

Walker, M. (2001) 'Adolescence: possibilities and limitations; experience and expression', in S. Izzard and N. Barden (eds) *Women, Identity and the Life Cycle*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

**Adolescence: possibilities and limitations; experience and expression**

*I wasn't good*

*At adolescence. There was a dance,*

*A catchy rhythm: I was out of step.*

*My body capered, nudging me*

*With hair, fleshy growths and monthly outbursts,*

*To join the party. I tried to annul*

*The future, pretending I knew it already,*

*Was caught bloody thighed, a criminal*

*Guilty of puberty.*

*Not a nice girl,*

*No.*

U.A. Fanthorpe

These brief lines vividly express the agonies, uncertainties, and discomfort often experienced by female adolescents. The 'pretending' to know - that false confidence of the 'you don't tell me what to do, I know', variety that can simultaneously infuriate, frustrate and alarm adults. The unpredictability of a newly changed body; the feeling that everyone else is somehow mysteriously 'in step' and you should be too; the lack of 'fit' combined with a huge need to be acceptable to your peers. For some, there is an underlying sense of a deep lack of ease with self, and for others, sadly, a real feeling of shame at their changing body, often reflecting major life difficulties experienced during childhood. What is not captured here is the converse - and adolescence is perhaps epitomised by these alternating phases - is the excitement, exploration, experimentation and discoveries that can also be experienced by adolescent girls. As they build the bridge between childhood and adulthood, particularly in the early years of adolescence, they vacillate often with remarkable speed between these two states - again to the perplexity of adults around them. At this point in their lives activities, friends and relationships outside of the family become increasingly significant in their search for love, attention, new experiences and excitement. No wonder then that it is a chance to re- work earlier issues (Blos 62). The essential fluidity that marks adolescence; the rapidity of changes during this time physiologically, psychologically and hormonally all lead to the possibility of earlier issues being re-visited. It is a time when past, present and future are extraordinarily intermingled and overlapping. This is recognised by parents as well as

professionals: one mother of a thirteen year old girl who had battled to be independent as a toddler and now fought the same battle with renewed energy, commented wistfully that it was like living through the terrible two's all over again except that at thirteen her daughter could do it so much better, for so much longer and brought to it so many new found skills.

Adolescence then is commonly marked by growing separation from the family, both socially and psychologically. There is greater independence in all aspects of being: in thought, word and action. In this major transition; this bid for separation; this striving to be herself, her parents can become scorned and rejected. Mothers in particular describe how at adolescence they metamorphise from being their little girl's 'best mummy in the world', to being a mother who just does not understand; who is treated with withering glances and contemptuous words, and find that their previously companionable child has become a young person who walks ten paces behind them. But even this is not constant: mothers will also describe how quickly this face of independence can shift under pressure: how the little girl can re-emerge playfully or needily; or how the apparently independent young girl's need for mother can be expressed as an immediate and desperate demand for re-assurance, comfort, solutions or for the projection of blame or uncertainty ('I can't stay at that party all night – my mum won't let me – you know what she's like'). It can feel for the parent as if they too have to metamorphise into the equivalent of the genie from the lamp: to appear instantly on demand when needed and to back off when not required. And in the

midst of this, of course, there can be moments of pure delight both from and to this newly emerging young woman. No wonder it can be such a demanding and confusing time for all involved.

### **Adolescence: a universal experience?**

However this process which is essentially not static within the individual is not static in external terms either. The descriptions above are placed in a UK context but girl's adolescence is influenced and effected by socio-economic class status, sexual orientation and subculture (Ponton 1993). Even the term adolescence has no neat definition in terms of time span and no attempt to create one will be made here. However it can be helpful to think of adolescence as falling into three periods- broadly, early, middle and late (Blos 1962; Laufer 1974). It is clear to those who work or live with adolescent girls that they present and behave very differently at, say, thirteen and seventeen.

The examples given throughout of adolescent behaviour are inevitably culture related. For many girls and young women around the world self expression would be impossible. Inness (1998) explores how the realities of girls' experience drastically differs between countries and cultures. She describes the bleakness experienced by many in their current day to day living and in terms of their future prospects. A stark

example is the number of girl prostitutes in Thailand, Brazil, and the Philippines (Kurz and Prather 1995). It is too easy to see these countries as unrelated to the UK, but of course many of their 'customers' are visiting businessmen. And we need only to look at the numbers of young women homeless on our streets to realise that within the UK culture exist many sub-cultures. There is not one adolescent experience. Being female and adolescent has entirely different meanings in say the UK from Japan, and within different sub-cultures in the UK. Inness points out how in many cultures girls are still 'ghostless voices'. The expression of 'withering glances and contemptuous words' referred to above is an unknown luxury to many girls: some cultures do not allow any expression of their views; they are forced into silent compliance – as indeed can be girls in the UK who are victims of violence within the family. So while 'girl power' has become a popular term and ideology in this country in many others it could not exist. It would have no place and no fit with the emotional or political vocabulary.

It is also important to explode the myth that exploitation of adolescent girls is a third world phenomena. In recent years in the US a famous and well publicized case (U.S. Department of Labor 1995) was taken to court by Trade Unions against a clothing manufacturers that netted \$9 million annually and was using child labour:

To support their claims they bought in fifteen year old Wendy Diaz who worked in the Honduran sweatshop Global Fashion. Diaz described having

started work in the sweatshop at the age of thirteen. Her days often consisted of working anywhere from thirteen to twenty-four hours to meet deadlines, and she often received only thirty-one American cents per day. She and her three brothers are orphans and she is the family's main source of income. (Ige 1998)

