

ADOLESCENCE AND EDUCATION

Cultural aspects of adolescence and its interaction with teachers.

Subject

When working in the field of health our attention is called upon the great number of adolescents that demand intervention with psychosomatic complaints. Not less frequent is the abundance of teaching professionals that demand sick leave due to depression and anxiety disorders. And this raises some questions in the professionals that assist them:

Why do we talk of conflicts in the classrooms? Is education in crisis? Which are the causes of the alarming rate of sick leaves amongst teachers? Are adolescents problematic? As a group do they have an identity and values that are different from those of their teachers? Do both sexes share them?... At present these matters are being evidenced in the media, in the street, in those responsible for education, and in the numerous studies that are published on this subject.

If we approach this reflection from the systemic point of view it is clear that there is not only one cause that produces such effects. The "cause" is multicausal, the effects extend to the global context affecting all the groups that interact with each other, and the health professionals cannot be the only ones involved in studying these matters. In fact they are not.

On the other hand the health professional has a biased perception of the problems because he/she only perceives the dysfunctional relations, the symptoms, the situations of blockage. It is also necessary to study the interaction in contexts of normality. What does not function is better understood if we previously observe and study how "the things that work" function. In this sense anthropological science has methodological tools that are very adequate for the study of phenomena such as those we wish to approach in this research.

Thus, this work intends to be an anthropological, descriptive, and transversal study of the cultural aspects of the identity and values shared by adolescents of both sexes and how they are perceived by teachers.

Justification

The specific demand of help and counsel of teachers in our province is significative: it manifests difficulties in the relation with these groups said to be based on the ignorance and/or the incomprehension of their worries, motivations, and interests.

The great number of adolescents that attend Mental Health Centres, with no diagnosis of psychosis, leads us to think that something is happening in their closest context.

The need declared by the associations of parents of students to "learn how to be parents", because they say they feel powerless in the face of the relation and control problems with their children.

Attention to diversity, which is a new method of work for the teacher, appears as innovative but very complex as he/she not only has to attend to the different personal characteristics of his/her students but also to the different ethnic groups that at present may be together in a same centre.

A survey carried out by the firm DATA amongst 3,853 youths between 15 and 24 years of age from all over the country shows us how Spanish adolescents say that what is most important for them is the family (amongst 10 possibilities), and that those in who they trust the most, after volunteer organisations, are teachers, precisely those who declare that they do not understand adolescents (*Diario El País*, 17-XI -99).

Not less surprising is the fact that 80% of the teachers in public centres point out psychological disorders as their biggest problem (*Diario El País*, 5-XI -00).

The exposed reasons, without being the only ones, justify a research of these characteristics as well as the usefulness of carrying it out with an anthropological vision that has been par excellence the one that has gone deeper in the study of the identity of cultures, their values, and their systems of beliefs and meanings.

3.2.- State of the matter.

Numerous works published on adolescence verify the existing preoccupation about youths. The bibliography research we have carried out shows more than three hundred researches in several countries during the last five years. Some study their language or their discourse, others their habits of alcohol and other drugs consumption. Some have observed their use of free time, school failure, activities in the family, the selfconcept, the selfesteem, the roles according to gender-sex, mental health, identity, values... Most of these studies have been done by sociologists and social psychologists. Those carried out by anthropologists are not so abundant.

However, it would not be fair to ignore for example the work that is being done in the city of Granada on an anthropological study of the "cultural models of gender in the discourse of adolescents in Granada" (1), or the study of gender-identity carried out with Puerto Rican adolescents (2), or that carried out on "the music as a counter-culture in urban adolescence" (3).

Despite this, it is surprising that precisely anthropology, whose methodology is based on participating observation, field work, and other techniques in close contact with the cultural facts, has not researched more a phenomenon that has been studied so much by other professionals whose results are based on the recount of items filled in by individuals they have not personally seen. Without questioning in the least the validity of said studies, it is worth pointing out the convenience of increasing those carried out from the anthropological field.

It seems important to point out another observation of the bibliographical research, and it is the fact of the validity and diversity of aspects studied of adolescence. The need to continue researching the matter could be related to the rapid and constant changes that occur in present day society: fashions, customs, interests, professional profiles, and a long et cetera change constantly in short periods of time... Possibly what was studied three years ago is not interesting "here and now". [...] The history of life is a series of stable states sprinkled at rare intervals with events that occur with great speed and help to establish the next stable stage... the idea that every change has to be smooth, slow, and constant was never read on the rocks (4).

Thus, the state in which the study of adolescence is in the scientific community confirms the need to keep researching. Any contribution capable of favouring a better understanding between people will be beneficial. Much more if the groups are "forced to understand each other", as is the case we are dealing with.

