CASE STUDY

When I was younger…back then, it was just like: me. You know? My feelings and my mind and my stuff…but now, you’re thinking of everyone around you…it’s just, like, snowballed into this huge big picture of; like, everybody that I know: my family, my school, my friends, boyfriends, where am I going to work one day, what money will I get in…You know, all these things…You have to learn how to manage your feelings and stuff. Or else it just gets unmanageable … (Leanne, girl, aged 17, Fish Hoek).

When I was 13 I moved to my aunt in Retreat because things were hectic at home in Ocean View…..I started high school near my aunt’s house and I was really nervous because the place was totally different from Ocean View. I met a cool bunch of friends. We got on well because I could share my feelings with them and they with me. We would sing and dance around the school. One of my favourite days at school was a Friday; we would all throw money together and buy pies and chips. We would talk about where we would live and what we will be one day. (Brian, boy, aged 17, Ocean View) (Bray, Gooskens, Kahn, Moses & Seekings, 2010, p. 208, 224, 253).

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:
• Critically evaluate the view that adolescence is a period of ‘storm and stress’
• Describe the physical changes associated with puberty, and the psychological implications of its timing
• Distinguish adolescent thinking from the thinking that is typical of middle childhood
• Describe the impact of parent–child relationships and peer relationships on adolescents
• Understand how adolescents think about moral issues
• Explain the significance of the adolescent period for the development of the self and identity.
Introduction

The quotations in the case study above illustrate the experiences of two adolescents growing up in different communities in Cape Town’s Fish Hoek valley (Bray, Gooskens, Kahn, Moses & Seekings, 2010, p. 208, 224, 253). Adolescence is the period of transition from childhood to adulthood. It is a recognised stage of life in hundreds of societies across the world. The adolescent period begins around the onset of puberty, and ends with the adoption of adult roles such as employment and marriage (Schlegel & Barry, 1991). Although there is disagreement as to how exactly to define adolescence, it is often linked to the second decade of life. Some writers distinguish between early adolescence (11 or 12 to 14 years), mid-adolescence (15–17 years) and late adolescence (18–21 years). In South Africa, there are nearly 10.5 million people between the ages of 10 and 19, comprising more than 20 per cent of the population (Statistics South Africa, 2011). Adolescents are the largest age group not only in South Africa, but also in the world (Richter, 2006).

From a developmental perspective, adolescence is both an exciting and a challenging time. Physically, adolescents’ bodies are maturing. Cognitively, they start to think about the world in new ways. Socially, changing relationships with families and peers play a central role in shaping their experiences. In Western societies, developmental tasks of the adolescent period include the following:

• Making a successful transition to high school
• Learning academic skills that are needed for higher education or work
• Achieving psychological autonomy
• Forming close friendships with those of the same and opposite sex
• Developing a sense of identity (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 2002).

However, expectations of adolescents are shaped by culture, and by historical and political events. The experience of adolescence, how long it lasts, and its impacts on later development and well-being are influenced by how a particular society thinks about young people, by what demands and pressure it places on them, and by what rights and opportunities it provides them with as they make their journey into adulthood.

The ‘terrible teens’?: Views of adolescence

The early view of adolescence was that it is a time of emotional turmoil or ‘storm and stress’: conflict with parents, moodiness, and reckless, antisocial behaviour (Hall, 1904). Anna Freud believed that this turmoil is universal and biologically based. She said, ‘To be normal during the adolescent period is by itself abnormal’ (Freud, 1958, p. 267).
The ‘storm and stress’ idea continues to influence developmental research on adolescence. Nowadays, however, many researchers believe that this idea is incorrect, or at least exaggerated. Certain types of problems – such as conflict with parents, mood disorders, and risk behaviour – do occur more often in adolescence than earlier (Arnett, 1999). For examples, see the discussion in the box headed ‘Adolescent risk behaviour’.

Nevertheless, most adolescents – like Leanne and Brian in the case study that opened this chapter – cope with the challenges of the adolescent period without developing serious social, emotional, or behavioural difficulties (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Thus, the storm-and-stress view has given way to a more balanced view of adolescence as ‘a period of development characterized by biological, cognitive, emotional, and social reorganization with the aim of adapting to cultural expectations of becoming an adult’ (Susman & Rogol, 2004, p. 16).

### Adolescent risk behaviour

Risk behaviour can be defined as any behaviour that places a person at risk for negative physical, psychological or social consequences. These consequences can play out in the short term or the long term. Rates of risk behaviour tend to peak in the late teens and early twenties (Arnett, 1999). According to the World Health Organization (2011), nearly two-thirds of premature deaths are associated with conditions or behaviours that began in adolescence.

A survey of South African adolescents in grades 8–11 (Reddy et al., 2010) showed that there is a high prevalence of risk behaviour in various domains:

- **Substance use:** 30 per cent had smoked cigarettes, 13 per cent had smoked dagga, and 29 per cent had engaged in binge drinking in the past month.
- **Sexual behaviour:** 13 per cent reported having had sex by the age of 13, and 69 per cent of sexually active learners did not use condoms consistently.
- **Violence:** 36 per cent reported having been bullied in the past month, and 15 per cent reported carrying weapons.
- **Traffic safety:** 38 per cent reported that in the past month they had been driven by someone who had been drinking alcohol.
- **Eating behaviours:** 20 per cent were overweight, and 8 per cent were underweight.
- **Physical activity:** 34 per cent had no physical education in schools, and 29 per cent watched TV or played computer games for more than 3 hours per day.
- **Suicide-related behaviours:** 21 per cent had attempted suicide.
Physical development

Adolescence is marked by dramatic physical growth and physiological changes. The biological changes associated with puberty have been a longstanding topic for research. More recently, the development of brain-imaging techniques has led to increased interest in, and understanding of, the developing adolescent brain. The biological changes associated with adolescence are universal. However, the timing and psychological implications of these changes vary across cultures and historical periods.

Puberty

Puberty involves a series of biological events that lead to an adult-sized body and sexual maturity (becoming capable of producing a child). Puberty is set in motion by hormonal processes – particularly the so-called sex hormones, androgens and oestrogens. Puberty takes place, on average, two years earlier in girls than in boys.

The adolescent growth spurt

The first outward sign of puberty is the adolescent growth spurt: rapid physical growth. Height and weight increase more quickly at this time.
than at any other time since infancy. The adolescent growth spurt usually begins around the age of 10 or 11 in girls, and 12 or 13 in boys.

Chapter four explained that physical growth in infancy follows a cephalocaudal (head-to-foot) trend. In adolescence, this pattern of growth is reversed. At first, the hands, legs, and feet grow very quickly, and the trunk or body catches up only later (Sheehy, Gasser, Molinari & Largo, 1999). This is why young adolescents often appear gangly, awkward, and out of proportion, with long legs and big feet and hands. Sex differences also appear in the overall shape of the body. Boys’ shoulders become wider, whereas girls’ hips broaden relative to the shoulders and waist.

Changes in primary sexual characteristics
The primary sexual characteristics are those that involve the reproductive organs (ovaries, uterus, and vagina in females; penis, scrotum, and testes in males). As a result of the changes that occur in these characteristics during puberty, individuals become sexually mature and capable of producing a child. Around the age of 12 or 13, girls experience menarche (the first menstrual period) and boys start to produce viable sperm and experience their first ejaculation, or semenarche.

Development of secondary sexual characteristics
Secondary sexual characteristics are characteristics that are visible on the outside of the body and serve as additional signs of sexual maturity. Secondary sexual characteristics are not directly related to reproduction, which is why they are called secondary. They include things such as breasts in girls, pubic and underarm hair, and deepening voices, particularly in boys.