This young woman's experience is a powerful reminder of the diversity of adolescent experience. Her world bears little relationship to that of the majority of those in the UK, who have the space and permission to be involved primarily and egocentrically with the task of growing up. For children and young women like Wendy Diaz adulthood is thrust upon them; the transition between child and adulthood is eroded – it is a luxury that cannot be afforded. The need to survive financially is paramount. Economic necessity fills the transitional space. It is evident that there is no one concept of adolescence; rather it is in part a social, economic and political invention, re-created by every society and age. That is, the period labelled youth is historically and socially variable – youth and adolescence are social constructs. In Victorian times children and adolescents had not been 'invented': although girls in wealthy homes may have been protected, nurtured and cherished, it was an entirely different scenario for those from the working class. Many worked in factories or domestic service from an early age; and although developing legislation relating both to employment and education gave some protection, life was hard, and earning a living essential:

Domestic service also involved long hours and little independence, but in 1905 it was Rose Ashton's only hope of work. Then aged thirteen, she was sent by her parents to the local hiring fair at Ulveston. Rose remembers the local farmers inspecting the girls rather like cattle at a market. If they like what they saw, they made an offer..... For six months she was virtually a slave in her employer's house, working even on Christmas Day. (Holdsworth 1988:63)

A far cry perhaps from the experience of a thirteen year old living in the UK today, although horribly reminiscent of the story of Wendy Diaz ninety years on..

### **An overview of developmental theory**

As noted, it is crucial to recognise that adolescence is not clear cut, either in terms of its time span, or its content and meaning. It is influenced by many factors, notably cultural, social and historical. However, the focus of this chapter is primarily to examine the current world of adolescent girls within the UK. To put this in context what follows is a brief overview of aspects of developmental theory that has influenced thinking and practice, focussing on how it pertains specifically to the development of girls.

Much has been written about adolescence from both sociological and psychological perspectives - as a term it was first used by Stanley Hall (1904). Around the same time that Hall was writing, Freud was recognising childhood as a distinct psychological and developmental state worthy of study and inextricably linked to, and exerting a powerful influence on, adult life (1905). Freud describes adolescence as a time when young people begin to separate from parents and begin the process of seeking sexual partnership. He argues that girls are less able to separate, remaining in 'childish love far beyond puberty' (1905: 150) and later argues that puberty brings a new awareness of 'the wound to her narcissism, resulting in a scar, a sense of inferiority' (1925:253) He did acknowledge the influence of the sexual double standard that existed: simply put, young men were free to enjoy their sexuality and sexual relationships, young women were not. He himself recognised that his understanding of girls and women had its limitations (1923: 309). This however does have the flavour of hedging his bets: he writes at length and authoritatively on female developmental and his views were and are extremely influential. He was at times extremely derogatory towards women; 'it seems that women have made few contributions to the discoveries and inventions in the history of civilization' (1933:166). When Karen Horney questioned the phallogentricity of Freud's theories, arguing that his theories were value laden and representing the interests of men, his response was similarly dismissive and belittling: 'We shall not be so very greatly surprised if a woman analyst who has not been sufficiently convinced of the intensity of her own desire for a penis also fails to assign an adequate importance to that factor



in patients' (Quoted in Kelman 1967:26). Statements such as these render questionable Freud's apparent uncertainty and modesty regarding female development. Horney's considered and careful challenges met with attack from Freud; he appeared personally affronted and Horney's career certainly suffered as a result of her continued challenges to his theories. It is interesting to note that the ideas being developed by Horney during the 1920's and 1930's were to lie dormant until the advent of feminist psychotherapy in the 1960's.

Since these early formulations female adolescence has created a problem for developmental theorists that reflects the confusions and questions arising from these times. Erikson, influenced by Freud, identified (1965) eight stages of psychosocial development—the 'Eight Ages of Man'. The gender specificity is pertinent although it must also be acknowledged that such specificity was typical and accepted writing practice of the time. However, as with Freud, there is a male bias in his work, and this is highlighted in his work on adolescence. Adolescence is Erikson's fifth stage when identity comes through a growing autonomy. Identity precedes intimacy as the sixth stage. Herein lies the problem in respect of adolescent girls. For women identity and intimacy cannot be so easily separated: they seem to be one and the same thing. Gilligan notes (1982: 10) that Piaget and Lever, also both influential in the field of child development, similarly equate male development with child development overall without any gender differentiation. She (1982) argues that attachment and

connectedness are intrinsic to the development of girls and women. They value these aspects: they are not impediments but central and core to the self.

A study of college students in the US (Hodgson and Fischer 1979) backs up Gilligan's argument. It found that young men focused on intrapersonal aspects of identity whereas young women focused on interpersonal aspects. For young women achieving intimacy was more closely related to their identity than in the young men—further supporting the view that Eriksonian theory is better at explaining male development. Similar results came from a study by Josselson (1973) who also noted that identity in young women differed from male identity and was marked by the greater emphasis on the importance of intimacy. To Erikson separation is both the model and the measure for growth and although he acknowledges that intimacy has a special significance to women this acknowledgement does not translate into a place in his developmental chart. By this measure girls then are almost by definition unable to fully grow up, reminiscent of Freud's words. This is also reflected in the Broverman study (1970) which found that mental health practitioners were less likely to attribute traits characterising healthy adults to women than to men. In other words, what is seen as normal for a woman does not match up with what is seen as normal for an adult. Gilligan comments that:

Implicitly adopting the male life as the norm, they have tried to fashion women out of a masculine cloth. It all goes back of course to Adam and Eve – a story

which shows, among other things, that if you make a woman out of a man, you are bound to get into trouble. In the life cycle, as in the Garden of Eden, the woman has been the deviant'. (1982:6)

Chodorow has also explored the masculine bias of psychoanalytic thinking and in tune with Gilligan argues that girls experience themselves as being essentially connected with others. Therefore the development of their identity does not rest on separation and individuation as it does for boys:

Feminine personality comes to define itself in relation to connection to other people more than masculine personality does... Moreover issues of dependency are handled and experienced differently by men and women. For boys and men, both individuation and dependency issues become tied up with the sense of masculinity, or masculine identity. For girls and women, by contrast, issues of femininity or feminine identity, are not problematic in the same way. (1989:47)

To summarise, the theories of Freud and Erikson argue that it is the successful completion of specific developmental tasks that differentiate the adult from the child and adolescent, and marks a mature person. The work of Gilligan, Chodorow and others into the development of girls and young women indicate that by taking these tasks as indicators then by definition girls and women are not going to achieve that

status. Their work shows that the male experience has been generalised to women and that this was biased, inaccurate and failed to capture the essence of female experience. The importance of their work in offering another perspective that is relevant to understanding girls in their transition to womanhood should not be underestimated.