Theoretical framework.

Cognitive and symbolic anthropology comprehends the fundamental concepts included in this work.

Key concepts of cognitive anthropology such as cultural model or shared cognition by the members of a group, or what needs to be known to behave adequately in the belonging/group were introduced by Goodenough in 1957 and recommended by him as object of study to the anthropologists of that time. Those of the United States considerably developed this cognitive anthropology from the sixties onwards, and in the study of the representations that an individual must have to think and act as a member of his/her community or belonging/group are included the concepts of identity and values, that later will be defined as analysis units.

We must also point out Quinn and Holland (1987) and their contributions on the prototypic structures of knowledge that helped considerably the understanding of the world and of behaviour. The work of Strauss (1992) has also meant an important step in the anthropological knowledge of behaviour and cultural models.

[...] At the beginning of the XX century Hall made an important contribution to the study of adolescence. He elaborated the so called recapitulation theory, according to which the genetic structure of the personality carries in itself the history of mankind. This phase would be dominated by the forces of instinct...They would not be forced to behave as adults because they are at an intermediate stage between "savageness" and "civilization"... The work of Hall had an enormous influence while spreading a positive image of adolescence as a stage of social moratorium and crisis, convincing teachers of the need to let "the youths be youths" (5).

However, we cannot speak of adolescence in anthropology without naming Margaret Mead. The American current started by Boas and Benedict had in Mead one of its most known disciples worldwide. Any

university student of the sixties who was “up to date” had read some work of this anthropologist.

Mead started her field work in 1925. Her book on adolescence “Coming of Age in Samoa” (1928) influenced enormously North American teachers of that time. [...] She criticised the ethnocentrism of psychological theory and the universality of adolescence problems. We could even interpret that she refuted the theories of Hall: “adolescence does not represent a period of crisis and tension but on the contrary it is the harmonic development of a group of interests and activities that mature slowly” (Mead, 1985). From Mead’s perspective educational methods, the structure of adult personality, the fundamental orientations of culture form an organised and indissoluble whole whose study invites us to reconsider the place of the natural in the core of each culture. Freeman dismantled her theories (5).

On the other hand the study of symbols, the rituals, the systems of beliefs and meanings would complete the theoretical framework of this study.

Without forgetting Van Gennep as the first anthropologist to study, at the beginning of the century, the rites of passage. Or Yeats, who in 1979 classified them in homeostatic, homeoesic, and morphogenetic. It is the American school who with Turner and Geertz fundamentally contributes new and useful aspects to the study of ritual symbols, which supposes a turning point in the previous historical course.

The fact is that the systemic paradigm that impregnated scientific thought in some disciplines such as physics, thermodynamics, mathematics, or psychiatry also inspired these anthropologists who in the sixties published their field researches where they spoke of the symbol with a purpose more circular than lineal. This type of approach is latent in the contributions of these authors who conceive rituals as a system of symbols that always have a greater, “older” symbol that Turner calls *dominant* and that cannot be considered merely as a means to fulfil the ends of the ritual concerned, but as its reference to values that are considered as ends in themselves.

Turner understands the symbol as an interaction that promotes emotional stimuli. Every ritual is linked to emotional matters such as matrilineage, detachment, parental separation loss, transit to maturity, integration in another social group, maternity, love-rage, etc.

If for Turner the symbol orients the action and constitutes the network of a fabric, Geertz contributes something more by considering it as a "symbolic action of communication". He gives the symbol a wide social connotation saying "it is a locus of the meaning", "it is a model of and for reality". While it shows us reality it discovers for us what its purpose is and why it influences and is influenced in a constant feedback.

When Geertz analyses symbols he tells us also of two concepts to be kept in mind to understand a culture: ethos and cosmovision, what should be and what is, the normative and the existential. Both complement each other giving each other signification. Again the sense of interaction and feedback is present.

This "circular" idea of interpreting the symbol as a maintainer of differences, a polarizer of meaning, a locus of significance, etc. contributed such revealing concepts for other disciplines that they surpassed the field of anthropology and were used in psychiatry as a therapeutic resource prescribing rituals to patients.

Thus, if a group of individuals identify themselves and feel that they belong to such a group because they are united by the same system of beliefs and meanings, it would be appropriate to propose the following approach:

Hypothesis

One of the causes that provokes relation conflicts between adolescent students and teachers is related with the disparity of values and elements of identity between the former -without distinguishing sexes- and the latter.

Derived Hypothesis

- 1.- Adolescents form a generation group with its own identity independently of which sex they belong to.
- 2.- The values and interests of adolescents are in function of the vital cycle they belong to without distinction of gender-sex.
- 3.- The generation conflict studied in the family relations is extendable to the relations teachers-students because in both cases it is related to, amongst other causes, the differences in values and identity shared between both groups.