The timing of puberty
Like other aspects of development, the timing of puberty varies, depending on complex interactions between genetic factors and environmental factors. Many girls are reaching puberty earlier nowadays than in the past. In the 1950s, the average age of menarche for urban black girls in South African was between 14 and 15 years; today, it is between 12 and 13 years (Jones, Griffiths, Norris, Pettifor & Cameron, 2009). This change is probably due to improved nutrition and health care; menarche occurs earlier in heavier, well-nourished girls than in girls who are not well-nourished. Girls who experience stressful family lives are more likely to experience early menarche than those whose family lives are not stressful, perhaps because stress affects hormonal functioning (Chisholm, Quinlivan, Petersen & Coall, 2005). Poverty, malnutrition, and intense physical exercise can all delay sexual maturation.
Maturing either earlier or later than peers can affect a person socially and psychologically. The international research suggests that adolescents who mature very early are at increased risk of depression and behaviour problems (Negriff & Susman, 2011). In South Africa, boys and girls who are in a more advanced stage of puberty at age 13 are more likely to be smoking, experimenting with drugs, and having sex than are their less developed peers (Richter, 2006). Early-maturing adolescents may feel ‘out of place’ when they are with their age mates, and may form friendships and romantic relationships with older peers. Having older companions, in turn, provides adolescents with more opportunities to engage in risk behaviours such as sexual activity and substance use (Mendle, Turkheimer & Emery, 2007).

The disadvantages associated with early maturation appear to be greater for girls than for boys (Negriff & Susman, 2011). An early study found there are positive aspects to early maturation for boys. Early maturing boys tend to be viewed as self-confident, attractive, and popular. Late-maturing boys, in contrast, are more likely to be seen as anxious and attention seeking (Jones & Bayley, 1950). Late-maturing girls do not seem to be as disadvantaged as late-maturing boys. In fact, late-maturing girls tend to do better academically than their peers (Mendle et al., 2007).

This gender difference may be linked to how well the adolescent’s body fits cultural ideals of physical attractiveness. Most of the research on the timing of puberty has been conducted in the USA or Western Europe. These cultures value a tall, muscular body shape for men, and a thin body shape for women. Early maturation brings boys closer to the male ideal, and may therefore improve their status. In contrast, early maturation moves girls further away from the thin ideal. This may explain why early-maturing girls are more likely than their peers to be dissatisfied with their bodies and to diet excessively (Mendle et al., 2007). People who live in poorer environments (for example rural Zulus) tend to prefer a heavier body shape for women than is considered attractive in Western cultures (Tovée, Swami, Furnham & Malgalparsad, 2006). However, a desire for thinness does seem to be increasingly widespread among adolescents in urban areas in South Africa (Caradas, Lambert & Charlton, 2001).

**ACTIVITY**

Think back to your early adolescence. As you reached puberty, how did your feelings about yourself and your relationships with others change?
Brain development

Neuroscientists once thought that brain development was essentially completed within the first few years of life. New findings, however, indicate that the brain continues to develop through adolescence and at least into a person’s twenties. In chapter four, you learned how the early blooming and pruning of synapses and myelination of neurons helps the infant brain to function more quickly and efficiently. Brain-imaging research shows that pruning of unused synapses in the cerebral cortex continues in adolescence. At the same time, increasing myelination leads to stronger connections among various parts of the brain. These changes improve the organisation of the brain and strengthen cognitive skills such as reading and memory. A person’s capacity to learn is greater in adolescence than at any other period in the lifespan (National Institute of Mental Health, 2011).

Brain scans also suggest that different parts of the brain mature at different rates. The parts of the brain involved in emotional responses are fully developed in adolescence, and even more active than they are in adulthood. However, the pre-frontal cortex – the part of the brain involved in planning and decision-making – is not yet mature. Some scientists believe that these changes contribute to making adolescents more vulnerable to risk behaviours and psychological disorders. Adolescents react more intensely than adults to stressful and pleasurable experiences, but have not yet developed the ability to control their strong emotional impulses (National Institute of Mental Health, 2011).

The changes that take place in adolescents’ brains may also contribute to adolescents’ tendency to go to sleep much later at night, and to wake later in the mornings. Adolescents need almost as much sleep as younger children – about 9 to 10 hours per night. Because most high schools have early starting times, adolescents may not get enough sleep. Inadequate sleep in adolescence has been associated with depression, behavioural problems, and poorer achievement in school. In South Africa, adolescents with sleep problems are more likely to smoke, drink alcohol, and use drugs (Fakier & Wild, 2011). Adequate sleep is therefore important for optimal physical, emotional, and cognitive functioning in adolescence.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- What are the main physical changes that characterise puberty?
- How does the timing of puberty influence boys’ and girls’ psychological development?
- How does the brain change during adolescence?
- How might brain changes influence adolescents’ behaviour?
Cognitive development

Recall that earlier chapters have mentioned the work of the renowned psychologist Jean Piaget. Piaget provided a useful theory for understanding adolescent cognitive development. Theories of cognitive development move beyond the physical maturation of the brain seek to understand people’s mental processes – how do people perceive, remember, think, speak, and solve problems? Theories of cognitive development are also concerned with how people, especially adolescents, develop the ability to think about thinking – what is known in psychology as metacognition.

**ACTIVITY**

Can you easily draw a diagram that shows how you come to make a decision? Has this ability improved over the years since you were a child, a teenager? Being able to ‘think about thinking’ is an important part of cognitive development. In a study conducted by Swartz (2009), young people aged 15 to 19, all living in an impoverished community, were asked to sketch out how they make decisions. Only a quarter of township-schooled youth were able to produce mind maps in which evidence of metacognitive ability was present.

**Piaget’s formal operations**

Piaget helps psychologists to understand the cognitive development of adolescents by focusing attention on what can or cannot be grasped during the teenage years. Most importantly, he claims that adolescents construct their own cognitive worlds. They are affected by the physical development of their brain, but they do not thoughtlessly absorb the information they receive from the environment. Adolescent cognitive development develops from sensing and observing during infancy; to representing the world with words, images, and drawing (age 2 to 7); to a period of being able to think concretely about phenomena (age 7 to 11); culminating in adolescents’ ability to apply what they know, think logically, and interpret abstract concepts. As chapter two explained, Piaget called this fourth stage in child development the formal operations stage, which, according to him, occurs between ages 11 and 15.

During this stage of development, adolescents make sense of their experiences and attempt to organise their worlds. They distinguish between important and less important ideas and ideals. They connect ideas, and allow their thinking to be changed by the introduction of new ideas. Recall from chapter two that Piaget (1954) called these two actions assimilation (incorporating new information into existing knowledge) and accommodation.
(adjusting thinking as a result of new knowledge). Recall also that Piaget
speaks of ‘equilibration’ to explain how adolescents (or children) shift from
one stage of thinking to the next. This movement occurs as they experience
conflict or ‘disequilibrium’ and seek to find a balance or new equilibrium.

In summary, Piaget’s fourth stage of cognitive development states that
adolescents:
• Are able to think in abstract ways (able to do algebraic problems, for
  example)
• Are more idealistic and think about possibilities for themselves and
  the world
• Are able to reason logically and verbally (called hypothetical–deductive
  reasoning by Piaget).

There is some disagreement about whether all these goals are reached by
the age of 15. Many psychologists argue that there is an early stage and
a late stage of formal operations. Piaget (1972) himself later revised his
theory to claim that the stage of formal operational thought is not com-
pletely achieved until as late as 20.

Read the box below to appreciate how poverty affects adolescents’
cognitive development. This has considerable resonance in the South
African context.

South Africa: Poverty and cognitive development
In the South African context, poverty affects cognitive development in vari-
ous ways. Adolescents under continuous stress, who lack parental supervi-
sion and who are subject to low-quality education often lag behind those
whose experience is the opposite. Adolescents’ cognitive development, while
related to brain maturation, also requires external stimulation in order to be
fully and optimally achieved. There is growing evidence to support the fact
that violent behaviour amongst youth in school may be due to impaired cog-
nitive development; when this impairment is left undiagnosed and untreated,
it leads to young people becoming bored and disruptive, and to them ulti-
mately resorting to violence out of frustration (Lynam & Henry, 2001).

Information processing
It is common for adolescents to form images of ideal circumstances or
roles. This is part of the process of replacing concrete experiences with a
new-found ability to think abstractly and come to conclusions based on
logical reasons. For example, adolescents might imagine what an ideal
family may be like, or an ideal world. Their ability to solve problems also
increases, since they develop the ability to choose between alternatives,
construct scenarios, and test hypotheses. It is therefore not uncommon for an adolescent to become infatuated with a cause or to develop strong opinions on issues such as climate change, democracy, or war.

**Factors affecting information processing**

A number of factors are important in understanding how adolescents process information:
- What information are they receiving from the environment?
- How are they interpreting the data?
- What do they remember?
- What is forgotten?
- How is the information processed with regard to their own ideals, experience and values?
- What language do they use to express their thinking?

