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DOI: 10.1111/cdep.12489

Child Development Perspectives

ARTICLE

Stereotypes of adolescence: Cultural differences, consequences, and intervention

Yang Qu

School of Education and Social Policy, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, USA

Correspondence
Yang Qu, School of Education and Social Policy, Northwestern University, 2120 Campus Drive, Evanston, IL 60208, USA.
Email: yangqu@northwestern.edu

Funding information
National Science Foundation, Grant/Award Number: BCS-1944644; Society for Research in Child Development; Center for Culture, Brain, Biology, and Learning at Northwestern University

Abstract

Adolescence is often viewed in Western cultures as a time of rebellion and irresponsibility. In this article, I synthesize recent research on stereotypes of adolescence that uses an interdisciplinary approach, integrating developmental psychology, cultural psychology, and neuroscience. I first discuss empirical evidence on cultural differences in stereotypes of adolescence, highlighting the importance of avoiding a one-size-fits-all assumption about such stereotypes across cultures. Then I summarize the impact of teen stereotypes on youth's academic, behavioral, emotional, and neural development. Finally, I present an experimental intervention that can change youth's teen stereotypes and promote positive youth development. Taken together, this body of work suggests that how individuals navigate the adolescent years is driven in part by social constructions of this phase of development. The work also calls for more attention to changing negative stereotypes of adolescence at the policy and societal levels.

KEYWORDS
adolescence, behavior, brain, culture, stereotypes

More than a century ago, Stanley Hall, the first president of the American Psychological Association, characterized adolescence as a time of "storm and stress" (Hall, 1904). According to this perspective, adolescents are prone to disrupted emotions and destructive behaviors, such as risk taking (Arnett, 1999). In reality, such a characterization does not reflect the prevalence of adolescents' typical behavior (e.g., Buchanan et al., 2023; Hollenstein & Lougheed, 2013), and the ways in which children navigate adolescence vary substantially as a result of both biological and social forces (e.g., Crone & Dahl, 2012; Galván, 2021; Steinberg, 2014). However, such negative views of teenagers are still common in Western societies (e.g., Buchanan & Bruton, 2016; Qu et al., 2016).

In this article, I synthesize current advances in research on stereotypes of adolescence. First, I summarize recent findings on cultural differences in stereotypes of adolescence, which highlight the importance of avoiding the one-size-fits-all assumption about teen stereotypes across different cultures. Then I review empirical evidence on how stereotypes of adolescence contribute to youth's academic, behavioral, emotional, and neural development as they navigate the teenage years. Finally, I present an experimental intervention that can change youth's stereotypes of adolescence and promote positive youth development. I conclude by outlining next steps for this line of research.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN STEREOTYPES OF ADOLESCENCE

Children and adults often hold stereotypes about people's attributes based on social categories, such as gender, race, and social class (e.g., Bigler & Liben, 1992; Durante & Fiske, 2017). Society also creates salient social categories based on the developmental phases to which children belong, with adolescence being one

Abbreviations: PFC, prefrontal cortex; VLPFC, ventrolateral prefrontal cortex.

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such phase (Buchanan & Holmbeck, 1998; Holmbeck & Hill, 1988). Although stereotypes of adolescence might to some extent be rooted in teenagers' actual behavior, they can also be inaccurate. Indeed, extreme instances of behavior (e.g., teenage delinquency reported in the media) are particularly memorable and thus influential in teen stereotypes (Gilliam & Bales, 2001; Nichols & Good, 2004). Societal messages about teenagers, such as exaggerated media portrayals or school rules based on assumptions, may also contribute to teen stereotypes. Moreover, scholars have suggested that characterizations of teenagers are often used purposefully to regulate youth's behavior and achieve policy aims, such as reducing youth violence (Dodge, 2008; Enright et al., 1987).