Enumerated objectives

General objective

To increase the knowledge of the cultural models of the adolescents of Alicante, shared by both sexes, describing the characteristics that identify them, their values, and their ways of relating. To analyse from these data possible difficulties in the interaction of this "non-conformist group" with the teaching hierarchy.

Specific objectives

- 1.- To identify identity markers of the studied group.
- 2.- To know which values are more important in this generation group.
- 3.- To apply the previous objectives to groups of adolescents with representation of both sexes.
- 4.- To know the perception the teacher has of his/her students.

Analysis units

Adolescence

In the anthropological perspective youth appears as a relative cultural construction in time and space.

According to Feixa, [...] adolescence is universal and it is understood as the phase of individual life comprised between physiological puberty and the recognition of the adult status (5).

Evolutionary psychology describes it as one of the most important stages of the vital cycle in the development of the individual. It is the moment when the "self" begins its differentiation becoming emotionally autonomous. It becomes "detached" from its parental figures and learns to make its own decisions.

The social perception of the beginning and end of this stage and its repercussions are the most important aspect for our study because, as Feixa declares, it is a relative cultural construction in time and space. And the fact is that they do not only vary from one culture to another but also inside the same culture, depending on the epochs, social changes, or labour and economic conditions.

In our culture, for example, and not many decades ago, the rites of passage were painful, most of all in boys (circumcisions, levelling of teeth, close haircuts), and in girls the transit began with the apparition of the menstruation. Today initiation rites are more disperse and individualised: driving license, to finish a cycle of studies, to go out with a boy/girl, to own a car.

The time of permanence in that cycle has also extended to 22-25 years of age for very different reasons that could briefly be summed up as: biological and psychical maturation, legal status, obligatory education, and the increase of university and post-graduate students that delay the departure from the family home, or the shortage or precariousness of work. Each variable exposed could be explained by enumerating other different consequences. Finally, adolescence has generated its own culture and counter-culture.

Identity - value

The sum of everything a group can call "its own" with the double purpose of "feeling to belong to" and "different from" constitutes the identity of a group. Psychology has introduced the term selfconcept, which influences the I and the MY as an object of cognition under three aspects: spiritual,

material, and social. Other terms such as self, selfconceptions, selfimage, or selfrepresentations also refer to the sense of identity (6).

Well, if we take these concepts to the *we*, including only those aspects that form a set of shared meanings, we would enter the study of the identity of the adolescents, whose fundamental definitional element would be the need the group has *to recognise itself as different* from the rest.

Values put in order those elements, previously described, based on the relative importance they acquire for the individual or group, guiding the behaviour of human beings. In this way a structured and interrelated system of values begins more or less consciously to be acquired whose, as Schwartz would say, importance we give to some depends on the priority we give to others.

Anthropology considers values as patterns or criteria of the desirable that influence collective behaviour. [...] However this word is frequently used by anthropologists without being explained. For Malinowsky and Evans-Pritchard it makes reference to feelings; for Kluckhohn to concepts of meaning; for Homand of interests; of ethos for Bateson, which shows an epistemological problem to be taken into account. Value is the principle of hierarchy that sets off the facts in the framework of a system of values. This system must be interpreted from the holistic point of view of the studied societies and not from the individualistic point of view (7).

Gender - sex

We will not enter a comprehensive exposition of the great amount of work that has been written on the concept of gender-sex. From all the fields of the social sciences we could discuss, describe, and define the roles, the biology, certain ways of behaviour, the language, the external signs, and a long et cetera. But we can give a small sample, for example that of Dolores Juliano: "From the epistemological point of view science, as generated historically by man, is seen by Cultural Feminism as obligatorily androcentric, anti-ecologist, and militaristic. The proposal then consists in replacing it with a *new science* that is based on the feminist virtues, mainly in the capacity of integrating subjectivity in cognition and the possibility of replacing competitiveness with interaction and cooperation (8).

The question is: Is the identity of adolescents as a group that interacts with others stronger than the differences of gender? Do they share a system of beliefs and meanings capable of keeping together their gender differences, which they undoubtedly have?

Hegemonic culture

[...] The social articulation of juvenile cultures can be approached from three scenes (Hall and Jefferson, 1983): Hegemonic, parental, and generational culture. The relation of youths with the dominant culture is interfered with by the different places where power is transmitted and negotiated, for example, in school, which is one of the institutional spaces where youths acquire experience and learn to identify with certain behaviours and values (5).

This identification stage of the adolescent is so complex because it places him/her constantly in a position of choosing between the mandates of the hegemonic culture and those of his/her own self, which not always are similar.

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