Defining Adolescence

How do we define ‘adolescence’, or young people in their teens? When the general picture teenagers, they will usually think of rebellious traits, along with the force to create a new trend or unique culture. In Korea, there are even specific terms for the teen’s rebellious traits, such as ‘사춘기’ and so forth. In addition, apart from such social perception towards teenagers, the dictionary defines ‘adolescence’ like the following; ‘The period of time in a person’s life when they are developing into an adult.’ ‘Adolescence’ can also be defined as a biological term as the following; ‘The physical transition marked by the onset of puberty and the termination of physical growth.’ Now we can ask, has teenagers and adolescence always been defined like this? Although we have all experienced adolescence once in our lives, it still remains as a confusing period to define. What if the image and general traits of teenagers differ in the past as we know it nowadays? What if the period of adolescence was not simply an invariable biological period in a human’s life but an invention, or a commitment made by people? We can explore how adolescence is defined in the 21st century and how it will be in the future, by investigating its traces in the history.

‘Younker’, ‘ephebe’, ‘and ‘backfisch.’ It is not strange for the average to not know the meanings of the words above. They are all old terms for adolescents that have fallen out of common usage. Across history, the terms we used to describe young people have changed significantly, driven mostly by transformations in culture, technology, work etc. In the 1500s, most Western adolescents would have been workers, recruited into the world of adult labor since the age of 7. During this time it was hard to find a definition for the period in life between childhood and adulthood, since there were no differences put between the two phases initially. It was not until the 1940s and 1950s when the term ‘teenager’ was first used commonly. Complaints about the difficulty of raising a rebellious teenager started to appear in medium such as newspapers and so forth. However, even though they share the same term, the teenagers of the 20th century differ in several ways compared to the teenagers of the 21st century. For example, a teenager who live in the 20th century was more likely to have tried alcohol, had sex, or acquired their driver’s license than teenagers nowadays. Researchers refer to this change of attributes as ‘life history theory’, explaining how the lifestyle of teenagers had changed from ‘fast life strategy’ to ‘slow life strategy.’ The main factor of this change is assumed to be the shift of how safe the teenager’s environments became. This resulted in the change of the teenager’s behaviors as such to not feel the need to adopt or be able to live on their own as quickly as possible.

Then how are adolescents seen nowadays? Otherwise than what has been previously stated, adolescence can be newly defined to continue even in one’s mid 20s. This is because it has been discovered that although puberty may finish at the end of teens, the maturation of the brain is far from complete. Brain imaging shows that white matter, for instance, continues to increase into the mid 20-s. Consequently, some researchers started to view the mid 20s as an important stage of growth where young people are still learning about intimacy, friendship, family, and social awareness. They assess that therefore young adults in their early 20s deserve more support and protection from the society. Here we can question the contemporary society’s regulations towards the ’teenagers’ in their 20s if we follow this definition. Currently they are allowed to have their own driver’s license, have the right to vote, and drink alcohol etc. Should they be banned of such rights if they are concerned as teenagers? Some may agree, but there are many issues that follow when this happens. Growth that takes place in this new adolescence is deeply related to the new changes of rights that were not allowed in the younger years. Just learning and adopting to the rapid change and extension of the world will cost the new teenagers a lot of energy and growth by itself. Therefore, if we are to define ‘adolescence’ up to mid 20s in the future, I believe we should do so by defining it as a ‘second stage’, where teenagers are almost done with preparing to enter their adulthood. Furthermore, teenagers could also start to be referred to younger children in the future as well, as the technology develops and children even in 4th grade make new slangs and trends on the internet or tiktok, acting like what the majority of teenagers did 10 years ago.

In summary, unlike how we thought of ‘teenagers’ or ‘adolescence’ as an invariable term, it was an invention, commitment made by the people who lived in that era, and has changed throughout the history, influenced by cultural, technological factors and so more. The definition may change further more in the future, due to new factors related in that new era. What we should think about is not only how the term can change, but what we can do or provide in social context for the new teenagers, and how we should treat them. For example, we could consider what we should respect about their stage of growth and what we should protect for them.

<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20220124-why-teens-arent-what-they-used-to-be>