The perception of adolescence as a time of "storm and stress" is widely shared among laypeople in Western cultures (Buchanan & Bruton, 2016). For example, adults in the United States, including parents and teachers, often view teenagers as more rebellious, emotionally unstable, and susceptible to peer pressure than younger children (e.g., Buchanan & Holmbeck, 1998; Hines & Paulson, 2006). Similarly, when generating free associations with the term *teenage brain*, Dutch parents mentioned more undesirable attributes (e.g., irresponsible, lazy) than desirable attributes (e.g., responsible, creative; Altikulaç et al., 2019). These teen stereotypes parallel those held by adolescents themselves in Western societies (Qu et al., 2016). Such negative stereotypes are also reflected in many titles of books on adolescence in the United States—including, for example, *Have a New Teenager by Friday: From Mouthy and Moody to Respectful and Responsible in 5 Days* (Leman, 2013) and *Yes, Your Teen is Crazy! Loving Your Kid Without Losing Your Mind* (Bradley, 2002).

However, since cultural norms and values may shape ideas about adolescence, it is important to examine whether such Western-popularized views of adolescence are also shared in other cultures. Recent cross-cultural studies not only identified differences in stereotypes of teenagers in Western and non-Western regions, but also highlighted important heterogeneity in non-Western regions in a globalized world. For example, as a result of the influence of Confucian tradition, adolescence in China largely involves fulfilling filial piety, which emphasizes respecting and obeying parents (Chao & Tseng, 2002; Ho, 1996). Confucianism also emphasizes learning as a moral endeavor (e.g., Li, 2005), and encourages youth to fulfill family responsibilities through increased academic engagement and better school performance (Qu & Pomerantz, 2015).

Indeed, when assessing the extent to which certain attitudes or behaviors are characteristic of the teenage years (vs. earlier years) among the U.S. and Chinese seventh graders, U.S. youth viewed adolescence as a time of dampened family obligations and increased disengagement from school, while Chinese youth viewed adolescence as a time of fulfilling family responsibilities and spending effort on academic learning (Qu et al., 2016). Both U.S. and Chinese youth viewed individuation from parents and orientation toward peers as more common during the teenage years (vs. earlier years), but U.S. youth endorsed these ideas more strongly. A key value of examining teen stereotypes across cultures is to understand the underlying reasons for cultural differences in youth's adjustment. As I describe in the next section, some differences in U.S. and Chinese youth's teen stereotypes may underlie cultural variation in their adjustment over time.

In light of considerable variation in teen stereotypes within the same country, recent studies have also moved beyond between-country variation to examine within-country variation. For example, researchers have examined youth's teen stereotypes in Hong Kong and Mainland China, both of which are grounded in the Confucian tradition but have different exposure to Western influences. Compared to their counterparts in Mainland China, youth in Hong Kong held more Western teen stereotypes: They saw adolescence (vs. the earlier years) more as a time of dampened family obligations, along with increased individuation, school disengagement, peer orientation, and emotional instability (Qu, Pomerantz, Wang, et al., 2020; Qu, Rompilla, et al., 2020). However, Hong Kong youth's teen stereotypes did not overlap completely with those endorsed by U.S. youth (Qu et al., 2016), but rather fell somewhere between their U.S. and Mainland Chinese counterparts.

THE ROLE OF YOUTH'S TEEN STEREOTYPES IN ACADEMIC, BEHAVIORAL, AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Culturally shaped stereotypes of adolescence, when internalized by youth themselves, may act as self-fulfilling prophecies and shape youth's expectations and standards for themselves, which in turn guide their affect, cognition, and behavior (Buchanan & Hughes, 2009). Such stereotypes may be particularly influential when move into adolescence, a time when many are uncertain about their new role and actively search for information about being a teenager (Ruble, 1994). For example, if youth see adolescence as a time to act irresponsibly (e.g., ignoring family obligations and disengaging from school) rather than responsibly, they may set for themselves expectations and standards that lead to more destructive behavior. Therefore, such stereotypes of adolescence may serve as a key mechanism underlying divergent trajectories in academic, behavioral, and emotional adjustment over adolescence.