### **The experience of adolescent girls**

For over a century adolescence has been identified as a time of heightened psychological risk for girls: from Freud and Breuer (1895) suggesting that girls lose their vitality, to Seligman (1991) who felt that they lose their capacity to resist depression, and to Herman (1981) who notes the increased risk of being abused sexually. Certainly the last century has seen enormous changes from a world where the establishment of adult identities was relatively straightforward; where the occupational world was more stable and social norms well established and gender definitions very clear. Routes available to girls were clearly defined, albeit restrictive, and frames of reference well established and stable.:

At the beginning of the (twentieth) century, only 29% of the work force were women and only 10% of married women worked. Men lost face if they could not support their wives. Middle-class women did not work and respectable

working –class women tried hard to do the same. Their unmarried daughters expected to stay at home, kept by father, until their wedding day. (Holdsworth 1988:62)

Nowadays, the range of social and cultural influences are complex, and possibilities previously denied are available to girls and young women. Cote and Allahar (1996) suggest that this range of influence and opportunity create a particular vulnerability to adult profiteers. This vulnerability is also a consequence of the dramatic changes in girls bodies that occur during early adolescence. This disconnects them from their childhood world before they are able to join an adult world and the transition between the two is not comfortable. This is neatly summed up by one thirteen year old who, as she swung around to show off a new outfit, managed to leave a trail of debris behind her as she swept objects off a shelf. Looking quite astonished and perplexed she commented that ‘the problem is I don’t know where I am any more – I don’t know where I start or where I end’. At one level she was referring to having grown five inches in a year but taken as a metaphor this captures the bodily and psychological disconnection, and the complexity of relating, both to their own self, and between self and others. As Brown and Gilligan point out- this is a difficult process:

Here at this watershed in girls’ development...each will struggle with a central relational quandary: how to stay with herself and be with others, how to keep

her voice in connection with her inner psychic world of thoughts and feelings and also to bring her voice into her relationships with other people. (1992:184)

This all has profound consequences: there is a paradox that as girls find it more difficult to know and communicate what they feel, where they are, who they are and what they think they become more dependent on others to place their identity for them. On the one hand they want to become and develop their individual selves, on the other they look for a world that offers clarity and purpose. This makes them particularly vulnerable to a mass media culture that makes millions out of selling the necessity of a particular image.

The menarche and becoming accustomed to on-going menstruation is a key aspect of adolescence. Land (1997) notes that responses to the menarche vary between cultures and within cultures between families. Some cultures celebrate and have rituals to mark this beginning of womanhood. Working with women in this country it is evident that in the past many girls were not told about the onset of periods, or if they were only in terms that left them confused or mystified. One woman recalls this being the subject of a biology lesson. 'We had to write notes that the teacher dictated and then we copied diagrams from the board. To this day they don't bear any relationship to any part of any anatomy –either male or female – that I've ever seen. The teacher was much happier when she got onto the reproduction of frogs. And my mother never told me anything'. Nowadays generally more openness prevails but the onset of

menstruation can still be a shock and not necessarily understood even when full explanations are given . One mother of a thirteen year old described how she had always been open with her daughter . She had explained everything clearly and answered all her daughter's questions. Yet one day her daughter came home from school and burst into tears saying 'you never told me periods go on for ever. I don't want them all the time'. This mother had explained (and to an adolescent the menopause must indeed seem like another planet) but clear information does not overcome ambivalence, fears and anxieties.

Another girl the same age, who had been talked through all the various aspects of the menarche, cried bitterly when her periods started and when soothed by her mother that it was just another step in growing up, responded that she didn't want to grow up yet – she wanted to be a child still. These thirteen year olds all had good relationships with their mothers. They also all had the ability to express the confusions they felt and trust that they would be heard and responded to. However they also give a clue to some of the difficulties that can arise in adolescence for girls when they are not well supported and contained, or when earlier difficulties come to the fore. Some girls are excited by the onset of periods – one eighteen year old, the youngest of four girls, described that when her periods started at fourteen she felt that at last she would again be part of her older sister's world. However others, as the girl quoted above, can experience the onset of menstruation as the loss of childhood and need to grieve this. This theme of loss and mourning is discussed by Anna Freud (1958) who notes

that it is difficult to analyse adolescents because they are mourning and there is not yet sufficient distance to enable them to view this process and its effects.

Dealing with loss can also be a difficulty for mothers – the young woman who was the youngest of four recalled that this was so for her mother: ‘I was so excited and she hugged me and then cried that now she didn’t have a baby any more. It didn’t worry me, I just said, ‘don’t be daft mum, I haven’t been a baby for years.’ Now (at 18) I think I could have been a bit nicer to her’. However the individual experiences the menarche, and this is very various, it is undoubtedly always significant; it is the start of being a woman whether or not ready for it and ‘even nowadays, for most girls menarche puts an end to dreams of adventure at sea or as an explorer, of a career as a racing driver or an oil-rig fire-fighter.’ (Land 1977: 61)

Concerns with her body extend beyond the changes brought about by the menarche. Typically girls are characterised by preoccupation with appearance, weight and image, and the spontaneity that can characterise childhood tends to go underground: ‘they lose their resiliency and optimism and become less curious and inclined to take risks...they become more deferential, self critical and depressed. They report great unhappiness with their own bodies’ (Pipher 1995:19 )While most young women do not suffer from eating disorders (although a proportion do and this will be discussed later) many young women are anxious to control their weight and this is central to their image and identity: ‘normative discontent with weight is now part of the day to



day psychological life of most young women, accompanied, at least temporarily, by some alteration in their behaviour' (Fombonne 1995:647). There are many explanations for this concern over weight and appearance: preoccupation with self can be seen as a normal part of adolescence and because bodily changes are so rapid it is not surprising if the body becomes a focus for this preoccupation. It can be a defence against the muddles and uncertainties of the inner world, combined with a desire to control identity at a stage in life where full autonomy is denied. In other circumstances it can be a denial of femininity particularly when a girl has experienced sexual abuse. Neither should the power and influence of advertising and the media be dismissed in its portrayal of ideal women as thin – many models are in fact pre-pubescent girls made up to look older.