In addition, as adolescents are able to think more abstractly, their use of language changes. They become able to interpret meanings and understand various elements of language such as metaphors and irony. Their general writing and conversational skills also improve.

Read the box below, which outlines some of the implications of South Africa’s multiple languages for tests of cognitive development in adolescents.

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**Use of multiple languages of learning in South Africa**

In the South African context, the use of multiple languages of learning potentially causes problems for learners. The learners become fluent in their mother tongue and are able to display advanced cognitive development when speaking their home language, but many are called on to display their proficiency in a second language, since school exit exams (matric) are not written in indigenous languages. When adolescents in the South African context undertake tests to measure their levels of cognitive development, it is essential that these tests are language appropriate — since language and cognition are so closely related.

**Environmental influences on learning**

The ecosystemic theory of Urie Bronfenbrenner draws attention to the fact that adolescent development does not occur in isolation from multiple contexts in which a young person finds him- or herself. Bronfenbrenner proposed that human development be considered through a ‘hierarchy of systems at four levels moving from the most proximal to the most remote’ (Bronfenbrenner 1992, p. 226). These four contexts are:
- The *microsystem* (immediate context of work home and school)
- The *mesosystem* (interrelationships between microsystems)
• The *exosystem* (institutions and practices affecting youth)
• The *macrosystem* (social and cultural contexts).

Later Bronfenbrenner added a fifth context, that of the *chronosystem* (change over time). At the centre of this ecology is the developing individual young person – with all his or her ‘cognitive competence, socio-emotional attributes, and context-relevant belief systems’ (Bronfenbrenner 1992, p. 228). Chapter 11 will draw on Bronfenbrenner’s work (you may wish to look at Figure 11.1 at this point, as it shows in a diagram the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem and the chronosystem).

The environments of home and school, culture, and political contexts of young people’s lives therefore materially affect how they develop physically, cognitively, and emotionally.

**Social learning**
Albert Bandura, a leading social-learning theorist, outlined a simple but important theory of how adolescents learn. Bandura focuses on the reciprocal (rather than unidirectional) influences of behaviour, cognition, and environment. In Bandura’s view, people learn by observing others; thinking, reasoning, imagining, planning, and valuing are social rather than individual in nature (Bandura, 1977, 1986). For Bandura, behaviour affects cognition, and vice versa, while a person’s behaviour can affect the environment, and the environment can change a person’s thought processes.

**Schooling**
As adolescents enter high school, they are faced with a number of changes that affect their cognitive development – for better or worse. As Brian and Leanne illustrate in the case study at the beginning of this chapter, school is a good place to discuss life and the future. However, it is a complicated process. Besides the psychosocial adjustment with which adolescent learners are confronted as they make new friends, they also have to put into practice their ideals and strive to both find out who they are and what they will one day do. At the same time, the pace at which learning happens is both increased and becomes more diverse as an adolescent enters high school.

**Pace of learning and teaching styles**
Adolescents naturally reason at varying speeds during this time of development, which can lead to differing rates of success in school. What is in no doubt is that adolescents reason at faster rates than younger children, and in many cases than older adults. One implication of this is that adolescents need to receive just enough stimulation in the school
context to prevent boredom, but not so much that they find themselves unable to cope and become frustrated. In addition, teaching styles should ideally (but often do not) cater to this range of formality and abstraction, because, as you have already learned, there is variation in the rate at which adolescents acquire the ability for thinking abstractly and logically. Recall that Piaget’s stage of formal operations states that people acquire the ability to think logically and interpret abstract concepts, and that this can occur from as early as 11 years of age to as late as 20 years – all of which is normal cognitive development.

**Experiential learning**

David Elkind (1981) has also shown that adolescents learn much better through experience, although there are a number of different learning styles. An overly rigid curriculum has the potential to dampen adolescents’ creativity and to not hold their interest. This argument also applies to different learning styles and levels of development between boys and girls. Educators need to adapt learning to these variations as well.

Read the box below to learn about the importance of adult involvement in adolescents’ learning.

Adult involvement in adolescents’ learning is crucial to the cognitive development of adolescents. In South Africa, as in many places in the world, the time of high-school attendance introduces multiple teachers who teach specialised subjects, while at the same time parents, for various reasons, become less involved in their children’s learning. One important reason for reduced parental involvement is that many parents feel less comfortable covering the content of subjects such as Maths and Science, especially if they have a low level of educational attainment and are aware of the rapid pace at which knowledge has changed ‘since I was at school’.

The one thing that has not changed, however, is young people’s need to be helped to reflect on what they are hearing and observing, and to make sense of it, question it, interpret it, and apply it. These are all functions that caring, interested, and involved adults can perform. This adult involvement in adolescent learning ultimately ensures good cognitive outcomes. This chapter will pick up this topic up again when it considers adolescents’ moral development.

**Caring schools**

When adolescents have multiple teachers in high school, this may lead to a lack of attachment to teachers and to a non-caring school environment. Educational philosopher Nel Noddings (1984, 2002) argues that a caring schooling environment is essential for learning to take place. Noddings’s
vision for schooling is one in which school can, through provision of a **formative education**, encourage young people to be reflective and to be connected to others, and one which can exemplify democratic processes of living. At the core of such a formative education are teachers’ caring and attentive relationships with adolescent learners.

For many adolescents in the South African schooling system, classes are too large, teachers are undertrained, and resources are too few to realise such an ideal. Schooling has a large role to play in adolescents’ cognitive development, but schooling can also impair, rather than enhance this development, if conditions such as those in the current South African context prevail.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

- How is adolescent thinking different from childhood thinking?
- What are the challenges to information processing during adolescence?
- How does the environment affect adolescent thinking?
- What theories, besides that of Piaget, help us to understand adolescent thinking, and what are their main contributions? (Consider, for example, the theories of Bandura, Bronfenbrenner, Elkind, and Noddings.)

**Psychosocial development**

Family relationships remain important in adolescence. At the same time, peer relationships become more mature and influential. At least in Western societies, adolescents face the task of becoming more independent from parents, and discovering who they really are.

**The family**

Most of the research on family relationships in adolescence has focused on parenting and the parent–child relationship. However, researchers are also starting to learn more about adolescents’ relationships with their siblings and grandparents.

**Relationships with parents**

The popular media often portray relationships between parents and adolescents as extremely stressful and conflict ridden. However, psychological research conducted over several decades tells a different story. The evidence indicates that serious difficulties in parent–child relationships are the exception, not the norm. Only about 5%–15% of families experience extreme problems in parent–adolescent relationships, and these problems typically began in childhood (Smetana,
In fact, about three-quarters of adolescents report having happy and pleasant relationships with their parents (Steinberg, 2001). Nevertheless, parent–child relationships do change during adolescence.

**Parent–adolescent closeness**

As children grow into adolescence, they tend to spend less time with their parents. The closeness of parent–child relationships also tends to decline (Smetana et al., 2006). Adolescents tend to be closer to their mothers than to their fathers (Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

Despite decreases in their closeness, most parent–adolescent relationships remain warm and supportive (Collins & Laursen, 2004). Adolescents who are securely attached to their parents tend to be better adjusted psychologically and more socially competent than their insecurely attached peers. They are less likely to engage in risk behaviours, and have better coping skills. Securely attached adolescents also find it easier to make the transition to high school (Moretti & Peled, 2004). In chapter four, you learned how a secure attachment between infants and their caregivers provides infants with a secure base from which they can explore the environment. Similarly, it seems that the support of parents provides adolescents with the confidence that they need to explore new experiences and relationships outside the family.

**Parent–adolescent conflict**

Declines in parent–child closeness in the adolescent years are often accompanied by more frequent conflicts with parents, at least temporarily in early and mid-adolescence (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). These conflicts are usually not severe; most often they are squabbles over things like disobedience, homework, or household chores. However, these arguments about seemingly trivial things may actually be expressions of larger conflicts over independence and responsibility. In most cases, conflict decreases again during late adolescence as adolescents and their parents gradually adjust their relationship in such a way that the adolescent is granted a more equal role in the family.

Interestingly, it seems that parent–adolescent conflict is often more stressful for the parents than the children. Adolescents tend to see their squabbles with parents as being unimportant. Parents, in contrast, tend to be upset by repeated, day-to-day bickering over mundane issues. This is particularly the case for mothers, who do most of the negotiating with teenagers. Many parents report a dip in self-esteem, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being during this time (Steinberg, 2001). High levels of parent–adolescent conflict are also detrimental to adolescent development. However, mild-to-moderate conflict is associated with
better adolescent adjustment than either no conflict or frequent conflict (Smetana et al., 2006).

