Comments on Defining Adolescence¹,²)

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Summary: Aspects of a definition for two characteristics of adolescence, being capable of doing something or not and having the right to do it, are proposed since adolescence is a period when a person is capable of but without the right to do something.

Since the classical two-volume work by Hall (1904), adolescence was characterized or defined in many ways, e.g., a period of heightened “storm and stress”. Another classical definition of adolescence was made by Erickson (1968), who proposed a series of eight stages to characterize overall human development. The stage of adolescence was a time of identity-vs.-confusion crisis. Such definitions are not clear-cut and do not accurately reflect the contemporary concept of youth or adolescence, such as being young, etc.

Aspects of definition are proposed. Consider being capable of doing something or not and having the right to do it. Adolescence may be characterized as a period when a person is capable but without rights to act. Table 1 displays this characterization with other three stages of human life, childhood, adulthood, and senescence, and thereby classifies human life as having these four stages.

The intrinsic characteristics of adolescence stem from developmental or biological capabilities coupled with the social withholding of the right to act, as for example, adolescents are sexually mature, but social mores in many societies do not endorse young people’s sexual activity. In other words, in a society where sexual behaviors by young persons are freely accepted, there would be no adolescents by this definition. It appears adolescence emerged in earlier times when the establishment of social customs prohibited young people from enjoying the privileges adults had.

The characteristics can be applied to other than sexual behavior. Perceptions of “adolescence” or “youthfulness” by standards other than actual age often occur for professional athletes, movie stars, and politicians with resulting disparity in their rights, salaries, benefits, or rank. On the other hand, those celebrities who receive higher financial earnings than their actual talent warrants may evoke an impression of senescence. In the Japanese Sumo wrestling, most high ranked wrestlers retire when about 30 years of age, sometimes when even younger, and then become coaches. Such men are traditionally called “toshiyori” a term which literally means “elderly (person)”.

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²) Requests for reprints to Professor Kazuo Mori, Shinshu University, Nishi-Nagano, Nagano, Japan 380-8544 or email (kazmori@gipnc.shinshu-u.ac.jp).
Table 1  
Four life stages classified By Capabilities and Rights

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>With rights</th>
<th>Without rights</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Socially approved</td>
<td>Socially not approved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capable</td>
<td>Adulthood</td>
<td>Adolescence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not capable</td>
<td>Senescence</td>
<td>Childhood</td>
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