Adolescent girls spend much time with their friends. They are often to be found deep in intense conversations on the phone, or huddled together talking in their bedrooms with the door firmly shut, conversations which cease when parents appear, with the very strong message that it is none of their business. This has both a containing and a comforting function: girls are remarkably good at mothering one another. Many parents comment on how their own words of wisdom, apparently rejected by their daughters, will be repeated by the daughter to a distressed friend in a most comforting and containing way. Parents learn not to comment on this for to suggest that she has in fact taken notice of the parent is not popular, especially with younger adolescents. However May (1994) comments on this tendency still being present in older

adolescents. He notes that students are still in the throes of separating from their parents and can be critical or dismissive towards them and 'are likely to become quite alarmed by any emotional experience of still being tied to parents or, horror of horrors, coming to realize one's similarities to a despised parent'. (14)

Adolescents tend to learn by doing and the defences of splitting and projection are strongly in evidence. They can take up extreme positions on many things, and their feelings too can be extreme. 'Identification with the mother, angry repudiation of her concern, strong feelings of love and hate towards the father, swings of wild emotion, are perfectly normal and strain relations in the most temperate of families'. (Land 1997: 65) The depressive position is once again being negotiated and good and bad views of their parents, their selves, their teachers, their peers can alternate rapidly. Certainly girls in their struggle to be their selves, to find their own way, to stay connected whilst finding their own distinct identity, do commonly become dismissive of parental involvement whilst also desperately needing it. Rather like a toddler they need space to explore but then, though with more ambivalence than their younger self, return for parental support. Also like the toddler the space they explore needs to be contained safely. It is vital that containment and boundaries are in place. These will be challenged but she needs to know they will not collapse and neither will her parents. Winnicott suggests that 'if the child is to become an adult, then this move is achieved over the dead body of an adult' (1971:145). This is meant

metaphorically and Winnicott adds that the parent must survive. Indeed adolescent girls with seriously ill parents where death is a possibility or a reality suffer greatly.

When boundaries are not held safely the adolescent girl can find herself floundering or worse. A fifteen year old girl was raped following an argument she 'won' about staying out at an all night party. At eighteen she could see how she had really needed her parents to have stayed firm and not allowed her to go. The party was a distance from home; she was the youngest there; having arrived she wanted to go home but had no way of extricating herself. She was raped by an older man who offered to drive her home when she became distressed. Her mother was so upset by the rape that in the girls eyes she became seriously depressed as a direct result and was hospitalised for a time. Her fears of her own potency in terms of her apparent uncontainability by her parents, her mother's breakdown, reinforced by what the rapist said to her was enormous. Her anger was also so fearful to her that it became deeply internalised and then expressed against herself - at eighteen she regularly self harmed by cutting. For this young woman her parents did not contain her aggression, her challenges, or her need for firm containment and clear boundaries, and a tragic situation with very long lasting consequences were the result.

Growing up female includes sorting out and facing delicate sexual dilemmas. 'Claiming her sexuality and her status as a sexual women is a vital task for the adolescent girl but a very complex one.' (Land 1997). Settlege and Galenson (1976)

discuss the impact of earlier sexual intimacy for girls, suggesting that this gives less space and time for resolution of other conflicts and issues. In addition adolescent girls have to balance the desire to be attractive and feminine without making themselves sexually vulnerable. Rape and sexual assaults are awful realities for far more girls and young women than is generally recognised. In my clinical experience few report these crimes feeling they will simply suffer all over again. Coward (1992) points out that rape victims: 'often feel not only invaded, degraded and made dirty, but also intensely self doubting, questioning how far their own behaviour could have contributed to what happened. It is a feeling which has been compounded by the convention of defence lawyers trying to pin the blame on women and accusing them of ambiguous sexual messages'. (174) The problem is wider than this; Coward quotes a teacher (167) who felt that on average 7 out of 10 girls she had taught had been frightened and upset by sexual incidents. Larkin (1997) supports this finding in another context: 'I have found that street harassment is such an inevitable part of girls' passage into womanhood that many young women are emotionally worn down long before they enter the workplace or academia'(116 ). Lees (1986) focuses on how definitions of sexuality contribute to continuing inequalities. She discovered that sexual double standards still exist whereby sexual experimentation by boys is regarded positively and that by girls negatively. She notes that a body of language supports this difference with negative vocabulary being attached to girls who experiment sexually - for example, the highly derogatory term 'slag'.

Of course young women now take up more public space than in prior generations; they are both more visible than previously, and are more likely to walk and to use public transport than older women . Young black women receive a particular form of harassment based on sexual stereotyping and encounter comments such as ‘I hear black girls are easy’(Larkin:120). Budgeon (1998) in her study takes up the issue of race and racism as perceived and experienced by young black women and concludes that:

One might expect ethnic identity to be experienced as a limiting factor via the experience of racism but the women in this study did not speak of their ethnicity in this way. When ethnicity was construed as a limiting factor, it was expressed as a restriction originating from within a racist dominant culture, because these women drew upon their experiences of being treated differently compared to the treatment men received within their ethnic community. (133)

This does not mean they did not suffer racism elsewhere but that this was not their perception. But their experience of their gender combined with their ethnicity was experienced as imposing limitations. This is validated by my own experience of counselling young Asian women. Budgeon argues that the issues they presented that related to ethnicity are most commonly related to feeling that their choices of career, partner, where they choose to live, who they live with, leisure activities, clothes and image are severely restricted and cause great unhappiness and conflict. It may of

course be that these young women have become so used to their treatment in the wider culture that they fail to identify racism or see it as unusual or concerning. In the same way girls do not always identify certain forms of male behaviour as harassing. This may be a defence against their potential distress or powerlessness but it is noticeable. For example, a group of young male football supporters were swaggering down the street, shouting at passing girls 'get your tits out, lets see them then', and occasionally lunging at any young woman who failed to get out of the way quickly enough. Some girls looked embarrassed or scared but most just seemed to shrug it off as typical lads behaviour. And yet it raises the question of the effects on these girls of 'typical laddish behaviour' in terms of their perceptions about self, sexuality and safety.