Parent–adolescent relationships across cultures
An increase in parent–child conflict has been seen in a diverse range of cultures, from Asia to the USA (Smetana, 2006). However, parent–adolescent conflict is more common in some cultures than in others. For example, there seems to be little parent–adolescent conflict in India. Indian adolescents spend much more time with their families than American adolescents do. They also enjoy this family time more than their American counterparts do (Larson & Wilson, 2004). How do researchers explain this difference?

In Western societies such as the USA, a major task of adolescence is to achieve psychological autonomy, or the ability to function independently as a separate, self-governing individual. In this context, declining closeness and increasing conflict between adolescents and their parents can play a positive role in the transition to adulthood: they lead to adolescents becoming more independent and autonomous. Indian culture, however, places the family at the centre of people’s lives, and values interdependence rather than independence. In this context, the developmental task of adolescence is not to become autonomous, but rather to reduce separation. Thus, Indian adolescents focus on strengthening emotional

Figure 7.1 Parent–adolescent conflict often increases during adolescence, but it is generally about minor issues
bonds to their relatives, and on learning to put the needs of the family before their own individual needs (Larson & Wilson, 2004).

Even in Western cultures, researchers now appreciate that it is best for adolescents if they maintain a close attachment with their parents, even while they are gaining autonomy and becoming more independent. How is this balance achieved? The next section discusses which parenting styles seem best for achieving this balance.

Parenting styles and dimensions
Recall that chapter six mentioned three contrasting parenting styles: authoritarian, permissive, and authoritative. These styles were originally identified by Diana Baumrind (1967).

Like younger children, adolescents benefit from having at least one parent who is authoritative: warm, firm, and accepting of their needs for psychological autonomy. Adolescents with authoritative parents tend to do better in school, report less depression and anxiety and higher self-esteem, and are less likely to engage in antisocial behaviour and drug use. These benefits have been found across different cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups (Steinberg, 2001).

In recent years, there has been a shift towards breaking down parenting styles into specific dimensions of parenting behaviour. Brian Barber and his colleagues have identified three central dimensions of parenting that appear to be particularly important in adolescence:

- Support versus rejection
- Firm behavioural control versus lax control
- Psychological autonomy versus psychological control.

Studies with adolescents in South Africa and a number of other countries have shown that parental support (warmth, acceptance, and affection) is associated with more social initiative and less depression. Firm behavioural control (supervision, monitoring, and limit-setting) is associated with less antisocial behaviour. In contrast, psychological control (intrusive parenting that does not permit the child to develop as a psychologically autonomous individual) is associated with more depression and antisocial behaviour (Barber, Stolz, Olsen, Collins & Burchinal, 2005). Thus, although patterns of interactions may change, parent–child relationships remain important for children’s well-being during the adolescent years.

Relationships with siblings
Although most of the research on adolescents’ family relationships has focused on their parents, there has been a recent increase in interest in adolescents’ relationships with their brothers and sisters. How do the relationships between brothers and sisters change once siblings no longer live together in the same house and lead their own separate lives? Sibling
conflict often increases when the first-born sibling enters early adolescence. From middle adolescence, however, both closeness and conflict between siblings decline. As brothers and sisters spend more time away from home and from each other, sibling relationships become less intense and more equal (Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

Although siblings have less influence on one another as they get older, they remain important. Better relationships with brothers and sisters are associated with fewer emotional and behavioural problems during adolescence. However, adolescents whose older siblings are involved in problem behaviours, early sexual activity, and drug use are at increased risk of also becoming involved in such behaviours (Smetana et al., 2006).

**Relationships with grandparents**

Grandparents have long been an important source of financial, practical, and emotional support in South African families. The Aids pandemic has made their role even more important. According to the 2001 population census (Statistics South Africa, 2005), 18 per cent of black South African adolescents aged 14–19 were living in a household where a grandparent or great-grandparent was the household head. Even when grandparents don’t live with their grandchildren, they often play an important role in their lives.

The international research suggests that contact with grandparents tends to decline as children move into adolescence (Bridges, Roe, Dunn & O’Connor, 2007). Nevertheless, there is evidence that positive involvement from grandparents has the potential to benefit adolescents’ psychological, physical, and academic well-being and development – particularly when their families are under stress (Attar-Schwartz, Tan, Buchanan, Flouri & Griggs, 2009; Yorgason, Padilla-Walker & Jackson, 2011).

**Peer relationships**

During adolescence, young people acquire skills needed to carry out adult roles, gain autonomy from parents, and recalibrate their relationships with members of the same sex and opposite sex (Elliott & Feldman, 1990). Consequently, peer relationships become prominent during this time. In landmark research in tracking US adolescents for a week using the experience sampling method, Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984, p. 222) found that adolescents spend 52 per cent of their time with peers, while spending only 21 per cent with adults and siblings, and 27 per cent of their time alone. These researchers conclude that friendships provide optimal conditions for growth amongst adolescents. However, others have questioned the influence of peers, friends, romantic partners, and cliques and crowds (or groups) in a teenager’s life. Each will be discussed in turn.
Adolescents choose friendships and reference crowds ‘best suited to their needs for emotional support and exploration or reaffirmation of their values or aspirations [and so] peer groups promise to be a highly adaptive context in which to negotiate adolescence’ (Brown, 1990, p. 180). The opposite applies too – ‘for those who either falter in these tasks or choose a dysfunctional crowd, peer groups can have maladaptive consequences’ (p. 185). Furthermore, given that adolescents make decisions focused largely on the here and now, because of their cognitive developmental stage, rather than thinking of the future, peer influence is especially important, especially with regard to young people’s health and risk-taking behaviours.

**Peer pressure and conformity**

The key questions that interest those who parent and work with youth are:
- Do adolescents behave in particular ways because their peers are doing so?
- Are adolescents able to resist pressure to conform through other influences such as family, teachers, and youth leaders.

Of course, conformity can be both positive and negative. Young people can be pressurised into taking drugs as much as they can be pressurised into joining a youth project that looks after vulnerable children.

Research shows that peers have influence on some spheres, whereas families hold sway in others. Berndt (1979) shows that peers influence antisocial behaviour – most between ages 12 and 15 – while families have the highest influence towards prosocial activities at this time. The same applies to the age of young people. In early adolescence, families have more influence, then peers become more influential, until in late adolescence, youth act and reason with greater independence of both influences.

An important example of peer influence being put to positive effect and institutionalised is in the many peer-education programmes currently in operation in South Africa and throughout the world. These programmes are especially successful in helping adolescents develop and adhere to healthy behaviour with regard to sexual and reproductive health (Visser, 2007).

** Cliques and crowds**

In the same way as peers can be both negative influences and positive influences, the crowds and cliques in which young people locate themselves have similar effects. Groups satisfy adolescents’ need for identity formation, for belonging, self-esteem, and information. However, these groups have norms and roles that adolescents have to navigate. The groups to which adolescents belong change from childhood to adolescence and over the course of adolescence. So, childhood groups are largely
unisexual, then become mixed sex, and finally disintegrate into couples with looser affiliations to each other than before (Dunphy, 1963).

Groups generally predict behaviour. So, for example, in a study in the USA, athletic males (‘jocks’) were found to be more sexually active than those in other groups, while other groups – such as ‘burnouts’ and ‘non-conformists’ – were more likely to be taking drugs (Prinstein, Fetter & La Greca, 1996). Those who belong to cliques and crowds overall exhibit higher self-esteem than those who are rejected or excluded. However, youth who purposely avoid groups have been to shown to have the same self-esteem as those who are part of them.

In a South African study (Swartz, 2009), young people identified four kinds of youth in a local school, namely:

- ‘Mommie’s babies’: Mommie’s babies spent all their time at home or church.
- ‘Skollies’: Skollies were criminals and gangsters.
- ‘Kasi boys and girls’: Kasi boys and girls partied hard and experimented with petty thieving and alcohol.
- ‘Right ones’: Right ones did not separate themselves from their peers, but they partied and drank alcohol only to the extent that it did not affect their school work and, therefore, chances of success.