In line with this idea, recent cross-cultural research has shown that among both U.S. and Chinese youth, viewing the teen years as a time of being irresponsible in the family or at school predicted decreased school engagement over early adolescence, controlling for their earlier school engagement. Notably, differences in such views between U.S. and Chinese youth (i.e., U.S. youth were more likely to see adolescence in such ways) partially accounted for U.S. (vs. Chinese) youth's lower levels of school engagement

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over time (Qu et al., 2016). Similarly, among both Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese seventh graders, viewing the teen years as a time of being irresponsible in the family or at school predicted more frequent risky behavior (e.g., stealing, hanging around with peers who get in trouble) over 6 months, controlling for earlier risky behavior. The tendency for youth in Hong Kong (vs. Mainland China) to view the teen years in such ways contributed to Hong Kong youth's more frequent risky behavior compared to their Mainland Chinese counterparts (Qu, Pomerantz, Wang, et al., 2020). Taken together, these findings suggest that youth's culturally shaped stereotypes of adolescence may contribute to country and regional differences in adjustment over this phase.

A key component of the "storm and stress" stereotypes of adolescence is characterizing teenagers as an age group with increased emotional instability (e.g., frequent and intensified emotional outbursts; Buchanan & Holmbeck, 1998). In a recent study, researchers investigated how youth's negative stereotypes about teen emotionality played a role in their own emotional functioning over time (Qu, Rompilla, et al., 2020). Among Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese seventh graders, viewing the teen years (vs. earlier years) as a time of increased emotional instability predicted greater expression of both positive and negative emotions 6 months later. Moreover, such views also predicted decreased use of emotion-regulation strategies (i.e., cognitive reappraisal and suppression) among Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese youth 6 months later. Taken together, these findings suggest that when perceiving emotional instability as a common characteristic of their age group, youth might express more emotions and exert less effort to regulate their emotions as they navigate adolescence.

THE ROLE OF YOUTH'S TEEN STEREOTYPES IN BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

Adolescent brains undergo important changes and are sensitive to sociocultural input (Blakemore & Mills, 2014; Crone & Dahl, 2012; Guyer, 2020; Nelson & Guyer, 2011). In the past decade, developmental neuroscience research has shown that social contexts (e.g., family environment, parents' characteristics) are associated with youth's neural changes over time (Galván, 2021). Therefore, youth's stereotypes of adolescence may modulate their brain development over the course of adolescence. For example, when youth believe that being irresponsible is a common characteristic of their age group, they might not use cognitive control to act responsibly and refrain from risky behavior. As a consequence, infrequent use of cognitive control might gradually lead to increased activation in the prefrontal cortex (PFC) because youth need to recruit more PFC activation to effectively inhibit their impulsive responses. These changes in neurodevelopment may make it difficult for youth to exert cognitive control (e.g., refrain from risky behavior). In this sense, youth's teen stereotypes may contribute to a series of transactions between neural changes and behavioral development.

In a three-wave longitudinal fMRI study, U.S. seventh graders reported on their stereotypes of adolescence with regard to irresponsibility in the family context (e.g., ignoring family obligations; Qu et al., 2018). In eighth and ninth grades, they had functional MRI scans during which they completed a cognitive control task (i.e., the go/no go task) and reported on their risky behavior. The more youth characterized teenagers as being irresponsible in middle school, the more their bilateral ventrolateral prefrontal cortex (VLPFC) activation during cognitive control increased over the transition to high school. This association remained after accounting for the quality of youth's relationship with their mother, baseline VLPFC activation, and demographic factors. In line with prior research (McCormick et al., 2016; Qu, Fuligni, et al., 2015; Qu, Galván, et al., 2015), such longitudinal changes in the VLPFC might reflect dampened cognitive control and was indeed associated with increases in risky behavior among youth over the transition to high school (Qu et al., 2018). These findings offer novel insights that youth's stereotypes of adolescence play a role in shaping neural plasticity during this developmental stage; they also suggest that internalized negative teen stereotypes may undermine youth's neural and behavioral development.