Potentially gender raises other areas of difficulty and conflict. Schaffer (1998) identifies four ways that girls responses to difficulties become identified and responded to from a perspective of gender bias. Firstly, girls can be punished and rejected if they use bad language; act out sexually or are angry or confrontational. Secondly girls may develop relationships with older men. Schaffer sees this as a response to living in families where the members are emotionally and sometimes economically exhausted. In this context girls may find a sexual solution in an attempt to meet their needs. Thirdly, lesbian girls can experience marginalisation and rejection, and fourthly the sexual abuse of girls takes its toll in many ways often

unrecognised, and therefore interpreted incorrectly, including labelling a girl as difficult, manipulative or attention seeking.

### **Being ‘out of step’: marginalized girls**

It has already been noted that the desire to belong; to be identified with, and attached to, a peer group; to be both be the same as others whilst somehow establishing an individual identity, are all characteristic of adolescence and the adolescent struggle. However this raises the question of the experience of girls whose struggle for identity extends beyond these parameters.

Although they are not alone in this, lesbian girls, as noted above, are one group who can experience marginalisation. Sexuality and sexual identity are complex areas of identity to negotiate for heterosexual girls and for lesbians the homophobia of society can cause enormous unhappiness, alienation, and can lead to bullying and victimisation (Schur :1984). ‘Coming out’ as a lesbian is difficult for many who fear both parental and a wider rejection. One seventeen year old who sought counselling was terrified that her parents would throw her out if she told them that she was lesbian. Another, brought up in an apparently liberal home where there was staunch support, theoretically, for the right to choose and own one’s sexual identity, felt betrayed by her parents reaction to her lesbianism. They were initially shocked and distressed, moving into denial and a re-framing of her sexuality into a ‘normal phase of experimenting that she would grow out of’. A student who was actively involved

in gay politics found her room in her student hall of residence daubed with anti-gay graffiti by male students who also urinated over her window. The warden of this hall responded that it was just lads being lads, adding that she invited this response by her involvement in gay rights campaigns. He suggested that she 'lay low' and kept her opinions to herself. Unlike, of course, the young men who were apparently given free reign to express theirs in this most obnoxious and unacceptable fashion. Another young woman of twenty two referred herself to counselling with panic attacks. The source of these was her extreme anxiety that her parents would discover that she was living in a lesbian relationship. Consequently, the subterfuges undertaken were enormous. Their flat was arranged so that in the event of parental visits it would appear that they were two friends sharing, and visits to her parents were inevitably based on deceit. Her partner became increasingly resistant to these tactics, and offended by them, and the relationship began to suffer. These examples give some indication of the agonies, conflict and isolation experienced by many lesbian girls. To own their identity they face actual and potential losses and victimization that are considerable and often deeply distressing.

Girls are marginalized for other reasons too. Some just do not fit the prevailing image of how girls in this day and age should look and act. They may be overweight; dress unacceptably; be of a different class or with a different accent from the predominant one; have different interests from the mainstream, or their life at home may make them estranged both from their self and from others. The latter particularly applies to



the consequences of sexual abuse and this will be explored later. A counsellor described her work with an eighteen year old student who presented as not settling and not fitting in. The counsellor described how as soon as she saw her she understood why this was. She described her as wearing her hair in a long plait; wearing ankle socks; a hand knitted jumper; no make-up, and also described how this girl told her she thought it was wrong to drink; that she had only come to University to work and that she thought the other students were 'decadent'. At the same time she was miserable and unhappy, and was very hurt that her attempts to make friends with the girl next door had been rebuffed. Her neighbour had clearly not wanted to be friends and had rushed off at the first opportunity to find others who, presumably, matched the prevailing style. In addition, she was expected to ring home every night and return to her parents at weekends. In contrast to the freedom loving, fashion conscious, pub visiting students who surrounded her she stood out as different and they avoided her, generally not unkindly but occasionally so, especially when she expressed her disapproval of drink and sex.

For other girls their marginalisation comes from different sources. Girls who are the primary carers in families, because of the disability or illness of their mother are another group. Their central concern from an early age is the welfare of others and the process of separation from mother and the development of a distinct identity becomes highly problematic. An eighteen year old described how from the age of eleven she looked after her mother disabled with multiple sclerosis. Her father had

left and their were two younger siblings. She would rush home from school to care for her and although her younger siblings, thanks to her, had a childhood and adolescence, hers was curtailed at age eleven. At eighteen she described how she felt both very old and very young, and how she felt on a different planet to her peer group. Her anxieties about the future were vast: her mother's condition had deteriorated and the prognosis was poor. Similarly, for those girls who themselves are stricken with illness or disability, the usual developmental pathways are unavoidably altered, and are strewn with obstacles not present for other young people.