Friendship

Harry Sullivan (1953) is internationally renowned for his work on the nature and importance of friendship for adolescents. While all people require tenderness, playful companionship, social acceptance, intimacy, and sexual relations for their long term well-being, it is adolescent friendships that begin to meet these needs and teach young people the skills necessary to sustain these in long-term committed relationships and partnerships. According to Sullivan, the need for intimacy – defined as self-disclosure and the ability to share private thoughts – intensifies during early adolescence, motivating young people to seek out close friends. Furthermore, adolescents who report good friendships frequently go on to report prosocial behaviours and positive self-worth in adult life (Carlo et al., 1999). Close friendships also teach youth how to self-disclose appropriately, how to provide appropriate emotional support to others, and how to manage disagreements without damaging relationships.

In Swartz’s study of young people’s moral influences, friends were frequently cited as positive moral influences – friends were both ‘good to me’ and ‘good for me’ (Swartz, 2009). Youth reported that friends helped them see where they were ‘going wrong’, advised them on how to change, and, in the case of romantic partners, helped them to be less selfish and generally ‘a better person’. These caring relationships provided youth with strong emotional ties and motivated young people to make
sacrificial choices, such as voluntarily parting with money earned or won, keeping a job, and working hard at school in order to maximise the possibility of getting a job in the future.

Research has shown, however, that close friendships between adolescents with a large age gap frequently results in the younger peer becoming involved in age-inappropriate behaviour and sometimes in antisocial behaviour (Magnusson, 1988). This is in contrast to research with children that shows that mixed-age friendships at these younger ages have generally positive outcomes.

ACTIVITY
Looking back at your past friendships, what advice would you have valued as a younger adolescent in managing these friendships?

Romantic relationships and sexual activity
In the South African context, various studies (reported in Swartz, 2009) have shown that approximately one-third of young people have had sex by the time they reach the age of 15. Of these, 15 per cent are involved in an ongoing sexual relationship. This is roughly similar to other countries, although there are some groups of South African youth who are more at risk of early sexual activity than others. Those living in overcrowded communities and in communities where poverty affects both education and survival options are especially at risk in this respect.

In the context of sexually transmitted infections (including HIV and Aids), teenage pregnancy, and high rates of rape and coerced sex, it is desirable for adolescents to delay their first sexual encounter and the age at which they begin dating. Much research shows that young people who become involved in a dating relationship at a young age are more likely to become pregnant, or impregnate a partner, than those who are helped to delay individual (rather than group or crowd) dating. It has also been shown that dating amongst younger adolescents is egocentric and focused on recreation and status, whereas older youth date for intimacy and companionship.

However, little research reports on the role that romantic relationships can play in developing adolescents’ identity and intimacy skills (Erikson, 1968). Studies have found that romantic relationships focus ‘adolescents’ attention … on behaviors that foster and promote intimacy [such as] helping, caring … sharing … sympathy and empathy’ (Fabes et al., 1999, p. 9).

The box headed ‘Teenage pregnancy and parenthood’ provides further information about adolescent sexual activity.
**Teenage pregnancy and parenthood**

The extent of teenage pregnancy (measured among young women aged 15 to 19) in South Africa ranges from 78 births per 1,000 in 1996, to an estimated 65 in 2001, and 73 in 2005 (Moultrie & McGrath, 2007). There are different rates of teenage fertility among each of the population groups in South Africa. In 1998 the *South African Demographic and Health Survey* (Department of Health, 2002) revealed that fertility rates for black teenagers and coloured teenagers were four times as high as those for white teenagers and Indian teenagers. In addition, rates of teen fertility (along with HIV infection) in informal settlements are significantly higher than in other communities (Shisana et al., 2005; Simbayi, Chauveau & Shisana, 2004).

Based on the 2001 census, Moultrie and Dorrington (2004) estimate that teenage fertility has decreased somewhat. This is an important counter-argument to those who claim that child-support grants from government act as a perverse incentive to teenagers who get themselves pregnant in order to access the child-support grant. If this were in fact true, the rates of teenage pregnancy would be increasing rather than decreasing. However, what is clear is that young women who become pregnant at an earlier age are at risk of adverse life outcomes. They are less likely to complete schooling, and therefore less likely to get good jobs or any employment at all. There is also a physical cost exerted on their bodies through early pregnancy.

A recent South African study (Swartz & Bhana, 2009) placed attention on adolescent boys who become fathers. The study showed that these young men have similar poor outcomes to young mothers, as well as delinquency. In addition, young fathers frequently have to overcome a number of challenges in being a present father to a child they have fathered whilst young. Some of these challenges include:

- Parental rejection (by the parents of the mother of their child)
- The cultural measure of money being equated with responsibility, resulting in fear and shame at being unable to provide – hence choosing to disappear
- The way in which parents sometimes commandeer young fathers’ parental responsibilities
- The widespread failure of services and sex education for these young men.

In the South African context, there is currently an epidemic of absent fathers. Posel and Devey (2006, p. 47) estimate that among black households 63 per cent of fathers are ‘disappeared’ (12.8 per cent dead, 50.2 per cent absent). This is in contrast to 13.3 per cent disappeared white fathers (2.4 per cent dead and 10.9 per cent absent). It is not known what proportion of these disappeared fathers became fathers whilst still adolescents.
Moral development

Young people’s moral values, moral development, and moral education have long been the subject of numerous academic disciplines. However, it is psychology that makes the largest contribution to the academic study of morality and moral education. Psychologists are concerned with the various cognitive processes of moral development, as well as with emotional and social behaviour of adolescents. Specific contributions from psychology to the study of young people’s moral functioning include:

- The role of empathy (Eisenberg, 2000; Hoffman, 2000)
- Intuition (Narváez, Getz, Thoma & Rest, 1999)
- The role of emotional intelligence in regulating moral emotions such as anger and shame (Goleman, 1995; Salovey & Sluyter, 1997).

Psychological studies have also considered:

- The importance of moral motivation (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002)
- Moral integrity (Blasi, 1980)
- The role of personality in moral formation (Damon, 1983; Glover, 2001)
- The process of translating belief into action (Blasi, 1980; Walker, 2004).

Piaget and Kohlberg

Perhaps the most well-known of all psychological contributions to the study of young people’s morality is the developmental work of Piaget and Kohlberg (1981, 1984). In particular, Kohlberg, whose work was discussed at some length in chapters five and six, made the connection between increased levels of cognitive and psychosocial development and the ability to reason at increasing levels of moral complexity. Recall from chapters five and six that Kohlberg elucidated three developmental levels of moral reasoning, as follows:

- **Preconventional level (stages one and two):** Moral reasoning based on the avoidance of punishment, consequences, self-interest, and personal benefit marks people at this level.
- **Conventional level (stages three and four):** People reasoning at this level are marked by concern for interpersonal relationships, relational
influences, and social obligations. Adolescents begin to reason at stage four and show understanding of duties of justice and care.

- **Postconventional level (stages five and six):** Finally, people reasoning at this level are characterised by principled and impartial judgements made on the basis of a universally applicable social contract. At this level, morality becomes based on internal moral standards, rather than on external codes. Although the people reasoning at this level explore alternative options, they reach decisions autonomously. Adolescents may reach this stage of moral reasoning from an age as young as 12 – especially being able to distinguish between community rights and individual rights. Few adolescents, however, are able to reach stage six, where moral reasoning is based on universal human rights. In fact, according to Kohlberg, it takes a lifetime to get to postconventional moral reasoning, with most adults reasoning at the conventional level.

For the past 30 years, Kohlberg’s work has dominated the field of moral development and materially influenced moral education. Chapters five and six discussed this influence in some detail. This section will complement the discussion in chapters five and six.

At least four broad approaches to moral education can be identified, as follows (some of these broad approaches incorporate Kohlberg’s approach, while others react to it):

- A primarily cognitive emphasis on moral development and judgement
- An affective or emotional emphasis (see, for example, Hoffman (2000) on empathy; Eisenberg (2000) on guilt and shame; Rozin, Haidt and McCauley (2000) on disgust, anger, and hatred)
- Those having an activist emphasis on learning through doing (Coles, 1993; Damon & Gregory, 1997; Scales, 1999; Youniss & Yates, 1999)
- An emphasis on integrated character (Lickona, 1991).