THE ROLE OF PARENTS' AND PEERS' TEEN STEREOTYPES

In the cultural socialization process, parents and peers play an important part in transmitting cultural ideas to children (e.g., Chen, 2012; Grusec, 2002), thereby shaping children's adjustment. Scholars have been interested in how teen stereotypes in social contexts—specifically in the family and in school settings—affect adolescent adjustment. Parents may convey their ideas about adolescence through their interactions with youth and through the rules they set for youth. In their conversations with youth, parents may communicate their views either in terms of how they talk about teenagers in general or through the expectations they discuss (e.g., Jacobs et al., 2005; Madon et al., 2003). Parents may also convey their teen stereotypes to youth in how they make rules for youth (e.g., the more they see teenagers as irresponsible, the less they may ask for youth's input) and in the extent to which they make those rules (e.g., the more they see teenagers as irresponsible, the more they may make rules). Indeed, empirical evidence suggests that parents' stereotypes about teenagers shape youth's adjustment. In one study, when U.S. parents, particularly mothers of seventh graders, viewed adolescence as a difficult time, youth subsequently tended to be more vulnerable in the social arena (e.g., they had lower self-concepts of their social ability and more deviant friends) during this phase (Jacobs et al., 2005). Moreover,

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U.S. mothers' expectations that their teenagers would use substances (e.g., would drink or smoke), as well as that they would demonstrate rebellious behavior during adolescence, predicted greater substance use and externalizing problems among youth over the teen years (e.g., Buchanan & Hughes, 2009; Madon et al., 2003; Mak, 2018).

Peers also play a vital role as socialization agents who influence youth's beliefs and adjustment (Chen, 2012). In particular, classrooms serve as important contexts for transmitting culturally shaped beliefs, thereby changing youth's behavior. For example, when youth are exposed to messages from their peers indicating that the teenage years are times of increased responsibility, they might be motivated to behave responsibly in school to attain peer acceptance. In a recent study, researchers investigated whether teen stereotypes at the classroom level played a role in Chinese youth's academic adjustment over seventh grade (Qu et al., 2022). In classes where peers commonly viewed the teenage years as a time of fulfilling family obligation and working hard in school, youth tended to exhibit improved academic adjustment, such as increased value placed on school and greater use of self-regulated learning strategies over early adolescence. These effects remained significant above and beyond the effects of youth's own stereotypes about teenagers, as well as earlier individual- and classroom-level adjustment, highlighting the unique role of teen stereotypes shared in the classroom. Researchers should examine whether such processes are similar or different in Western cultures, where youth perceive school disengagement as more common during early adolescence (Galván et al., 2011). In a separate study conducted in the United States, in addition to peers, teachers tended to believe adolescence was a difficult time (Buchanan et al., 1990). Despite limited research on this topic, teachers' teen stereotypes could also influence youth's adjustment via their expectations and practices.

INTERVENTION TO CHANGE YOUTH'S STEREOTYPES OF ADOLESCENCE AND PROMOTE POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Given the detrimental impacts of negative stereotypes about teenagers, it is important to cultivate positive views of teens among youth, parents, and educators to promote positive adolescent development. Although stereotypes of adolescence reflect culturally shaped social constructions of this stage, they may not be static because of the dynamic nature of culture itself (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 2010). To evaluate whether youth's teen stereotypes can be changed, my colleagues and I developed a brief counter-stereotyping intervention and investigated its effects on changing teen stereotypes and behavior (Qu, Pomerantz, & Wu, 2020). In the intervention, the stereotype of teenagers as irresponsible was first described to youth as a commonly held belief among adults and in the media. This stereotype was then countered with the fact that teenagers frequently exhibit responsible behavior. Youth were subsequently guided to generate their own examples of responsible behavior among teenagers they had observed, which helped them process the idea of teenage responsibility through personally meaningful and relevant examples. Our study compared youth who participated in the intervention to youth in a control group who simply generated examples of typical teenage behavior they had observed.