### **The changing world: the impact on the position of girls and young women**

Historically young woman have underachieved in the UK. Indeed in the 1970's and 80's concern was rife about underachieving of girls after primary school age. In school they always achieved higher standards than boys at primary level but fell behind at secondary school. However this has turned around dramatically in recent years: they now consistently do better than boys at secondary level; are more likely to enter higher education and are moving into traditionally male subjects at an impressive pace never seen before. (Roberts 1995) Throughout the 1970's and 80's female participation in higher education increased rapidly. By 1992 47% of full time undergraduates were female and more women than men are currently in medical schools training to be doctors. However impressive these figures, and they are indeed

deeply encouraging in terms of access to education for young women, inequalities do still exist. In 1993 a quarter of working class men and a third of working class women had no educational qualifications. Among the Pakistani and Bangladesh communities over half of men and three fifths of women lacked qualifications. (HMSO 1994).) However in the Afro Caribbean population girls also out perform boys (Cross, Wrench, and Barnett, 1990) . Although in educational terms girls are now doing well inequalities do not stop there. At age 18-19 women earn less than men and wage inequalities increase with age (Lee, Marsden, Rickman, and Duncombe, 1990). But women graduates have better chances of finding employment quicker than their male counterparts. Unemployment is higher amongst young men than young women and young men are likely to be unemployed for longer periods of time (*Sunday Times* 1995)

Life for young people has changed dramatically in the last two decades of the twentieth century (Furlong and Cartmel 1999) profoundly affecting the lives of young women and young men. Changes in the labour market, social policy and further educational funding has meant that many young people remain dependent on their families for much longer. In 1987 students were prevented from claiming supplementary benefit in short vacations; in 1990 they lost entitlement to housing benefit and in 1991 they lost the right to claim income support during long vacations. Grants to students are now severely restricted having been replaced by a system of loans that makes working life begin with debt. (Roberts 1995) However

although they share the same social context girls tend to leave home earlier than boys: more move away to study and they enter partnerships earlier. They are also treated differently; they are likely to be subject to greater scrutiny in terms of their movements and they are expected to help more in the house (White 1994). This may be a factor in encouraging them towards greater independence younger. It may also be that because more has been expected of them they have greater skills for autonomous living.

Certainly the journey into adulthood has taken on new routes which are less predictable than those taken by previous generations accompanied by more unpredictable outcomes. Giddens (1991) suggests that young women today experience a situation of both greater opportunity, accompanied by greater risk and uncertainty. A somewhat mixed picture begins to emerge. Sue Sharpe has undertaken two studies of girls and young women – the first in the 1970's and the second in the 1990's. In her second study in the 90's she concluded that the attitudes and perceptions of girls had changed in many ways. They expected and wanted more equality with men; valued education more, wanted to stay in it longer, and placed a greater value on independence and self sufficiency. However Sharpe argues that there is a mismatch between reality and expectations; that the constraints she had identified twenty years earlier had not changed as much as these young women felt. What is very evident from her second study is that twenty years has seen a major

shift in how young women feel about themselves and their world. The world may not always match this but expectations are certainly higher.

McRobbie (1991) also explores changes in how girls identify themselves as feminine. She examined and analysed the content of magazines aimed at teenage girls and shows how the prevailing image has shifted from one of girls as focusing on romance and dependence on a male, towards one of independence and self satisfaction. She argues that a greater range of personal identity is now available. Budgeon (1998) argues similarly:

Young women are not cultural dupes. With the advent of girl power in Britain, it would seem that the current moment is ripe for conditions of self determination. If identity is contingent upon the discursive positions made available to the individual, the emergence of new subject positions, consolidated in the assertive and self-determined subject of girl power, may well bring the potential for young women to exercise choice and define themselves in new and positive ways...The range of subject positions available to young women has widened considerably since the mid 1970's and the path young women will take in the transition to adulthood cannot be assumed to be a homogenous route. (121)

In Budgeon's study of young women a central theme was their recognition of themselves as able to make their own individual decisions and choices from a range of available options. They recognised that both traditional and modern versions of womanhood were available to them. Some young women did eventually want marriage and children, but not in the traditional sense of being a stay at home partner and mother. Rather they recognised that they would need to negotiate the tension between motherhood and careers. They felt they had more choice than their mothers and were aware of their increased opportunities. Their focus was on equality in relationships and parenthood. She concludes that:

...these young women have been able to actively seek out and create a space in which they are able to construct a 'self' that does not simply reproduce traditional femininity. Therefore, the ways in which structures were said to limit and determine the lives of young women in the 1970's and 1980's no longer appear to be straightforward. (135)

The work of McRobbie, Sharpe and Budgeon all point to girls nowadays having a central concern with sexual equality; valuing individualism; having the right to feel good about oneself, and wanting independence even if they are in relationships. However contradictions and resistance exists: the double sexual standard that still exists and is explored by Lees is one good example. The relationship between sex and power remains complex and was recognised as such by these girls. The formation of

their self identity is therefore not simple even in the context of greater choices unheard of for earlier generations of women. The question that is posed by Sharpe about the mismatch between actual possibilities and false perceptions of these is central. The wage differentials that still exist is just one very crucial example of where the reality is harsher for young women than young men.

### **Particular issues for girls and young women**

A number of issues could be considered in relation to girls and young women. Although in childhood girls are healthier than boys, in adolescence this reverses and they are more likely to suffer from illness and psychological disturbances (Sweeting 1995). Levels of depression and stress related illnesses seem to have increased as have depression, eating disorders, and suicidal behaviour. Girls are more likely to consider suicide although they are less successful in carrying this out than boys partly because of the gender differential in methods chosen (Smith and Rutter 1995). As practitioners know adolescence is a risky time. Dependence on alcohol and heavy drinking is not the norm for girls and young women although most do drink. This is likely to reflect a changing culture. They feel comfortable in pubs; it is a social venue they feel they have a right to, unlike previous generations of women. For most drinking is associated with socialising and sociability and is a problem for a minority only. However drinking alcohol starts young for many girls (Fosse., Loretto,

and Plant, 1996). Similarly, drug use is increasingly a normal part of adolescent experience and drug experimentation is on the increase (Measham, Newcombe, and Parker, 1994). Sexual abuse and eating disorders affect the lives of many young women in especially powerful ways these are explored in more detail below.

### *Sexual abuse*

Although boys as well as girls suffer sexual abuse it still appears that more girls are at risk than boys and that their abusers are more likely to be men. One pattern is survivors who have been sexually abused by the father or other close male relative, and physically abused or neglected by the mother. Some have been abused in many ways by many people. Commonly abusers are family members or someone known and trusted by the child and the family: for instance, abuse occurs in children's homes, schools, churches, nurseries, hospitals and with child minders. Abusers and their victims come from all walks and classes of life. Abuse is frequently meticulously planned, especially where this is part of an organized ring.