The focus on cognitive development has eclipsed the other three approaches to moral education. Cognitive developmentalists maintain that autonomous choice, evolving judgement, and critical reflection are most important when educating young people in the moral domain. For cognitive developmentalists, the aim of moral education is to stimulate cognitive development and thereby help youth to develop moral judgement. Many of the techniques cognitive developmentalists use include the discussion of moral dilemmas, which proponents of this approach have shown is an effective way to improve moral reasoning. At least three educational strategies that have emerged from the academy have strong cognitive and developmental bases:

- ‘Values clarification’ (Raths, Harmin & Simon, 1966)
- ‘Philosophy for children’ (Lipman, 1991; Vardy & Grosch, 1994)
Selman’s social perspective-taking
Harvard educationalist and psychologist Robert Selman, a colleague of Kohlberg, proposed a theory of social perspective-taking. He describes perspective taking as the ability to assume another person’s perspective and understand that person’s thoughts and feelings. In his theory, he describes the following sequential developmental stages of social perspective-taking from childhood through adulthood (Selman, 1971, 1980):

• **Stage 0, age 3–6:** In early childhood, an egocentric viewpoint is adopted.
• **Stage 1, age 6–8:** A social informational perspective follows.
• **Stage 2, age 8–10:** Then there is a more self-reflective stance.
• **Stage 3, age 10–12:** In early adolescence, youth are able to adopt a mutual perspective by stepping outside of the self–other interaction.
• **Stage 4, age 12–15:** Social and conventional system perspective-taking follows, during which the young person realizes that complete understanding is not always possible and so social conventions must be used.

Following later empirical work, Selman concluded that the majority of youth on the brink of adolescence were at stage 2, while by age 16 most adolescents had reached stage 3 (but not yet stage 4). A number of factors account for the range of social perspective-taking abilities amongst youth. Among these are educational quality, home environment, and stimulation – similar factors to those that affect how children are placed on Kohlberg’s scale. Apart from some of the wideness of age ranges in each stage, Selman’s theory contributes to understanding how young people come to make moral decisions, especially those of an interpersonal nature.

Adolescents’ increasing ability to take others’ perspectives has implications for their self-understanding. This, in turn, impacts on their relationships with peers and family. Studies, for example Adams (1983), have shown that young people who are empathetic are more popular and that the quality of their friendships is improved.

Critiques of developmental approaches to moral development
Critiques of developmental approaches to moral education centre on two aspects:

• The elevation of the self to a sovereign position above that of the society in which an individual finds him- or herself (Hunter, 2000)
• An undue emphasis on individualism (Smith & Standish, 1997).

But the central criticism of developmental approaches centres on Kohlberg’s work, which has been challenged on numerous fronts, for example:

• The use of fictitious dilemmas
• The gap between moral reasoning and moral behaviour
• The (disingenuous) way in which white middle-class men seem to always score higher on Kohlberg's scales than women or those from other cultures
• The conclusion that autonomous and individualistic moral judgement (characteristic of the postconventional level) is more advanced than a system of moral reflection based on a collectivist or communitarian orientation (characteristic of the conventional level)
• How young people’s moral reasoning has little relationship with their functioning as moral people.

As a result of the challenges listed above, people have questioned the usefulness of Kohlberg's levels of moral reasoning. Some of these critiques have been covered in Chapter five on middle childhood, but will be discussed in more detail below.

The use of moral dilemmas
The use of fictitious moral dilemmas by cognitive developmentalists has been criticised because they are fictitious (and so do not help young people in real-life contexts) and because they are already flagged as moral dilemmas. Fictitious dilemmas do not measure participants’ moral sensitivity, since they have already been judged to be moral dilemmas (Walker, 2002). Cognitive moral reasoning is significantly different when based on real, rather than hypothetical, dilemmas (Myyry & Helkama, 2002). Moral dilemmas also reinforce the perception that moral issues are something which is on the periphery of human life, rather than central to it (Smith & Standish, 1997). Walker (2002) adds that cognitive stimulation – the aim of moral dilemma discussion – is a simplistic approach to moral education. Research has also shown that talking about moral issues in the abstract is a poor predictor of what youth do in practice (Kuther & Higgins-D’Alessandro, 2000).

Feminist and cultural objections to Kohlberg
Carol Gilligan has shown that young women judge ‘conflicting responsibilities rather than … competing rights’ (Gilligan, 1982, p. 19) and consider collective rather than individualistic orientations as more important in their moral reasoning processes. Similar conclusions have been drawn for youth outside global Northern cultures, who privilege a collective conscience over individual conscience (Ferns & Thom, 2001; Snarey & Keljo, 1996). Not surprisingly therefore, women and collectivist cultures have been found to score lower on Kohlberg’s scales. The study of Ferns and Thom (2001), for example, demonstrates how black South African youth consistently score below white youth on Kohlberg’s scale of moral reasoning.
However, in a more nuanced study (Smith & Parekh, 1996) black South African youth between the ages of 10 and 12 scored higher on Kohlberg’s schema than did their white counterparts, although older black youth scored lower. Snarey and Keljo comment that this result seems to align with that of Gilligan’s study of young women, in that an initial ‘strong voice of courage and honesty … [is replaced] by a strained voice of niceness and conformity’ (Snarey & Keljo, 1996, p. 1089). Like those of young women, the scores of marginalised and oppressed groups appear to deteriorate over time.

Snarey and Keljo conclude that any form of oppression (sex, class, or ‘race’) contributes to stagnation in moral development. Possible reasons proposed for this difference include the following:

- Poor education resulting in diminished levels of high-order abstract thinking (Ferns & Thom, 2001; Snarey & Keljo, 1996)
- The way in which discrimination and oppression lowers esteem and silences strong voices (Maqsud, 1998; Snarey & Keljo, 1996)
- The finding that authoritarian parenting – usually found in contexts of poverty (Elliott & Feldman, 1990) rather than being related to ‘race’ or culture – seldom encourages autonomous thinking (Ferns & Thom, 2001).

Of course, an alternative explanation is that Kohlberg’s research instrument is biased by language or towards masculine responses. However much this bias may have been unintentional, Kohlberg’s work appears to have fuelled mistaken notions of inherent moral superiority. Ferns and Thom’s (2001), for example, do not use Kohlberg’s Moral Judgment Interview or Rest’s Defining Issues Test (based on Kohlberg’s schema) since it emerged (upon piloting) that the level of verbal proficiency required was unsuitable in a cross-cultural environment.

Critical absences in moral development

The first of these critical absences concerns the relationship between moral knowledge and moral practice, alluded to earlier as a key critique of Kohlberg’s work. Robert Coles sums up a prevailing view:

The moral life is at once thought and action … [I] struggle…[between] strong respect for the work of Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, Carol Gilligan, and yet a perplexity that sometimes slides into pique as I compare their ideas about ‘moral development’ with the thoroughly complicated matter of moral … behaviour (Coles, 1986, p. 286).

This ‘belief–behaviour’ gap is one about which psychologists are increasingly writing (Bergman, 2002; Blasi, 1980; Lickona, 1976; Swartz, 2009; Walker, 2004). Augusto Blasi (1980) addresses this gap by focusing on
the development of a moral identity – the integration of self with a sense of responsibility and integrity. For Damon (1984), the task is to investigate the ‘person’s understanding of self in relation to these moral beliefs’ (p. 110). While both Blasi and Damon contribute to understanding the dynamics involved in this gap, neither pays attention to the role of context – the role of lived experience that occupies the space between moral belief and moral behaviour. Read the box headed ‘Moral capital and moral ecology’, which considers these issues further.

Moral capital and moral ecology
In a study done in Cape Town (Swartz, 2009), township youth aged between 14 and 20 were asked how they understood the concept of morality (‘right’ and ‘wrong’) and how their beliefs and contexts affected their action. Overall, the study provides an account of the moral lives of vulnerable young people from within a context of partial parenting, partial schooling, pervasive poverty, and inequality, in post-apartheid South Africa. The study introduced two important concepts into the discussion of youth morality, namely ‘moral ecology’ and ‘moral capital’.

Moral ecology
Understanding youth moral development as an ecology draws on Urie Bronfenbrenner’s ‘ecological systems theory’. It helps to systematise the study of the environment’s effects on people’s lives by describing these influences as interconnecting systems. Considering contexts helps a researcher to see how the usual institutions that might inoculate youth against multiple negative influences exert less influence in poor environments than might be the case in a middle-class context. It shows how township youth have to choose to opt out of the current youth culture in favour of moral goodness, and how these youth construct a moral world in resistance to the existing culture. In Swartz’s study, for example, it became clear that the socio-emotional effects of poverty influence young people’s ability to reflect, and that employment is a moral necessity in the lives of poor youth.