Across two studies of Chinese middle school students, the counter-stereotyping intervention effectively led youth to see the teenage years as a time of being more responsible than did their counterparts in the control group (Qu, Pomerantz, & Wu, 2020). Youth in the intervention showed greater intention for engaging in school and also performed better on a behavioral task related to learning than did youth in the control group. In the 3 days following the intervention, youth in the intervention group were more engaged academically than were youth in the control group. Similarly, youth in the intervention group had lower risk-taking intentions and daily risk-taking behavior than did their counterparts in the control group. Together, these findings highlight the causal role of internalized teen stereotypes in youth's academic engagement and risk-taking behavior, and suggest that one approach to help youth flourish during adolescence is to guide them to view teenagers as responsible. More work is needed to develop family- and school-based programs that help youth, parents, and teachers develop positive views of teenagers.

CONCLUSION AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Negative stereotypes of teenagers are a salient societal issue. Recent research that uses an interdisciplinary approach integrating developmental psychology, cultural psychology, and neuroscience has demonstrated the unique role of teen stereotypes in shaping cultural and individual differences in adolescent development (Qu et al., 2021). The current evidence also points to several important directions for future research.

First, cross-cultural studies on teen stereotypes have focused primarily on comparing youth in the United States and youth in China, as well as comparing youth in different regions of China. To achieve a comprehensive understanding of cultural variation in stereotypes, researchers must compare a broader range of countries and various ethnicities and socioeconomic statuses. The value of these cross-cultural studies goes beyond documenting how teen stereotypes vary across cultures; they also demonstrate how such differences in teen stereotypes contribute to cultural differences in adolescent development, which provides important insights into cultural construction of this developmental phase (e.g., Qu et al., 2016; Qu, Pomerantz, Wang, et al., 2020).

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Second, most studies examining the consequences of teen stereotypes have focused on youth's own stereotypes. Despite some initial evidence discussed in this article, we know little about how stereotypes of adolescence in social contexts (e.g., teen stereotypes communicated by parents, peers, teachers, and social media) influence adolescent development. Hence, researchers should use various methods (e.g., surveys, interviews, experiments) to explore the processes by which teen stereotypes in the social environment influence adolescent adjustment. In particular, scholars have recently emphasized the significance of how the media portrays adolescents (Kendall-Taylor & Fuligni, 2022). When society and the media view teenagers in a more positive light, more positive messages about them will be disseminated, which may further promote youth's flourishing.

Third, researchers should make more effort to investigate how youth's teen stereotypes evolve over adolescence and whether the influences of such stereotypes on adolescent development vary across time (i.e., from early to late adolescence). In addition, studies should take a holistic and dynamic perspective to explore how youth's teen stereotypes influence their behavioral adjustment and brain development over a long period. Research has largely examined only the role of youth's teen stereotypes in neural development underlying cognitive control (Qu et al., 2018); we need studies that explore neural development in other processes (e.g., reward seeking). Moreover, as studies showcase the reciprocal relations between youth's teen stereotypes and behavior (Qu, Pomerantz, Wang, et al., 2020), researchers need to explore the complex processes among youth's teen stereotypes, behavioral adjustment, and brain development, unveiling developmental processes across beliefs, behavior, and brain levels.

Finally, a key direction is to develop culturally informed interventions that foster positive views of teenagers among youth, parents, and teachers. The counter-stereotyping intervention my colleagues and I developed was conducted in China (Qu, Pomerantz, & Wu, 2020), so we do not know whether it would be effective in Western cultures (e.g., the United States) where negative views about adolescence are more pronounced. Therefore, the intervention might be tailored and modified to ensure its effectiveness in different cultural contexts. For example, given U.S. youth's heightened orientation to peers, an intervention that incorporates peer-led discussion and activities might be more successful in changing U.S. youth's teen stereotypes than are interventions that do not involve peers. Progress in this area can provide evidence-based insights that inform educational practices and scalable interventions in diverse cultures.

FUNDING INFORMATION

Preparation of this article was supported by the National Science Foundation CAREER award (BCS-1944644), the Society for Research in Child Development Small Grants Program for Early Career Scholars, and the Center for Culture, Brain, Biology, and Learning at Northwestern University.

ORCID

Yang Qu https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6173-8100

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How to cite this article: Qu, Y. (2023). Stereotypes of adolescence: Cultural differences, consequences, and intervention. *Child Development Perspectives*, *17*, 136–141. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12489

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