Girls and young women who have been abused carry with them the legacy of a spoilt childhood in which their belief in the trustworthiness of others has been demolished. For some abuse has started young and carries on into their teenage years and sometimes well beyond. Others are groomed for abuse from very young by the abuser who waits until they reach puberty to begin abusing them. The age 10-12 is



a very risky time for children in terms of the likelihood of sexual abuse. (Finkelhor 1986). Eating disorders in girls and young women have been linked to childhood abuse (Oppenheimer et al 1985), although research varies in estimating the degree of significance. The effects of abuse on the young woman are extensive: sexual and relationship difficulties; extreme feelings of low self-esteem; lack of self confidence; a sense of shame and badness; self-loathing, and a deep sense of lack of trust –all are symptomatic of the effects of abuse in childhood. For some young women their childhood is a blank, as if it had not existed. They have little recall - only a sense of depression, anxiety and loss that cannot be attached to specific events.

It has already been noted that adolescence for girls is a fluid and normally volatile process. Sexuality is explored; boundaries are challenged; conflict is normal; relationships with peers are crucial and there is an enormous need for adults to provide a safe and containing environment. Girls have to learn to safely accommodate within themselves strong and often contradictory feelings and to know that those around can contain theirs and hers. For the transition to be made successfully from childhood to adulthood young women need sufficient ego strength, good internalised boundaries, sufficient maturity in their adult carers, privacy that is respected, parents who will allow and recognise the need to separate and challenge, and sufficient hope and trust in the world. For the sexually abused girl, especially where the abuser is a close family relative the converse of this situation exists. Sexual abuse kills off trust and damages hope (Walker 1992). It turns the

world into a dangerous place and attacks the ability to allow safe dependency. This renders real independence extremely difficult although a false self (Winnicott 1965) may emerge. Her experience of difficult feelings is that they are not safely contained; the abuser has in the most extreme way been unable to do just that. Her boundaries of her self and her body have been continually attacked by the abuse and her privacy disregarded in the most appalling way. She has been forced to keep secrets, and this will often have been accompanied by the perpetrator threatening those close to her, and by blaming her for the abuse. In addition, abused children are often isolated, depressed, are re-victimized and experience themselves as essentially different. Abuse damages self esteem and often schooling and peer relationships are limited (Walker 1992).

The developmental damage of abuse is huge and is seen particularly vividly at adolescence. Self harm (Cairns 1988;) is a common manifestation: it frequently involves cutting the body and it can be a comfort; a self punishment, a communication of pain and hurt; a way of speaking the pain when words cannot be said or do not suffice; a dissociative technique; an expression of self loathing; an attempt to avoid further abuse, or an expression of loathing or ambivalence towards the abuser. This list is not complete – self harm is complex and many faceted. Abuse also effects the ability to form close relationships; this may be simply impossible or it can lead to attempts to create very close relationships inappropriately, including sexually. Other effects are poor performance at school and being absent from

school; drug and alcohol misuse; running away from home, depression and anxiety. For many abused girls there is no safe place to turn and no-one to trust. After all, if the abuser is someone deemed by society to be trustworthy, as is usually the case, then who does this leave to trust.

Separating and leaving home can be a nightmare. One described it as follows:

After I'd left home (at seventeen) it was really hard. There was no respite if you needed a break: nowhere to run back to ; no retreat. It was like camping in an open plain without even a cave to go back to. And it's canvas, so you've got nothing firm . And I was still; suffering under the delusion that it was all my fault. I carried that one for ages and ages : like, 'What do you expect? It's you.' And the sense of difference that I had all through my childhood, that just carried on and coloured lots of other things all the way through. (Walker 1992:66)

One of the tragic consequences for young women when they try to leave the abusive environment is this experience described above. They often hope that physically leaving will mean the abuse ends but even if it does literally stop they discover that consequences remain and that they are ill prepared for the difficulties of the adult world. And many young women cannot even leave the abusive home: they have no money; no job; no place to live; no sense of self and self value – in other words they

lack both the internal and external resources that they need for the next step to independence.

An eighteen year old, physically abused by her mother throughout childhood and sexually abused by her father from the age of eleven, managed somehow to succeed academically and move away to University. She was confident that now all would be well. It was not. She could not cope with such a free environment, her boundaries had been so invaded that she could not put these in place for herself; she began to suffer flashbacks of the abuse so could not study; and her relationships with her peers were extremely difficult. She formed extreme and intense attachments very rapidly and could not understand why her new 'friends' then abandoned her. She had many sexual encounters, including some which put her at considerable risk, and became very depressed as she began to recognise the full impact of her childhood abuse. She became suicidal before vacations when she had to return to the abusive home. She also began to clearly recognise what she had missed and what damage had been done. Her father had kept her away from other families but now she saw parents visiting their children, and she had a glimpse of a different world. She described her extreme pain and distress when friends were visited and brought cakes and food parcels; were taken out for meals and generally cherished.

I have noted earlier how adolescents need to mourn their childhood as they become adult, but in the event of abuse this process is distorted and sometimes dangerous.

For the adolescent girl who has been abused the process of growing up is indeed a treacherous journey.

### *Eating Disorders*

Anorexia nearly always has its onset during adolescence and as such is an important and concerning developmental issue. It mainly affects those from the white middle classes. It peaks at ages 14 and 18 whilst bulimia is more likely to start at age 19 or 20. Although more boys are now developing eating disorders the proportion of boys to girls who develop these difficulties is about one to ten (Smith and Rutter 1995). However it is now increasing more rapidly amongst working class girls than middle class girls, and it has been argued that slimness becomes taken on as the ideal once a social class had literally acquired the financial means to indulge its appetite (Mennell, Murcott, and Van Otterloo, 1992). Bruch. (1973) points out that eating difficulties frequently appear when adolescent assertion of independence and rebelliousness could be expected suggesting that not eating is another way of expressing control over self and to some extent those around her. As stated above there is a link between abuse in childhood and the later development of eating disorders. This does not mean that all those with eating disorders have been abused but studies indicate that this is the case for about forty per cent of cases. It is a significant factor.