Furthermore, the notion of a moral ecology helps moral educators consider moral life as more complex than only moral action. A definition of what it means to be good must surely include moral knowledge, moral identity, and moral desire, in addition to moral action. This has implications for where to concentrate the focus in moral education practice, when some elements are stronger than others in young people’s lived experience.

Thimna’s story
Thimna’s story illustrates how an ecological lens helps to interpret young people’s moral lives. Thimna is a tiny 19-year-old woman who struggled
to concentrate at school, and showed clear signs of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD). She constantly dropped out of school due to her inability to focus on her studies. Thimna spoke of having grown up in a ‘shebeen house’ with her alcoholic mother selling alcohol, and that she (Thimna) had begun drinking at 14. Soon she was involved in a gang, and then incarcerated for stealing a cellphone in order to pay for her alcohol. She dropped out of school permanently after becoming pregnant, and currently struggles, due to her alcoholism, to hold down a job as a street sweeper. Thimna’s moral ecology included physical manifestations of FASD, parental neglect, poor education and substance use – all of which are interrelated.

**Applying moral ecology**

What Thimna’s story also shows is that neither is the moral life of young people living in a context of poverty linear and ordered, nor is their moral development directly related to physical maturation, as is often depicted in existing moral-development literature focused on youth living in the global North (Damon, 1984; Kohlberg, 1984). In more stable environments, moral growth is largely depicted as a series of deliberate choices within a series of narrow options. In the lives of township youth, while options are far wider, the act of choosing is more limited and immediate.

Using an ecological lens also shows how young people’s moral reasoning ability, the role of personal responsibility for moral (or immoral) action, and the context of poverty are interwoven in complex ways. This interplay is crucial to understanding the chasm that exists between young people’s stated moral beliefs and their subsequent behaviour. Swartz’s study found that young people living in poverty lack not so much the ability to engage in high-order levels of cognitive reflection, but the opportunity and resources to do so. If, as various literatures suggest (Evans & English, 2002; Yehuda, Halligan & Grossman, 2001), poverty results in physical illness such as depression, despair, fatigue (from stress hormone overload), anxiety, apathy, a struggle to delay gratification, emotional blunting, the consequences of FASD, and avolition, then it is understandable that youth who live in poverty lack the resources to act on what they know and desire to be right, and toward which they aspire.

‘Moral capital’

In the same study, young people regularly spoke of ‘being good’ as a form of capital – a resource that helps you get ahead. In other words the act of ‘being good’ resulted in them regularly attending school, completing their education, and accessing the job market. Having a job, in turn, enabled them to ‘do good’ things, like provide for family members. Being good therefore produces money – or economic capital.
In addition, these youth identified the necessary elements that would contribute to them becoming good people, which may also be described as assets or capital. Throughout Swartz’s study, township youth made the connection between education and achieving future dreams and goals (‘If you don’t have any education, no future for you’), and they recognised school as

**Figure 7.2** A schematic representation of the various components of ‘moral capital’

![Diagram of Moral Capital]

Source: Swartz (2009, p.149)
morally empowering, diversionary, a deterrent to crime, and the key to future success: ‘School is very good, it takes you out of trouble, so if you don’t want to be in trouble this keeps you out of trouble’ (Ingwazi). Young people repeatedly made the connection between having a job and being a moral person (‘becoming good people when they have got their own jobs’). In other words these youth saw morality as generating capital and capital generating morality. Being good provides young people with the opportunity to embark on the cycle of ‘be a good person, complete school, get a job, be a good person.’ In this sense, morality is seen as an instrumental good – it produces economic value.

From the research data, four overarching features of moral capital were identified:

- Relational connection
- Reflective practice
- Personal agency
- The importance of an enabling environment.

Look at Figure 7.2, which provides a summary of these four main elements of moral capital, with constituent components in each category.

The concept of moral capital provides a useful counterpoint to talk of moral panics and moral deficits. Moral capital shifts the focus from what is absent in the moral lives of youth to what is present. Educators and policy makers might now be encouraged to develop moral capital rather than complain about the absence of morality in young people. If the aim of moral education is to nurture or increase moral capital, then moral behaviour can be analysed with regard to the extent of moral capital already available to an individual or to a group. This could result in a more nuanced conversation between the ‘blame the victim’ and ‘blame the system’ schools of thought, since social and institutional factors will become part of the discussion, rather than solely focusing on the personal in questions of morality.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- What are the main criticisms of Kohlberg’s stages of moral development, especially in the South African context?
- How does social perspective-taking contribute to adolescents’ moral decision making?
- What are the advantages of considering moral development as an ‘ecology’?
- What are the components of ‘moral capital’ that might be developed in youth?
Development of the self

The development of abstract reasoning skills and changing social relations influence how adolescents think about the self. An important task for adolescents is to decide who they are, and to develop their own values.

The self-concept

Your self-concept refers to your perception of yourself, your understanding of what you are like. How do people's self-concepts change in adolescence?

In chapter six, you learnt that social comparison starts to play an important role in children's self-concepts during middle childhood. This tendency to compare the self with others continues in adolescence. In fact, younger adolescents are often very self-conscious and preoccupied with how others see them. But as young people move into late adolescence, they increasingly start to see themselves in terms of their own personal beliefs and values, rather than in terms of how they compare to others (Harter, 1998; Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

There is another important way in which the adolescent's self-concept differs from that of the child. The development of formal operational thought means that adolescents are more likely than children to use abstract labels such as ‘intelligent’ or ‘extraverted’ to describe themselves. In mid-adolescence, their self-descriptions vary across situations and across time. At this age, adolescents see themselves differently, depending on whether they are with their peers, parents or teachers (for example shy with peers, outgoing at home). By late adolescence, young people become better able to integrate their different or contradictory tendencies into a more general, coherent theory of the self. For example, a person who is sometimes cheerful and sometimes depressed might integrate these seemingly contradictory characteristics by using a higher-order abstract concept such as ‘moody’ or ‘emotional’ (Harter, 1998).

Self-esteem

Once adolescents begin to reflect on their own characteristics, they must deal with the question ‘How much do I like myself?’ One study investigated self-esteem from age 9 to age 90, using data collected from more than 300,000 individuals over the Internet (Robins, Trzesniewski, Tracy, Gosling & Potter, 2002). The findings showed that there was a drop in self-esteem in early adolescence, although self-esteem started to rise again in late adolescence. Girls’ self-esteem dropped about twice as much in adolescence as boys’ self-esteem.

The drop in self-esteem in early adolescence is probably due to a combination of factors. The transition to high school can be stressful, because
it places new academic and social demands on children at the same time as it puts them at the bottom of the school social hierarchy. Having left grade seven as the big fish in a small pond, they must now start grade eight as the smallest fish in a big pond. In addition, girls in particular may become unhappy with their changing bodies. The increased cognitive capacities of adolescents also mean that they are more knowledgeable than children about their strengths and weaknesses.

Not all adolescents experience this dip in self-esteem, however. Adolescents who have the approval and support of parents and peers, and who do well in areas that are important to them, are likely to see themselves as worthy and capable (Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

Identity formation

According to Erikson (1971), one of the main developmental tasks of adolescence is to develop a coherent sense of identity. The term ‘identity’ refers to a person’s clear and consistent sense of who he or she is, what he or she believes and values, what he or she is going to do with his or her life, and where he or she fits into society. The quotations from Leanne and Brian in the case study at the beginning of this chapter illustrate how adolescents become increasingly concerned with questions of who they will be and what they will do ‘one day’. Identity formation involves three major issues: the choice of a career, the adoption of values to believe in and live by, and the development of a satisfying sexual identity.

Erikson proposed that adolescents experience the psychosocial crisis of identity versus role confusion as they struggle to determine who they are and where they are going in life. Young people who resolve this crisis in a positive way are able to formulate personal values, goals, and standards. They know who they ‘really’ are, and they have psychological strengths such as high self-esteem and an ability to form close relationships with others. In contrast, young people who resolve this crisis in a negative way remain confused over who they are and lack self-esteem. Their values are unclear and are easily influenced by others, and they have difficulty forming commitments and loyalties (Kroger, 2007). Erikson thought that such identity confusion is most likely to occur if earlier psychosocial crises were resolved in a negative way, or if society tries to force adolescents into roles that do not match their abilities or interests.

