

## Book Review

### **New Perspectives on Adolescent Risk Behaviour**

**Richard Jessor (Ed.) 1998**

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Why do they do it? As adults we feel like throwing up our hands in despair at the way in which vulnerable adolescents insist on pumping themselves full of alcohol and other toxic substances, exposing themselves to nasty viruses, and taking horrific risks on the road. Somewhere, deep within the experience of adolescence it lies a volatile mixture of frustration, despair and intense longing for new and extreme experiences that leads to a variety of risk behaviours. But this edited volume of 15 chapters on adolescent risk behaviour is not focused on how young people feel, rather it is focused on the relationship between objective features of adolescents' lives and their likelihood of engaging in behaviours that are considered either physically or socially undesirable.

The book arose out of a conference on adolescent risk behaviour that was held in Los Angeles during 1996, which may be why all but two of the 33 contributors listed are based in North America. It is divided into sections on development, problem behaviour, sexual activity, psychopathology, and social role performance, finishing with two chapters designed to provide an overview and integration. Most of the chapters are fairly long and include a detailed literature review, clearly explained rationale for the empirical study described and extensive detail on the statistical analyses undertaken. From the New Zealand perspective some of the numbers involved in these studies are staggering. For example the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, described by Udry and Bearman, obtained a sample of more than 90,000

for their in-school questionnaire.

There are numerous tables and graphs throughout, allowing the reader to carefully scrutinize the findings and the validity of each author's conclusions. This makes the volume potentially extremely useful for researchers with a specialised interest one of the areas covered. Although the overall focus is on the social factors involved in risk behaviour, there is consideration given to biological factors such as physical addiction (Kandel) and genetics (Udry & Bearman). There is also a chapter specifically on design issues in developmental research (Cairns, Cairns, Rodkin & Xie).

A variety of themes emerge from the volume. Perhaps the most prominent of these is that the variables identified through past research as "risk" and "protective" factors for risk behaviour work together in a complex fashion that is highly dynamic, contextual and changes over time. Jessor draws attention to this in his introduction, as do a number of other authors. In some cases this may even mean that one particular variable can act as both a "risk" and a "protective" factor depending on the context and individual involved. For example, in a study of the effects of employment on youth, Mortimer and Johnson state "This investigation . . . shows that youth employment is neither wholly deleterious with respect to a range of healthy outcomes nor always protective." (p. 468).

A second and related theme is that it may be possible to identify a variety of trajectories or paths through adolescence that are characterised by particular antecedent conditions and result in different constellations of risk behaviours, or on the other hand, in the absence of risk behaviours. Two of the chapters that concentrate on this theme are one by Ensminger and Juon on the transition to adulthood among high-risk youth and a chapter by Steinberg and Avenevoli on the impact of disengagement from school. Loeber, Farrington, Stouthamer-Loeber and Van Kammen also emphasise that not all types of problem behaviour are equivalent or interchangeable and that there may be age-related shifts in the type of risk behaviour displayed by a young person. To some extent this notion challenges the emphasis Jessor's problem behaviour theory gives to the correlation between problem behaviours, as if they are all basically symptoms of the same underlying causes.

Some of the chapters also draw attention to the concept put forward by Moffit (1993) that there are essentially two types of risk behaviour in adolescence, adolescent-limited and life-course persistent. Some risk behaviour is after all, normal in adolescence, in the sense that most adolescents engage in it, and, as argued by Baer, MacLean and Marlatt it may have a positive function in identity formation. By definition adolescent-limited risk behaviour does not lead to adult risk behaviour, and therefore is best dealt with through harm reduction strategies. In her 1993 article on this topic Moffit drew attention to the desire most adolescents have to achieve adult status and the role that risk behaviours can play (ironically perhaps) in helping adolescents feel they have become adult. This part of her contribution to understanding risk behaviour in adolescence is, in my opinion, not emphasised enough in this volume. Similarly, problem behaviour theory's outline of the developmental functions of problem behaviour (which includes the desire to achieve adult status) are seldom referred to.

In an attempt to show how complex development is, and the variety of ways in which adolescents behave, it is almost as if the common threads of this life-phase have been neglected in these new perspectives. Why this matters, is that unless we have some vision of what adolescents have in common, it is hard to imagine realistic primary prevention strategies that will help reduce engagement in dangerous behaviours. At the end of this book, I was left with many fragments of ideas about how to refine my thinking (and language) with regard to adolescent behaviour, but with little better sense of what might work in terms of interventions.

The other thing lacking in the volume was the voices of adolescents themselves. As Silbereisen points out in the final chapter of the book "The fact that even such enormous data sets are silent on adolescents' thoughts and plans should give rise to complementary qualitative research." (p. 524). If adolescents are a complicated lot, then this is surely because they are constantly managing their worlds and reacting to new circumstances as they arise. I can't help feeling that increasingly sophisticated statistical designs which reveal more and more complex relationships between variables are in fact going to lead to a plethora of theories so detailed that they become unmanageable. This is an important book, and it is full of challenges to everyone interested in human development, but it would also be very useful to see further efforts directed at integrating the vast body of empirical work it offers into a parsimonious theoretical framework.

**Reference**

Moffit, T. E. (1993). Adolescence-limited and life-course-persistent antisocial behaviour: a developmental taxonomy. *Psychological Review*, 100, 674-701.