Unravelling the causes of eating disorders is controversial and complex. One set of theories views them as a reflection of disturbed and disturbing family dynamics. Food becomes a means of expressing emotions, of conveying messages and making statements. In this way the anorexic becomes the spokesperson, through their actions, for what cannot be said or acknowledged directly or in any other way. It may be easier for the family to focus on the individual's difficulty with food than to look at what is occurring elsewhere. Secrets are common in these families - as I have noted above, sexual abuse can be one such secret. Commonly families of an anorexic or bulimic tend to contain a confusing mixture of passivity, control, distance and apparent closeness, that is invasive rather than supportive. There is often a pattern of a passive, powerless mother and a distant but powerful father. Issues of power and control are very intensely present without being thought through, talked over or fought over. There is little ability to acknowledge or resolve conflict and the anorexic is rendered powerless and out of control. She can, however, control eating or not eating, and so gain some of the power that is denied her elsewhere.

However family dynamics alone cannot explain the preponderance of girls and women with these disorders. It is here that understanding the social and political context is vital. Feminist clinicians and writers (Macleod: 1981; Orbach:1987) understand eating disorders as a way of protesting in a world in which it remains difficult for a woman to have a place in her own right. Women are seen as being

caught in a myriad of conflicting expectations and demands, with little room for manoeuvre or legitimate protest. As discussed previously there is a pressure to be attractive and sexually desirable, which is nowadays equated with being thin. Food is no longer functional. It is highly symbolic and as such is the focus for the conflict, confusion and unhappiness experienced by many young women who struggle to find a place in the world, within themselves and in a relationship.

Anorexia can also be understood as a rejection of adult female sexuality. This understanding links with both the family and societal aspects discussed above. If a girl comes from a family where she is not validated and valued, in a society in which she struggles for a place, the adult world may not seem too attractive. Childhood may seem the lesser of the two evils. The very thin body of an anorexic does appear asexual and pre-pubertal, and menstruation is likely to cease. This desire to feel and appear non-sexual can be seen as an extreme rejection of, and rebellion against, the stereotypical portrayal of a woman. In other instances it can ensure that the girl or adolescent is not able to leave home. This may reflect an anxiety to watch over and protect a parent. For example, an anorexic girl was the youngest in a family where her father was very violent to her mother. Her anorexia meant she could not leave home as her older siblings had done. If she left, no-one would be left to care for mother, and she feared for her life. Developing anorexia was an unconscious move on her part to exert some control over her own destiny, to protest - albeit silently - and to ensure she stayed with her mother.

Another young woman of twenty, Marie, recalls the power of stopping eating when she was fourteen. Hers had been a difficult family to live in. Her older and more volatile sister had always been in very direct conflict with her father. Her father used to hit her sister, on several occasions hurting her quite badly. Marie had grown up in terror of her father; with a deep concern for her sister, with her mother adopting an extremely passive and emotionally absent presence. Marie never dared get angry or be assertive; appeals to her mother were unheard and she missed her sister terribly when she left home. At eighteen. At the age of twenty Marie was becoming able to recognise the complexity of emotions that led her to stop eating when her sister left home. She began to identify that direct expression of any feeling had been impossible for her. Refusing food gave her a sense of power and control in the absence of any real influence over her life and events in the family. It worried both her parents and then this was deeply satisfying to her. She felt rage towards them; was also very distressed at what she had witnessed; was fearful of growing up like her mother and worried that all men would be violent like her father. The adult world did not seem a very attractive place. In addition, her self esteem was low and she found the world of her experimental and rebellious peers terrifying. Not eating seemed, unconsciously at that time, an effective option for resolving these issues. At twenty this unconscious struggle was becoming more consciously accessible to her. But the battle was not easily won. Anorexia had in her words 'become my friend and my supporter'; it had served her well and was not easily abandoned.



Eating disorders arise from intense and complex dynamics, and produce symptoms that are powerful and anxiety provoking. Eating disorders are tenacious and are not easily given up. The responses of the caring professions to eating disorders vary greatly. Very judgmental language is frequently heard: anorexics are called 'difficult', 'manipulative', 'secretive' and 'devious' without apparently any awareness that this behaviour may reflect the circumstances that created the problem. Others try to understand the meaning of anorexia and bulimia, and recognise that tracking down the feelings and experiences that triggered this particular response is a difficult task, but an essential one if this concerning feature of female adolescent development is to be given the serious attention it deserves.

### **Adolescence is not just for adolescents**

Adolescence is a process and not an event and is one that can be re-visited throughout life. We all have the capacity for re-discovering our adolescent selves; sometimes enjoyably (one only has to think about how 'grown-ups' can behave at parties and conferences to be aware of this) and sometimes not so happily. Indeed, adolescents themselves have a particular skill at triggering this aspect of the adult. Many mothers of adolescent girls will recognise the scenario, especially common

when tired after a heavy day at work, when they enter the type of argument with their daughter that their adult side strongly advises against. However another part comes into play more powerfully, to the chagrin of mother, who can feel herself rapidly become more adolescent than her daughter. And anyone who has ever witnessed, or been part of, couples arguing will know that the adult self can be a very thin veneer, as slamming doors and threats to walk out are rapidly invoked by the apparently emotionally sophisticated. So adolescent girls are not the only ones to have fun, take risks, be rebellious, feel misunderstood, be volatile, want to be independent *and* dependent, and not care what others think *and* want to be accepted. These are part of the human experience and of the human condition. These aspects of the self are particularly intense and significant at this exciting and difficult transition of adolescence, especially in these rapidly changing times, but they are universal. Hopefully as a girl grows into a woman these parts become better integrated; the fit becomes more comfortable, and self doubt and questioning settles into a growing confidence and ease with self that allows her to take up her rightful place in the world. The picture, on balance, is one where this is becoming more possible and young women are entering worlds never dreamed of fifty years ago.

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