Individual differences and developmental trends in identity formation

James Marcia (1966) expanded on Erikson’s theory and developed an interview that allows investigators to classify adolescents into one of four identity statuses based on what they say about making occupational, religious, and political choices. The key questions are whether or not the individual has experienced a process of exploration (or has seriously grappled
with identity issues and explored alternatives) and whether or not he or she has achieved a commitment (that is, resolved the issues raised and made a personal investment in a set of goals, beliefs or values). Depending on whether or not there is a process of exploration and commitment, the individual is classified into one of the following four identity statuses:

- **Identity diffusion**: The identity diffusion status is characterised by a lack of both exploration and commitment. Adolescents in the diffusion status have not yet thought about their identity, or have given up the search. They have not established goals or values, and may take an ‘I don’t care’ attitude. For example, consider an adolescent named Susan. When Susan is asked what she wants to do when she leaves school, she answers, ‘I don’t know. I haven’t really given it much thought. I’m sure something will turn up.’

- **Foreclosure**: Individuals in the identity foreclosure status have committed themselves to goals and values, but without exploring an alternative. They seem to know who they are, but have uncritically accepted identities chosen for them by significant others, such as parents or teachers. For example, consider an adolescent named Nabeelah. Nabeelah plans to study medicine because her parents have always wanted her to become a doctor.
• Moratorium: Individuals in the identity moratorium status are in the process of searching for meaningful adult roles and values, but have not yet made a commitment. For example, consider an adolescent named Loyiso. Loyiso had planned to study engineering. However, he has discovered that he is also very interested in graphic design, and is now unsure about which career path to follow. He has started reading and talking to people in order to find out as much as he can about each career option.

• Identity achievement: An individual who has explored alternatives and made a commitment to personal goals and values is in the identity achievement status. For example, consider an adolescent named Philip. Philip has been enjoying his course in media and writing, and has managed to get a part-time job as a sub-editor at the Cape Times. He has given a lot of thought to journalism as a career, and is convinced that it is right for him.

Identity development follows many different paths. Many individuals remain in one status throughout adolescence, whereas others make one or more transitions from one status to another. Identity diffusion is considered to be the least developmentally mature status, and identity achievement the most mature. Most young adolescents progress from less mature statuses to more mature ones as they move into their late teens or early twenties. However, some move in the reverse direction (for example from achievement to moratorium) as they start to question decisions they had previously made (Meeus, Van de Schoot, Keijsers, Schwartz & Branje, 2010).

There is also evidence that identity development does not happen neatly, but in bits and pieces. Adolescents often achieve a sense of identity in one area (for example their career goals) while remaining confused about another area (such as their religious beliefs) (Archer, 1982). So certain aspects of identity may take shape earlier or remain more stable than others do. And decisions are not made once and for all, but have to be made time and time again. Nowadays, many researchers believe that the development of identity is a lifelong task. It begins with the development of a sense of self in infancy, and continues into old age. Questions around ‘Who am I?’ do tend to be particularly frequent in adolescence and early adulthood, but they are not exclusive to this age.

Influences on identity formation
Research has shown that the process of identity formation is influenced by at least the following six factors:

• Cognitive skills: The development of new cognitive skills associated with formal operational thinking allows adolescents to think in more abstract and flexible ways, and to imagine possible futures for themselves. Thus, adolescents who are more capable of complex, abstract
thinking, who actively seek information, and who have good problem-solving skills are more likely to raise and resolve identity issues than those who are less cognitively advanced (Kroger, 2007). From what psychologists already know about the development of the brain during adolescence (especially with regard to reflecting, deciding, and planning), it is easy to see the difficulties that young people might encounter in investigating possible futures including career choices, goals, and plans. Furthermore, if there is little stimulation and help with regard to developing cognitive skills such as planning, learning, and choosing, this can have a negative effect on an adolescent's overall life outcomes.

- **Personality**: Adolescents who are high in the personality traits of 'openness to experience' and 'conscientiousness' and low in the personality trait 'neuroticism' are more likely to explore alternatives and achieve an identity (Ozer & Benet-Martínez, 2006). These adolescents are curious, responsible, and emotionally stable.

- **Relationships with parents**: Identity formation is also influenced by relationships with parents. Adolescents tend to have difficulty forging their own identities when their parents are neglecting, rejecting, and emotionally distant from them, or overprotective and overcontrolling. Adolescents who have made the most progress towards achieving an individual identity tend to come from homes where high levels of warmth and support are combined with low levels of psychological control (Meeus, 2011). In these families, there is a solid base of affection, closeness, and mutual respect between children and parents (connectedness), but children are also given the freedom to disagree with their parents and be individuals in their own right (individuality) (Grotevant & Cooper, 1998).

- **Support from peers**: Social support from peers, including close friends and romantic partners, also has a positive impact on identity development during adolescence (Meeus & Dekovic, 1995).

- **Opportunities to explore**: Identity formation is also influenced by the extent to which adolescents are provided with opportunities to explore the world outside the home. Such opportunities can be provided by a variety of experiences, including those involved in work internships, volunteer projects, youth organisations, and attendance of university (Kroger, 2007).

- **The cultural and economic context**: The extent to which adolescents are provided with opportunities to explore is likely to depend on the broader cultural and economic context. Western industrialised societies that value individualism, personal choice, and responsibility allow adolescents a period of time in which to explore different roles before finally choosing an identity. Questioning and personal choice play a smaller role in traditional societies, or societies where educational and work opportunities are limited by racial, gender, political or economic
barriers. In the South African context, where possible futures are limited by environmental constraints such as poverty and a lack of employment, this life stage is made more difficult for teenagers. In these cases, foreclosure may be more adaptive than identity achievement (Coté & Levine, 1988).

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- How does the self-concept change in adolescence?
- Why might a drop in self-esteem occur in early adolescence?
- What are the four identity statuses identified by James Marcia?
- What factors influence the process of identity formation?

CASE STUDY

In the case study at the beginning of this chapter, you were introduced to two participants in a study of adolescents growing up in Cape Town’s Fish Hoek valley (Bray et al., 2010). Another participant in this study was Charney, a 17-year-old girl living with her parents in the working-class area of Ocean View. Charney stood out as being unusually successful at school and popular with her peers. She enjoyed spending time with her family, and described her mother as her best friend: a trusted companion with whom she could talk about anything. Yet her mother was also quite strict; she set clear boundaries for Charney’s behaviour, and challenged her to use her talents and be the best she could be.

Charney was primarily responsible for the cooking and cleaning at home, but her parents were flexible with regard to domestic tasks, and willing to listen and negotiate. Their relationship with Charney was one of mutual respect, openness, and honesty.

Charney’s mother also actively tried to build Charney’s confidence and instil certain values in her, including that she did not need other people, such as friends or boyfriends, to define who she is. Charney spoke about some early experiences of giving in to peer pressure, but said that she now takes a strong stand against being persuaded to do things she does not wish to do. She was one of only two girls at her high school to pass matric with exemption in 2005 (Bray et al., 2010).

Questions

1. Based on what you have learned in this chapter, how would you describe the parenting behaviour of Charney’s parents? How does this compare to the parenting that you received? How do you think your relationships with your parents in adolescence have influenced your academic achievement, behaviour, and social and emotional development?
2 Now that you have been introduced to the concepts of moral ecology and moral capital, what advice would you give to educators or policy makers who want to improve the moral behaviour of young people?

Conclusion

Adolescence is marked by dramatic physical growth and physiological changes, combined with important cognitive and social transitions. Genes, childhood experiences, and the environment in which a person reaches adolescence all influence behaviour. While family relationships remain important, friends and other peers become increasingly influential.

Development is also affected by the broader context in which adolescents live. In South Africa, poverty may reduce young people’s opportunities to develop cognitive skills, to behave morally, and to explore possible futures.

Some adolescents find the challenges of this period stressful, and a small number have serious problems. Others, like Charney in the case study at the end of the chapter, cope well. Contrary to the popular ‘storm and stress’ view, most adolescents are reasonably happy and well behaved; find much to enjoy in their friendships, leisure activities, and family lives; and are hopeful about the future (Arnett, 1999; Graham, 2004).

References


