their presence as descendants of their ethnic group, citizens of their nation, and members of a global community, is maximized. (3) Entreat for "community-based initiatives;" child welfare policies and practices must target the community through which political and economic forces penetrate the lives of the young and which they in turn reshape and define. Finally, the challenge to achieve the well being of children demands an integrative and comparative approach to the problem, a direction toward which each of the selections discussed in this essay so aptly represents.